



Title	オーストリア=ハンガリー二重君主国による「最後通牒」(1914年7月23日)再考:F. ヴィースナーの『覚書』にみる開戦決断の背景
Author(s)	村上, 亮
Citation	境界研究, 7, 1-24
Issue Date	2017-03-31
DOI	10.14943/jbr.7.1
Doc URL	http://hdl.handle.net/2115/65062
Type	bulletin (article)
Additional Information	There are other files related to this item in HUSCAP. Check the above URL.
File Information	07Summary_01Murakami.pdf (英文要旨)



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Summary

Austria-Hungary's Ultimatum of 23 July 1914 Reconsidered: The Background of Vienna's Decision-Making in the Memorandum of Friedrich von Wiesner

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The immediate cause of the First World War was the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand at Sarajevo on 28 June 1914. Gavrilo Princip, who killed Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie, was a Serbian nationalist and a member of the Black Hand Society. The Austrian government thought that Serbia was behind the affair. In its response, Vienna sought to settle its decade-long dispute with Serbia. On 23 July 1914, the Austrian government gave an ultimatum to the Serbian government. Many researchers argue that Austria deliberately made demands that it knew Serbia could not accept. Furthermore, it is often indicated that Vienna's ultimatum was not aimed at the Black Hand Society, but at the National Defense (in Serbian, Narodna Odbrana).

Many researchers have carried out research into the diplomatic crisis (the so-called July Crisis) between the assassination at Sarajevo and the British declaration of war against Germany. Although Vienna's declaration of war caused a chain reaction in Europe, historiographic studies still do not pay sufficient attention to either the process that led to the ultimatum, or to the Austrian justification for war against Serbia. In this article, I point out the importance of Friedrich von Wiesner, adviser on international law at the Austrian foreign ministry, during the July Crisis in Vienna. He participated by drawing up the ultimatum and he wrote the document (a memorandum) detailing charges against Serbia. Consequently, this article focuses on Wiesner and his memorandum.

The first section deals with the road to war in Austria. Initially, Leopold Berchtold, the Common Foreign Minister of the Austrian Empire, was determined to commence military operations against Serbia. The discussion of the common cabinet on 7 July 1914 is crucial. At this conference, the Austrian leadership largely agreed to an invasion of Serbia. Only the Hungarian Prime Minister, István Tisza, warned of Russian intervention, which would lead to a European war. Tisza demanded that Austria should talk with Serbia about the assassination. Emperor Franz Joseph and Berchtold could not ignore his opposition. However, Tisza backed down and accepted a hardline policy until

14 July 1914. The text of the ultimatum was approved by the common cabinet on 19 July 1914. The main aim of Austria's demands was to prevent hostile Serbian actions against Austria and to declare Serbia a subordinate state to Austria.

In the second section, I describe the importance of Wiesner for the July Crisis, and the content of his memorandum. Wiesner wrote it for the purpose of justifying Austria's demands. His memorandum was based on a careful investigation in Sarajevo. In his telegram on 13 July 1914 he denied the direct participation of the Serbian government in Franz Ferdinand's assassination, but confirmed the provision of arms by the Serbian military and the participation of Serbian frontier guards in illegally smuggling the assassins into Austria. His observations were inserted into the final text of the Austrian ultimatum. After his return to Vienna he completed the final edition of his memorandum on 24 July 1914. The central elements of the memorandum were accusations against Serbia regarding its toleration of criminal machinations and the nationalistic propaganda of several associations directed against Austria, the participation of its officials and officers in subversive agitation, various plots of assassination against Austrian politicians, severe press comments on Austria, and Serbian involvement in the Sarajevo affair.

The third section focuses on the correctness of the memorandum and the Serbian reply to it. Wiesner's memorandum could not refer to the activities of the Black Hand. However, as he wrote later, we should keep in mind the very close relationship and cooperation between the Black Hand and the National Defense. Serbian Prime Minister Nikola Pašić noticed several signs of intrigue about Franz Ferdinand's assassination beforehand. However, he didn't take measures against it. On the contrary, Pašić insisted repeatedly on Serbian innocence in the Sarajevo affair. As far as the Serbian reply on 25 July 1914 to the Austrian ultimatum is concerned, it is usually regarded as almost entirely complying with Austrian demands, with the exception of some points regarding the violation of Serbian sovereignty. However, the Serbian reply contained several ambiguous expressions and false statements.

The content of my analysis may be summarized as follows: (1) Austria rejected diplomatic negotiation with Serbia after the Sarajevo assassination, so Austria should bear great responsibility for the outbreak of the First World War. (2) Wiesner played a vital role in Vienna during the July Crisis. Most of his memorandum were correct, but its delayed presentation to European governments completely diluted its significance. (3) Serbia's propaganda maneuvers and terrorism strongly influenced Austria's decision in July 1914.