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Russia and the Assassination of Franz Ferdinand

Matthew Kowalski

Ever since that June day in Sarajevo, there has been a cloud of mystery surrounding the events that led up to the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand. Although there is little doubt that the Bosnian assassin Gavrilo Princip and the rest of the murder squad were part of a wider conspiracy centered in Serbia proper, the question of Russian compliance in the plot remains an unanswered question. In his letter to the Kaiser following the murder of his nephew, Emperor Franz Josef first raises the possibility of Russian responsibility. His statement that the events of June 28th was "the direct consequence of agitation carried out by Russian and Serbian Pan-Slavists" and that Serbia is "completely under Russian influence" firmly assert the claim of Russian involvement. Since then accusations have been made claiming that various Russian officials in both the foreign ministry and the Imperial General Staff had received prior information of the plot. However, when one examines the nature of St. Petersburg's relationship with the radical Pan-Serb organizations, it becomes apparent that the extent of Russian compliance with the plot was limited to a handful of sympathetic officials in Belgrade.

The relationship between Russia and radical Pan-Serbian organizations, such as the Black Hand, was characterized by feelings of mutual distrust. Although, the ideology of Pan-Slavism appeared to unite the two, the reality was very different. Pan-Slavism had existed since the mid-19th century and was based on the concept of the liberation of all the Slavic peoples from the rule of either Austria or the Ottoman Empire. Russia had from the start taken the leadership role in this movement and due to both political benefit and feelings of ethnic brotherhood adapted the ideology into its foreign policy. The extent to which Pan-Slavism had become part of Russia's foreign policy by 1914 can be clearly seen in the Russian Foreign Service's Balkan specialist Prince G.N. Trubetsoy's statement that, "Russia's true role in the world is to protect the smaller Slav states' cultural and political independence from Germanic pressure."¹ Trubetsoy's statement was especially relevant in regards to Russia's relationship with Serbia.

The Serbian Pan-Slavic movement had from the time of its inception been radical in its nature and given a tendency toward violence. Hans Kohn notes that this radicalism was characterized by "a brutalization of public life and the celebration as heroes of terrorist martyrs."² It was this affinity towards violence that strained relations between the Russian government and organizations like the Black Hand. The government in St. Petersburg held deep reservations about both the tactics and political leanings of Black Hand, particularly those of its leader Colonel Dragutin Dimitrevic. Dimitrevic and most of the other Black Hand leaders had been involved in the 1911 assassination of the King Alexander and Queen Draga, which although resulting in increased Russian influence also raised the question of Dimitrevic's possible republican sentiments. Many die-hard absolutists in the

¹ Levin, D.C.B, Russia and the Origins of the First World War. New York: St. Martin's Press. 1989, 93.

² Kohn, Hans, Pan-Slavism- Its History and Ideology. Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press. 1953, 92.

Russian court viewed the regicides as dangerous precedents in regards to their own positions. Further more, the violent and ultra-radical brand of Pan-Slavism preached by Dimitrevic and his colleagues were in direct opposition to those of the staunchly pro-Russian government of Prime Minister Pasic and the 'Old Radicals'. On several occasions the Tsar informed Serbia's King Peter of his fear of the growing republican movement and the need to eliminate the influence of the regicide officers.³ The Russian ambassador to Belgrade Nicholas Hartvig further echoed these sentiments by stating that, "Russia's Balkan policy required Pasic in office."⁴

For their part, the radical Pan-Serbs were as critical of Russia as she was of them. In both the constitution of the Black Hand and the radical Pan-Serb daily *Piejemont*, reliance on Russia in the creation of a "greater Serbia" is never mentioned. Instead, the radical Pan-Serb movement stressed concept of the self-reliance of Balkan peoples over the need for any outside leadership. This point is clearly stated in Article 4 of the Black Hand's constitution when Serbia, not Russia is referred to as the "Piedmont of Serbdom." Also, rather than praise Russia's policy in the Balkans, Colonel Dimitrevic openly criticized her secret diplomacy with Austria-Hungary dividing the Balkans into different spheres of influence. An October 1911 issue of *Piejemont* went as far to characterize Russia as a "Brotherly Judas", engaging in secret diplomatic arrangements at the expense of Serbia and the other Balkan Slavs.⁵

After looking at the differences that existed between the Russian government and the radical Pan-Serb movement, it becomes very unlikely that the government in St. Petersburg had any official role in the plot. Therefore, one must conclude that any Russian compliance in the conspiracy must have come in the form of individuals working on their own initiative. Several Russian officials, largely due to their affinity toward Pan-Slavic ideals, may have received prior knowledge of the assassination attempt. However, when assessing the available evidence, several of these candidates were most likely completely ignorant of the conspiracy.

The first candidate that may have possessed knowledge of the assassination was the Foreign Minister, Serge Sazonov. Sazonov was a committed adherent of the Pan-Slavic ideology and was instrumental in forging the close relationship between Russia and Serbia. He was also strongly anti-Austrian and a proponent of Serb expansion in the Balkans. His remarks to his Serbian counterparts in April 1913, "that in the future they would eventually get much territory from Austria",⁶ makes clear his sympathy with the Pan-Serb movement. However, Sazonov was a supporter of the more moderate brand of Pan-Serb nationalism professed by the Pasic and the Old Radicals and not that exposed by radicals under Dimitrevic. Besides this, his action during the 'July Crisis' seem to indicate that Sazonov was unaware of the conspiracy. It can be argued that had he been fully aware of

³ Dedijer, Vladimir *The Road to Sarajevo*. New York: Simon and Schuster. 1966, 430.

⁴ MacKenzie, David *Apis: The Congenial Conspirator*. New York: Columbia University Press. 1989, 121.

⁵ Dedijer, Vladimir *The Road to Sarajevo*. New York: Simon and Schuster. 1966, 429.

⁶ Seton-Watson, R.W. *Sarajevo*. London: Hutchinson and Co. 1966, 59.

the fact that the assassins were aided by elements within Serbia proper, he would have shown greater willingness to compromise with Vienna.⁷ Instead, Sazonov assumed that the Austrian charges of Serbian involvement in the plot were nothing more than an attempt to justify an invasion.

Another Russian official that may have received prior information concerning the assassination plot was Sazonov's top diplomat in Belgrade, Nicholas Hartvig. Like his superior, Hartvig was a dedicated "Slavophil" and saw a war between Serbia and Austria-Hungary as being inevitable. His strong identification with the Pan-Serbian cause led one Russian official to comment, "that it would be better if in the first place he pursued only Russia's interest."⁸ He was, however, a firm supporter of the Pasic regime and was concerned about the growing influence of the radical Pan-Serb movement. Indeed, it was largely Hartvig's efforts that saved the Pasic government during the 'May Crisis' of 1914 when Dimitrevic's radical faction was preparing a coup. As expected, this intervention on the side of Pasic did not win Hartvig any friends amongst the radicals, who mockingly referred to him as "being the real ruler of Serbia."⁹ The very notion that Dimitrevic would inform a man that he universally loathed of the conspiracy seems highly unrealistic. Also, Hartvig's response on hearing the news of the Archduke's assassination, "let us hope he is not a Serb"¹⁰, speaks against his knowledge of the conspiracy.

The one solid link between the conspiracy to assassinate the Archduke and Russia comes in the form of St. Petersburg's military attaches in Belgrade. Both Colonel Victor Artamonov and his deputy Alexander Verkhovsky were committed Pan-Slavists and through their official capacities had links to the leaders of the Black Hand. The Russian military's officer corps, in contrast to their counterparts in the Foreign Service had always been more sympathetic to the "direct action" tactics preached by the radical Pan-Serbs than the moderate policy of Pasic. In the army's daily newspaper *Novoye Vremya*, editorials echoing Pan-Slavic themes and anti-Austrian sentiments were common. Hartvig took note of the military's feeling towards the radical Pan-Serb elements after a conference with the Naval Minister Vladimir Lebedev. According to Hartvig, Lebedev characterized the Black Hand "as most popular, unselfish, idealistic and patriotic and whose aims was solely unification and liberation of the Serbo-Croatian-Slovenian peoples."¹¹ He went further in saying "the most honorable of the South Slav elements grouped themselves around Colonel Dimitrevic," a view that was in complete contrast to that of both that of the Russian government and Foreign Ministry.

Besides the already strong Pan-Slav direction of the Russian officer corps, the Black Hand's leaders had an established working relationship with the Russian military attaches

⁷ Lieven, D.C.B *Russia and the Origins of the First World War*. New York: St. Martin's Press. 1989, 140.

⁸ Lieven, D.C.B *Russia and the Origins of the First World War*. New York: St. Martin's Press. 1989, 42.

⁹ Dedijer, Vladimir *The Road to Sarajevo*. New York: Simon and Schuster. 1966, 431.

¹⁰ Jannen, William *The Lions of August - The Prelude to World War I*. Novato, CA: Presidio Publishing. 1996, 7.

¹¹ MacKenzie, David *Apis: The Congenial Conspirator*. New York: Columbia University Press. 1989,

in the Serbian capital. In his duty as chief of Serbian Military Intelligence, Colonel Dimitrevic had official contacts with the Russian military attaché Artamonov. It is known that Artamonov was privy to intelligence gathered by Dimitrevic's agents in Austria-Hungary and from time to time provided a sum of money for their expenses. Aratamonov also had actively helped Dimitrevic infiltrate agents into both Bosnia and Macedonia and unlike Hartvig, never expressed any strong sympathy for the Pasic regime. Finally, the two men also trusted each other a great deal, so it is conceivable that Aratamonov would have been told of the plan to murder the Archduke.

After the war, some former members of the Black Hand stated that before the assassination Dimitrevic had made a point of asking Aratamonov and his associate Verkhovsky about Russia's stance. The answer he was supposedly given was, "Go on. If they attack you, you are not going to be alone."¹² However, it should be mentioned the fact that this conversation ever took place must be called into question, largely because the testimonies were made by second hand sources. Also, had he actually made such a statement, Aratamonov was only expressing his personal view, and not quoting official Russian policy. Finally, Aratamonov and Verkhovsky not only denied any knowledge of the plot, but also had been given strict instructions by their superiors not to influence the Serbian positions.¹³

The true nature of Russia's role in the plot to murder Franz Ferdinand will probably never be known. There existed no hard evidence to support the claims that various Russian officials had either a hand in or received any advanced knowledge of the assassination plot. What we can deduce from the available evidence seems to show that at least a few sympathetic Russian officers in Belgrade may have had prior knowledge of the plot. At the same time, the distrust between the Russian government and the radical Pan-Serbs almost certainly discounts the allegations of wide ranging Russian participation.

¹² Dedijer, Vladimir *The Road to Sarajevo*. New York: Simon and Schuster. 1966, 433.

¹³ Mackenzie, David, *Apis-The Congenial Conspirator*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989,

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