



## Trenches:

### The War Service of Sherlock Holmes

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## August 1914 – Mycroft Holmes and Pre-War European Diplomacy

by Ross Davies

What caused World War I? And how was it that the diplomats and their masters failed to avert such an obviously disastrous bloodbath?<sup>1</sup> Scholars cannot agree. Indeed, even among elite European historians (a crowd that specializes in studying the evolution of a complex of complex cultures), the tangled threads that led to the Great War are viewed as an extraordinarily terrible mare’s nest.

Nevertheless, there is enough common ground on some main themes to make for a fairly coherent conventional narrative of pre-war European diplomacy. It begins in October 1879 — when Austria-Hungary and Germany formed the Dual Alliance. It ends in August 1914 — when diplomacy failed and the Central Powers (Austria-Hungary and Germany) and the Entente Powers (France, Russia and Great Britain) declared war on each other. That passage of 35 years also marks, roughly, the span of Mycroft Holmes’s career in the British government. His involvement in the maneuverings of the great powers in those times may be invisible to most modern eyes (as it was to his contemporaries), but there are clues. They will crop up from time to time in this narrative, which reviews, briefly and in sequence, the perspectives of each of the five major players in the onset of World War I — Austria-Hungary, Germany, France, Russia and Great Britain — with some emphasis on Austria-Hungary, because that is where the war to end all wars began.

### First, a Few Words About Mycroft

He was born in 1847.<sup>2</sup> Little is known of his early years, but by the mid-1870s, while still a young man, he “had already made a brilliant start in the Foreign Office.”<sup>3</sup> “Brilliant” because he was both

<sup>1</sup> In “The Cardboard Box,” Sherlock Holmes referred to war as a “ridiculous” and “preposterous” “method of settling international questions.”

<sup>2</sup> “Chronological Table,” *The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes*, ed. Leslie S. Klinger (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2005), Vol. 1, 752.

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brilliant and unique. As his gifted younger brother Sherlock once said, Mycroft was “my superior in observation and deduction.”<sup>4</sup>

Officially, his job was “audit[ing] the books in some of the Government departments.”<sup>5</sup> But beginning in his early days at Whitehall, Mycroft — with his capacious and powerful mind — served unofficially as “a short-cut, a convenience” for high officials in need of unlimited data storage and easy retrieval.<sup>6</sup> Thus, he must have quickly become the primary (or at least the largest) depository of information on the European powers and their various interests. It was a role that surely intensified as he transformed himself from a useful depository/dispensary of data into an indispensable analyst of those data.

Mycroft harbored “no ambitions of any kind,” and accepted “neither honour nor title.” So, he remained a “subordinate” official throughout a career that ended as obscurely as it had begun.<sup>7</sup> It is difficult to doubt, however, that one way or another his service continued until World War I. As June Thomson has observed,

Although Mycroft may have himself officially retired by 1912, by which date he was sixty-five, it is unlikely that his connections with the British Government had been entirely severed . . . . [H]e may have come out of retirement to return to his former post as Government adviser and to contribute his own expertise towards the war effort.<sup>8</sup>

International politics was only one aspect of Mycroft’s multi-faceted role serving all departments of the British government.<sup>9</sup> So, the focus here on pre-war diplomacy precludes a complete portrayal of the man and his work. His labors in that area were, however, among his most important. Why? Consider this description of the situation in those days, as Sherlock heard it from a British prime minister: “The whole of Europe is an armed camp,” and, with a single diplomatic misstep, “this country would be involved in a great war.”<sup>10</sup> It was a chillingly accurate assessment and forecast.

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<sup>3</sup> Harrison, Michael, *In the Footsteps of Sherlock Holmes* (London: Cassell, 1958), 4. O.F. Grazebrook places Mycroft in government service in 1870. *Studies in Sherlock Holmes* (New York: Magico Magazine, 1981), 29.

<sup>4</sup> “The Greek Interpreter.”

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> “The Bruce-Partington Plans.”

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Thomson, June, *Holmes and Watson* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1995), 253, 261.

<sup>9</sup> “Appendix: Mycroft Holmes,” *The Sherlock Holmes Reference Library: The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*, ed. Leslie S. Klinger (Indianapolis: Gasogene Books, 1999), 213.

<sup>10</sup> “The Second Stain.”

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## Five Perspectives on the Road to World War

### Austria-Hungary

In the year 1879, Austria-Hungary (the greatest power in south-central Europe) and Germany (the greatest power in north-central Europe) signed a mutual defense treaty to create the Dual Alliance. It was the first link in a chain that bound the fates of the two nations together against the great powers that crowded around them in Europe from the east (Russia) and west (France and Great Britain), and around the world as empires grew. A formidably durable diplomatic bond, the alliance survived all the way to and through World War I. Early on, in 1882, Italy — a European power but not a great one — joined them in a Triple Alliance. But that turned out to be a merely nominal adjustment. When the time came, Italy sat out the beginning of World War I before coming in against its allies, attacking Austria-Hungary in the spring of 1915. Very late in the game, in August 1914, the Ottoman Empire — a formerly great power — also allied with Austria-Hungary and Germany and did, in fact, fight on their side in the Balkans and the Middle East.

Its long border with Germany secured by the Dual Alliance, Austria-Hungary was free to deal with its other big international concern: protecting and extending its presence and influence to the south and east, along its Hungarian borders in the Balkans. That ethnically diverse peninsula, bounded by the Adriatic, Ionian, Aegean, and Black seas, was in a practically perpetual state of crisis. The peoples of the region struggled to gain independence from the Ottoman Empire and resist domination by the other European powers and each other. Russia, for its part, was hungry — and poised — to expand its Balkan territory and influence. It had gained a great deal of both in the immediate aftermath of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78. But it then saw most of its gains undone by the terms of the peace negotiated at the Congress of Berlin. Under the Treaty of Berlin, the other great powers (all of whom wanted to prevent any one power from controlling the Balkans) distributed the Balkan spoils of war more evenly. Not surprisingly, this only served to perpetuate frustration and friction among the interested parties in the region: (1) the people who actually lived there (with their numerous ethnicities and histories and hostilities, and their aspirations for independence) and (2) all five great powers (with their competitive territorial ambitions and unlimited capacities for meddling). It was the driest, most dangerous tinderbox in Europe. Everyone knew that, especially the Austro-Hungarians and the Russians, who spent the next 35 years in what amounted to a Cold (and occasionally hot) War-by-proxy in the Balkans.

And thus it also should come as no surprise that the first public report on the activities of Mycroft Holmes was in “The Greek Interpreter,” which chronicles events in the summer of 1888.<sup>11</sup> It is replete with hints that he is keeping his fingers on Balkan pulsations both locally (in London) and on the front lines (in Budapest, the capital of Hungary).

In London, Mycroft was on familiar terms with Mr. Melas, a Greek expatriate who had been for “many years . . . the chief Greek interpreter in London,” with the ability to “interpret all languages — or nearly all,” and a specialty in “acting as guide to any [visiting] wealthy Orientals.” It is difficult to imagine a more useful contact for anyone wanting to keep tabs on — and discreetly communicate with — Central Europeans with resources and reasons (diplomatic, commercial, social) to visit London. Indeed, the susceptibility of talented translators to recruitment as diplomats

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<sup>11</sup> Klinger, *The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes*, Vol. 1, 762.

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and spies was no secret in Victorian times, just as it is no secret now. Prominent examples — such as Sir Richard Francis Burton (1821-1890) and General Vernon Walters (1917-2002) — have always been easy to find, and Melas fits the profile quite well.<sup>12</sup> When Melas was mistreated by mysterious and violent characters, Mycroft invited his brother Sherlock to investigate. Mycroft (a man of analysis, not a man of action) was accustomed to leaving the legwork of investigation to Sherlock. It is a sign of Melas's great value that Mycroft could not resist pitching in, albeit ineptly enough to prompt accusations of sabotage.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, Melas survived the ordeal — an unlikely outcome if Mycroft truly intended to betray him — and presumably returned to his translations, and his association with Mycroft.

In Hungary, Mycroft operated from a distance, monitoring Balkan affairs via that universal tool of international relations: the newspaper. At the end of “The Greek Interpreter,” we learn that someone has been keeping tabs on the men who attacked Melas. Having fled England after the Holmes brothers frustrate their plans, they made their way to Budapest, where they died under suspicious circumstances. Sherlock and Watson learned of this when “a curious newspaper cutting reached us from Buda-Pesth.”<sup>14</sup> “But,” asks D. Martin Dakin, “*who sent it?* What contacts had [Sherlock] in Hungary who knew of his interest in the matter?” Dakin then offers a most plausible answer: “I can only conclude that Mycroft, who in the course of his duties (at that time unknown to Watson) had to keep an eye on the foreign press, saw the item, cut it out and sent it to Sherlock.”<sup>15</sup>

Alas, not even a quarter-century of Mycroftian monitoring and cerebration could prevent ignition of the Balkan tinderbox, and then the world. In the Balkan War of 1912, the peoples of that region — with Russian backing — fought side-by-side to throw off their Ottoman rulers. Disputes over the spoils of victory erupted into the Balkan War of 1913, in which Serbia and its allies — again with Russian backing — defeated Bulgaria. The threat posed by consolidating Balkan powers, especially Serbia with its Russian sponsor, was more than Austria-Hungary could bear. When assassins with Serbian ties killed the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne on June 28, 1914, Austria-Hungary struck back. First, it solicited and received unconditional German support. Second, it issued a bundle of ultimatums seemingly designed to bring Serbia to heel and reassert Austro-Hungarian power in the Balkans. Serbia did not submit. So third, on July 28, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia. Russia promptly backed its client, Germany promptly backed its ally, all moved to preemptively protect their flanks, and, within a few days, all the great powers were at war.

**(Continued)**

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<sup>12</sup> Keifer, Lucille Westfall, “‘The Greek Interpreter’ Interpreted,” *Baker Street Journal* 59.2 (Summer 2009): 23.

<sup>13</sup> Knox, Ronald A., “The Mystery of Mycroft,” *Baker Street Studies*, ed. H.W. Bell (New York: Otto Penzler, 1995 (reprint of London: Constable, 1934)), 144-146.

<sup>14</sup> “The Greek Interpreter.”

<sup>15</sup> Dakin, D. Martin, *A Sherlock Holmes Commentary* (London: Cassell, 1958), 128.

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