ChronoZoom

World War 1: Participating Country Profiles

Germany

**Background:**

* After winning a war with France in 1870, a collection of small states united to become Germany under Kaiser Wilhelm I. Unification created a powerful country in the heart of Europe.
* Germany took the important industrial area of  
  Alsace-Lorraine from France after the war. French nationalists were furious.
* Germany allied with Austria-Hungary partly to protect itself from French retaliation and Russian aggression.

**Interests and Issues:**

* The German Kaiser wanted Germany to be seen as a world power and wanted more overseas colonies.
* In 1890, the Kaiser ordered the building of a large navy.
* German leaders were worried about being surrounded by France and Russia on either side of the country.
* Germany was concerned about the huge build-up of arms (especially in Russia) and was building up its own army.

Austria-Hungary

**Background:**

* Sprawling patchwork empire made of a many ethnic groups,  
  including Germans, Czechs, Slovaks, and Serbs. Each had its own customs, history, and language.
* Many of these ethnic groups wanted independence from Austria-Hungary
  + In the north the Czech people wanted to rule themselves.
  + The Slavs in the south west (especially the Croats) wanted their own state.
  + The Serbs living in the south wanted to break off  
    and join the neighboring state of Serbia.
* In 1914 Emperor Franz Joseph’s main concern was how to keep his patchwork empire together.
  + Newly independent Serbia was becoming stronger and stronger. Austria-Hungary believed Serbia could become the “nucleus for unification” as Piedmont had been for the creation of Italy and Prussia had been for the creation of Germany. A Serbian-led Slav State with ties to Russia might mean the end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Austria-Hungary was suspicious that Serbia was promoting unrest among its ethnic groups which was a danger to the empire.
* Allied with Germany to protect itself from Russia and Serbia.

**Interests and Issues:**

* Wanted to keep the fragmented empire together.
* Worried that Serbia was becoming powerful  
  with a strong army.
* Worried that Russia had a strong army and might support Serbia.

Italy

**Background:**

* Formed from a collection of smaller states
* Southern Italians less supportive of the new country than Northern Italians.
* Signed an alliance with Austria-Hungary and Germany even though many Italians lived in Austria-Hungary and Italian nationalists wanted that territory.
* Invaded Libya in 1911 and took control of it away from the Ottoman Empire. Most European countries, including Italy’s allies, opposed Italy’s actions.

**Interests and Issues:**

* By 1914, Italy was the weakest of the great powers, but was still an important country with a strategic geographic location.
* Wanted to develop an overseas empire based on Libya and Ethiopia.
* Had signed alliances that were defensive only, so Italian leaders thought they had flexibility in their responses to crises.

Great Britain

**Background:**

* Agreed to cooperate more with France in 1904 in order to defuse imperial rivalries between them.
* Grew less worried about Russian rivalry after Russia  
  lost in war with Japan in 1904-1905. Russia’s fleet was decimated.
* Began to cooperate more with Russia in 1907, even though most Britons preferred Germany to reactionary and autocratic Russia.
* Signed agreements with France and Russia in order to eliminate rivalries with those countries in Africa and Asia.

**Interests and Issues:**

* Anxious to maintain control over their colonies.
* Did not want any one country to be too strong in Europe.
* Wanted to make sure Belgium remained independent so that neither France nor Germany would control the Belgian coastline.

France

**Background:**

* Defeated by Germany in war in 1870; lost the important industrial region of Alsace-Lorraine.
* Developed a strong alliance with Russia despite their two governments being very different.
* By 1914 French socialists wanted better relations with Germany and less reliance on autocratic Russia.

Interests and Issues:

* Wanted solid alliances with Britain and Russia to deter aggression from Germany.
* Wanted to maintain control of its empire, especially in North Africa.
* French politicians wanted to keep control of military policy away from the military, whom they generally distrusted.

Russia

**Background:**

* Largest of the great powers, but least industrially developed.
* Developed industries and railways with help from French loans.
* History of rivalry with Austria-Hungary, and supported Serbia in the Balkans as a way to project power in the region.
* Lost a war with Japan in 1905, followed by revolution against the Russian Tsar at home. The war began because both Japan and Russia wanted to control Korea and Manchuria. After losing the war, Russia was forced to abandon its expansionist policies in the east.
* Began rebuilding and modernizing its army after the Russo-Japanese War.

Interests and Issues:

* After losing influence in East Asia, Russia sought to increase its influence in the Balkans.
* Preservation of access to warm water ports in the Mediterranean, especially through the Dardanelles Straits.
* Resistance to any further Austrian expansion or influence in the Balkans.
* Prevention of further internal conflict  
  to avoid fragmenting the country.

Serbia

**Background:**

* Protested Austria’s takeover of Bosnia in 1908,  
  but backed down.
* Emerged as the strongest country in the Balkans by 1913.
* Was a close ally of Russia.

**Interests and Issues:**

* The ability to defend Serbs in the region (Pan-slavism).
* The ability to defend against Austria-Hungary’s aggression in the region.
* Some members of the Serbian elite actively sought the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Ottoman Empire

**Background:**

* Undergoing massive domestic reform as a result of the “Young Turk” movement that sought to modernize the empire.
* Seen as the “sick man of Europe” after its defeat in the First Balkan War.
* Looking for a European ally to help the empire rebuild after losing most of its Balkan territories.

**Interests and Issues:**

* Worked increasingly closely with Germany to help deter Russian interests in the Dardanelles Straits.
* Sought to extend its control into the Caucuses and Central Asia.
* Needed to defend its borders against British forces in imperial areas like India and Egypt. It also had long, exposed coastlines.