



THE PLAYERS



GERMANY

By the early 20th century Germany was very strong. It had the largest population in Europe and its industrial output was among the greatest in the world. The Germans were quite proud of their progress and turned their attention to increasing their military strength. Between 1890 and 1914, Germany doubled the size of its army and built up its navy to a size second only to Great Britain's. The Germans built up their military at least in part out of suspicion and fear of their old enemy, France. Germany and France had been enemies for a long time, the most recent conflict being the Franco-Prussian War (1870) which had resulted in a German victory. The Germans annexed the valuable French territories of Alsace and Lorraine, which fueled the hatred between the two nations. To make matters worse, the German military staged a victory parade down the streets of Paris, angering the French after the war.

FRANCE

The French limped into the twentieth century. They had just come through a century of chaos and revolution. The French people overthrew their king, tried and failed at democracy, and weathered Napoleon and his wars to expand France. And they were war-weary after their crushing loss in the Franco-Prussian War against Germany. Their military was crippled, and they had lost valuable territories. However, the desire to go to war with Germany to avenge their defeat remained strong. Hatred of the Germans guided France's policy as Europe headed into World War I. Then, as they saw the German military build-up, their hatred turned to fear. At this point the French knew they were too weak to defend themselves against Germany so soon. France needed some powerful friends for protection!

GREAT BRITAIN

The British, although fearful of German militarism, were for a time unwilling to fan flames that could push them into a war. At the time, Great Britain was more concerned with its overseas trade and its empire than warfare. Its huge and impressive navy was built and maintained mainly to protect overseas shipping, and the British were concerned about their position as the world's largest sea power for this purpose. For years Great Britain enjoyed its position of "splendid isolation" as other European powers stared each other down and at times fought. However, as the nineteenth century drew to a close, the British began to fear the loss of power and influence in Europe as other nations, most notably Germany, grew stronger. Britain knew it could no longer stay out of European affairs, or it could lose all say in what happened. But who would be its best allies?

ITALY

Entering the 1900's, Italy had complaints against many of the other European powers. Italians were angry with France because it had gained control of colonies in Northern Africa they had their eyes on. On the other hand, Italy needed French support to conquer other areas of interest. Another important concern at the time was that Italy very much wanted to recover several Italian-speaking provinces that had fallen under Austria-Hungary's control. Knowing that Italy had no strong ties to any one nation in Europe, the other players all sought to woo her to their side with promises of aid to attain more territory.

AUSTRIA-HUNGARY

Austria-Hungary formed in 1867, when the Austrian king was forced to give up half of his control to the leader of the rebellious Hungarians, a very large group within his empire. Though the compromise pleased the Hungarians, many other groups under Austria-Hungary's control wanted their independence as well. They were just looking for an opportune time to revolt. Of all the European nations this empire stood to lose more than any if war broke out. The chaos of a European war could certainly provide an opportunity for rebellion. Several of their territories on the Balkan Peninsula (in southeastern Europe) wanted to link up with Russia. These people spoke the same language and had the same Slavic ancestry as the Russians. Although not in a position to launch full scale war against Austria-Hungary, Russia helped in any way they could to give their Slavic brothers a chance to break free from Austro-Hungarian rule.

RUSSIA

Just as militarism had taken root in Germany, the military also reached a position of power in Russia. Army officers dreamed of a war that would bring glory to the military and expand Russia's influence in Europe. The Russian government also wanted to distract its people from food shortages and other problems at home. In addition to their interest in the fate of the Slavs in the Balkans, the Russians also wanted to gain control of a port in southern Europe that Russian ships could use in the winter when all of its northern ones were frozen over. Russia had always been on somewhat friendly terms with Germany, but the friendship was crumbling, as Germany increasingly supported Austria-Hungary. Russia and Great Britain had always been rivals in trade, but Russia, despite its huge army, posed no threat to British sea power.

A WORD ABOUT ... THE BALKANS

Although this region of southeastern Europe was neither a major player in Europe, nor part of the alliances that were forming, it would help bring about war. Serbia, one of the countries there, formed the Pan-Slavic movement, a group whose main goal was to unite the European Slavs into one nation. Of course to do that, many groups of people in Austria-Hungary's empire would have had to be freed from its rule.