

British Diplomacy at the Balkans during WWI

by
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Introduction

On 28 June 1914, Gavrilo Princip, a Bosnian Serb student, assassinated the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria in Sarajevo, Bosnia. The political objective of the assassination was to break the Austro-Hungarian's south-Slav provinces off from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The assassination triggered a chain of events that embroiled Russia and the major European powers. The dispute between Austria-Hungary and Serbia escalated into what is now known as World War I, which involved Russia, Germany, France, and the United Kingdom. Within a week, Austria-Hungary had to face a war with Russia, which had the largest army in the world at the time. The result was that Serbia became just another front to the massive fight that started to unfold along Austria-Hungary's border with Russia. The need to protect against a Russian invasion of Austria-Hungary meant that thousands of Austro-Hungarian troops had to be diverted from the Balkan Army to the Galician front, and this in turn spoiled Austria-Hungary's initial plans for the invasion of Serbia. The Serbian Campaign started on 28 July 1914, when Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia and her artillery shelled Belgrade the following day. The Austro-Hungarian Army launched several massive attacks against Serbia until the end of the year with no change in the border, but casualties were enormous as the Serbian army suffered 170,000 men killed, wounded captured or missing while the Austro-Hungarian losses were approaching 215,000 men killed, wounded or missing.

Early in 1915 the Germans were pushing to take Serbia since it would provide a rail link from Germany, through Austria-Hungary and down to Istanbul (and beyond). This would allow the Germans to send military supplies and even troops to help the Ottoman Empire. While this was hardly in Austria-Hungary's interests, the Austro-Hungarians did want to defeat Serbia. The Austro-Hungarians and Germans began their attack on 7 October 1915, with their troops crossing the Drina and Sava rivers, covered by heavy artillery fire. Once they crossed the Danube, the Germans and Austro-Hungarians moved on Belgrade itself and the town was captured on 9 October and by the end of the year the entire country was occupied with the Serbian Army fleeing to Greece.

Sir Charles Louis des Graz

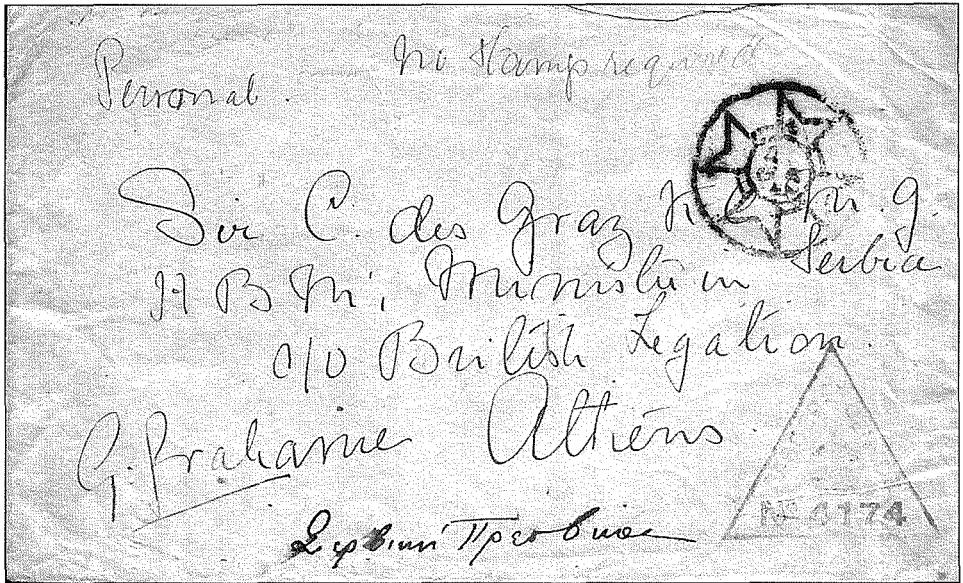
Why is this of interest? Since we have an unfranked cover at hand dispatched

by one Mr. G. Grahame in Malta to Sir C. des Graz K.C.M.G., H.B.M. Minister in Serbia, c/o British Legation, Athens and raises the question whom we deal with and what they did.

We first should ask ourselves who the addressee was. Sir Charles Louis des Graz was born in 1860, educated at Harrow and at Trinity College, Cambridge where he obtained his B.A. in 1883. He started a diplomatic career in 1884 and was sent to Constantinople. Next he became Secretary of Legation in Athens in 1888, at The Hague 1891-94; Saint Petersburg 1894-1901; as Secretary of Legation at Teheran 1901-1903, and at Athens 1903-5; Councilor of Embassy at Rome 1905-8; Charge d'Affaires at Cettinje 1906-8; and Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to Bolivia 1908-10 and Callao, Peru and Ecuador 1908-13. On 1 October 1913 he was nominated Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to Serbia, at the British Legation, Belgrade which position he held until 1919. The latter is reflected at the cover where one addresses him as His British Majesty (H.B.M.) Minister in Serbia.

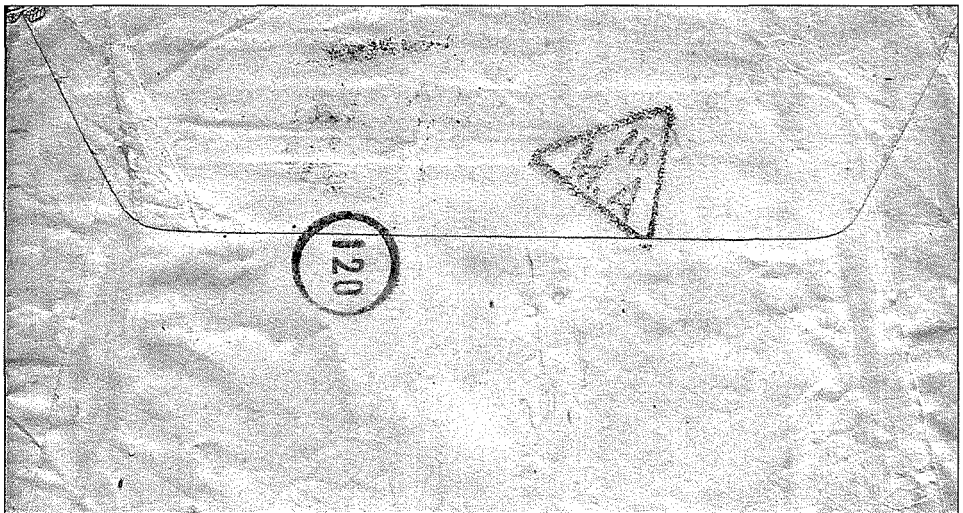
The cover shows that he was awarded the Order of St Michael and St George conferred to men and women who render extraordinary or important non-military service in a foreign country or loyal service in relation to foreign affairs. Also Knights Commander of Saint Michael and Saint George (K.C.M.G.) are entitled to use the prefix "Sir". The Order was founded to commemorate the British amicable protectorate over the Ionian Islands, which had come under British control in 1814 and had been granted its own constitution as the United States of the Ionian Islands in 1817. It was intended to reward "natives of the Ionian Islands and of the island of Malta and its dependencies, and for such other subjects of His Majesty as may hold high and confidential situations in the Mediterranean." In 1864, however, the protectorate ended and the Ionian Islands became a part of Greece. The Order's basis was revised in 1868; membership was granted to those who "hold high and confidential offices within Her Majesty's colonial possessions, and in reward for services rendered to the Crown in relation to the foreign affairs of the Empire."

The cover was cancelled by the undated GPO (GPO-1) canceller mostly seen on registered mail and forces mail. However, the fact that it was not addressed to Sir Charles Louis des Graz in Belgrade but rather in Athens, Greece let me believe it was sent after 1915. This is confirmed by the fact that the triangular censorship handstamp with number 4174 (CS-T1 4174) applied to this cover is first noted on a cover dating 31 July 1916. What is also astonishing is the fact that on the front is written "Personal" and "No stamp required". This is most likely a privilege for diplomatic relations as there is no indication that it concerns a military sender who would have indicated "on active service" in that case. Unfortunately I could not find any background information on G. Grahame the sender. However, Malta was a pivotal point in the Mediterranean to coordinate British actions in the wider



Front

region. May-be someone in Malta can shed more light on him. The front shows also a line written in Cyrillic I was not able to decipher and at the back two handstamps a circle with the number 120 and a triangle with 15 over M.A. The latter seems to be a Greek censorship type. May-be someone can tell as well where and by whom they were applied. I can be contacted by email: marcparren@hotmail.com.



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