

The powers of europe during 1914 history essay



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In 1914 war was just a disaster waiting to happen, all over Europe tensions were raising with each country looking for the smallest excuse to start one of the greatest wars in history; World War I. On the 28th of June 1914 Austria found its excuse; the heir to the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir apparent of the Austrian throne, was assassinated in Sarajevo by a Gavrilo Princip; a member of 'the Black Hand' which was a secret Nationalist Serbian group that was devoted to uniting all of the territories with significant Serb populations not ruled by Serbia. This was not the only cause for the First World War however; it was only the match that lit up the unstable barrel of gun powder that was known as Europe during the time. Lots of countries wanted to go to war, but there is just one question; which country was most prepared or would benefit the most from the war? There are a few main factors that should be considered when deciding; economy, military, social conditions and political policies.

Economy

During the start of the 19th century Great Britain was the kingpin of economic development. This was mainly because of its overseas colonies. 1815 to 1914 was referred to as Great Britain's "Imperial Century". During that time 10 million square miles and close to 400 million people were made part of the British Empire in which it had access to loads of extra resources. But while Britain's economy had jumped during the industrial revolution, its growth had started to slow. This can be shown through its coal production. In 1914 Great Britain's coal output was 292 million tons from 250 million tons in 1900, only a 42 million ton increase. This growth compared to Germany, it had a 156 million ton increase in production. As these statistics show, while

Britain was growing it wasn't growing as fast as it was during the Industrial Revolution and could soon be overtaken by any potential competitor. Despite this, London was still the world's financial and entrepreneurial center for international payments and Britain still remained a very large creditor nation, lending funds to other countries.

The German economy in 1914 was growing at a phenomenal pace and should be considered as one of the greatest economic powers of the world at the time. During the earlier years of Imperial Germany's existence its economy had lagged far behind its competitors (Great Britain, France and Belgium) due to the fact that it was a new country and had to unify all of its affairs from the countries that were created from it, as a result the social structure was not at all suitable for economic or entrepreneurial development. But by the beginning of the 20th century Germany had become one of the world leaders in industrialization second only to Great Britain (which was in a slow decline after the industrial revolution). An example of this would be Germany's steel production. In 1914 it had produced an estimated 14 million tons compared to Great Britain which only produced 8 million tons. The prosperity of Germany's economy was also reflected in the way its population had "exploded" during the late 1890s yet when absorbed into the labor market living standards went on without any drastic decline. By 1914 the country's NDP (Net Domestic Product) was over 20 billion reichsmarks. This statistic can be disputed though. According to Knut Borchardt, "the poor state of the statistical material undermines the reliability of many of the detailed figures" (Borchardt, 1954)

After Austria-Hungary became a dual monarchy its economy had changed in many ways. It had started to replace its medieval institutions with more modern structures. The technological changes during that time also accelerated the urbanization and industrialization of the country. As a result of the improvements of Austria-Hungary's economy, the GNP grew an estimated 1.76% per year during the time period for 1870-1913. This growth compared very favorably with the other super powers of the time such as Britain (1%), France (1.06%) and Germany (1.51%). But in its early years the economy in general still could not compare with the others due to its late start in its sustained modernization. But by the end of the 19th century these differences slowly began to even themselves out. By 1900 Austria-Hungary had a strong food industry and agriculture in the east while the western areas excelled in various manufacturing industries. By 1914 Austria-Hungary had become the 3rd largest economic and industrial country in Europe after Great Britain and Germany.

During 1914 Russia's economy was not in such great shape. It had an abundance of resources but most were "locked in" by the vast size of the country and the extreme climate that they were located in. It would seem that Russia may have been a "dying man" but historians unanimously agree that its economy did grow. By 1900 it had taken France's 4th place position in iron production and 5th in steel production. Railway mileage had increased by 87% between 1892 and 1903 and its oil extraction had even tripled between 1892 and 1903. All of this industrialization though, required lots of capital to start up and maintain. This though was capital that Russia did not have at its disposal. As a result, Russia's industry ended up being

predominately owned by foreigners. A few examples of this would be Russia's steel and mining industry; 69% and 85% respectively were owned by foreigners. An interesting fact about other ownership of Russia's industries is that the knowledge capital that was utilized in Russia's industrialization were either foreigners or Russian minorities like Jews, Poles or Old Believers. Despite all of these improvements on Russia's economy there were very few people in the middle class and most were living in close to medieval-like poverty while the nobility were extremely wealthy. This created a giant imbalance in the workforce which in turn drastically lowered industrial efficiency. These were the main hurdles for Russia to become a major economic superpower and also resulted in unrest within the country.

Throughout the first half of the 19th century France was the world's wealthiest nation. During the time when agriculture was the main occupation of the majority of Europe it had the most abundant resources. It also held the 2nd place in the world's industrial production after Great Britain. But in 1914 the economy was not like it was 50 years ago. France ranked behind the other main superpowers like Great Britain, Germany Austria-Hungary and Russia in population and was struggling with Russia in terms of industrial production as it had already fallen behind in production. An example would be coal output. France lagged behind both Germany and Great Britain with only a 40 million ton output compared to 277 million and 292 million tons respectively and is only able to have competition with Russia which had 36.2 million tons of coal output. Though the general patterns of growth in France had a resemblance to the other Western European nations, the peaks

in its periods of prosperity were lower and the troughs in its periods of depression were deeper.

Military Might

During the beginning of the 20th century, Great Britain had the largest empire in the world which covered over 11 million square miles of territory most of which was claimed between 1750 and 1850. By the late 19th century Great Britain also acquired colonies in Africa and in 1914 King George V reigned over 430 million people. The British Empire was protected by its Royal Navy. This included 18 dreadnoughts, 29 pre-dreadnought battleships, 195 assorted cruisers and 146 destroyers. The Royal Navy was the largest navy in the world at the time. In August of 1914 Britain had around 250 thousand soldiers in active service with the remaining 450 thousand in reserve. About 120 thousand soldiers in active duty were in the British Expeditionary Force and the rest of the army was stationed abroad in all of its colonies except for the “ white countries/dominions” of Canada, New Zealand and Australia. Britain already had an undersized army but the fact that they were spread out all over the world meant that fighting capacity in the event of war would be limited.

Even before 1914 Germany was credited with having the most efficient army in the world. Unlike Britain it employed universal mass conscription for all of the men. The German Army (Deutsches Heer) were first put into short term military service and after that was finished they were put into long term reserve should they be needed in the event of a war. By 1914 the German Army in its entirety had 4. 2 million soldiers. The Imperial German Navy (Kaiserliche Marine)

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