

# THE BOSNIAN CRISIS 1908-1909

## CAUSES

**BACKGROUND:** Treaty of Berlin 1878. This stated that Austria-Hungary had "*special rights*" to the Ottoman empire's provinces in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The Treaty of Berlin also stated that Dardanelles would not allow the passage of warships. This angered Russia as they wanted to be able to get their ships out into the sea. Russia had several war ships locked in that they could not use in the Russo-Japanese War 1904-05, which they aimed to be able to use.

**MAIN CHARACTERS:** **Alois Lexa von Aehrenthal** was the foreign minister of Austria-Hungary. **Alexander Izvolsky** was the foreign minister of Russia. They were both very ambitious leaders; the former being more successful in the Bosnian Crisis, the latter less.

**WHAT DID THEY WANT?:** The Russian foreign minister, Izvolsky, wanted **the Black Sea Clauses changed** as Russia was looking to restore some faith and dignity after the embarrassing loss of the Russo-Japanese War 1905. They were looking to find a way out of the black sea, enabling their navy to be more effective. This angered the British.

Aehrenthal (Foreign minister of Austria-Hungary) wanted **full control of Bosnia-Herzegovina**. His reason for this was possible recovery for "*the sick man of Europe*", Turkey, after the Young Turk revolution in 1908.

## COURSE

**MEETING:** On 2nd of July 1908, Russian foreign minister Izvolsky wrote to his Austro-Hungarian counterpart Aehrenthal to discuss secret changes to the 1878 Treaty of Berlin to both their interests. On July 14 Aehrenthal responded with careful acceptance to the proposed changes. On the 16th of September the Austrian and Russian foreign ministers met face to face at Buchlau. At this meeting no details were recorded, so only the individual accounts of the two ministers remain.

**According to Aehrenthal:** The agreement had been that Russia would maintain "*a friendly and benevolent attitude*" to the eventuality of Austro-Hungarian annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina. In return, Austria-Hungary would maintain a benevolent attitude if Russia would move to open "*the Straits to single ships of war*". Both would accept the Bulgarian declaration of independence, which was likely to take place if their planned chain of events would happen. Whilst no territorial concession would be given to neither Serbia nor Montenegro, Austria-Hungary would not protest or in any way oppose Serbian expansion southwards (at the expense of the Ottomans), and would support Russia's bid to remove the restrictions on Montenegrin sovereignty.

**According to Izvolsky:** The Austro-Hungarian withdrawal from the Sanjak of Novibazar, would stop Russia from considering war after the planned Austro-Hungarian annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Russia would press for changes to the Treaty of Berlin favorable to itself, such as: The opening of the Straits to Russian warships - Unhindered Bulgarian independence - Territorial concession of the Sanjak of Novibazar to Serbia - Complete and utter abolition of the restriction on Montenegrin sovereignty. All of this Austria-Hungary would support actively or passively.

**AUSTRIAN ACTION:** October 5<sup>th</sup> 1908 – Bulgaria declared independence from the Ottoman Empire. The day after the Emperor of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Franz Joseph, declared the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina into the Empire. The day after that, on the 7th of October 1908, the

government of Austria-Hungary also announced its withdrawal from the Sanjak of Novibazar. Both these actions were against the Treaty of Berlin 1878, and the diplomatic scene flared up.

**PROTESTS:** Serbia protested the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina vigorously (a province with a Serb majority), and mobilized its army. It demanded that either the annexation would be reversed, or the Sanjak should be given to Serbia in compensation. Austria-Hungary rejected both options, but with Austrian-Hungarian troops withdrawn from the Sanjak, the Serbs soon took it in until their control.

The Ottoman Empire also protested against the annexation, but was much more vocal about the Bulgarian independence, as Bulgaria was right next to home whilst Bosnia-Herzegovina was far beyond its reach anyhow. Nevertheless, the Austro-Hungarians decided to settle with the Ottomans, with a monetary compensation amounting to 2.2 million pounds.

**RUSSIAN ACTION:** Meanwhile, the Russians announced their plan to open the Straits to Russian warships. This was denounced by every other signatory to the treaty. Britain, the naval power, was especially negative to the opening to exclusive opening to Russian ships, although they were willing to accept the opening of the Straits if it applied to everyone. This was contrary to what the Russians wanted with their plan, as allowing potentially belligerent ships into the Black Sea could have bad consequences.

## RESULTS

**RUSSIAN DISAPPOINTMENT:** Lack of support from Austria-Hungary, as well as the failure of Russia's plans, made the Czar and Izvolsky embittered. To make Izvolsky back down, the Austro-Hungarians threatened to publish the documents of secret negotiations between the two countries, concerning the Balkans. The Russian Czar wrote to Franz Joseph, accusing Austria-Hungary of betraying a given trust, further damaging relations. In March 1909 Russia did back down, and accepted the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina, and encouraged Serbia to do the same, which it did soon after. Russia was bitter and felt betrayed: *"The dirty Jew has deceived me. He lied to me, he bamboozled me, that frightful Jew"* Izvolsky comment... Izvolsky's reputation was severely damaged, never to be repaired. He remained at his post for three more years after the incident, before being transferred to the Russian embassy in Paris.

**SERBIAN DISAPPOINTMENT:** Relations between Serbia and Austria- Hungary were permanently damaged. Serbia declared the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina was *"none of their business"*.

**GERMANY:** How was Germany involved in the Bosnian Crisis of 1908-09? When Izvolsky realized he been deceived the pressure on Austria-Hungary increased. Therefore they contacted Germany and asked for a clarification of their position. Von Bülow wrote to Conrad von Hötzendorf (Chief-of-Staff of the Austro-Hungarian Army) *"I shall regard whatever decision you come to as the appropriate one"*. The German Chief-of-Staff added that Germany was prepared to mobilize in support of the Dual Monarchy. The first **"Blank Check"** had been given to Austria-Hungary! Germany actions was a hope to humiliate Russia and weakened their link to France. Therefore Germany sacrificed one of Bismarck's main principles – don't get involved in the **"Eastern Question"** (the weakening of the Ottoman Empire). What happened in the Balkans now also involved Germany...