

## Forces and resources of the combatant nations in 1914

When war broke out, the Allied powers possessed greater overall demographic, industrial, and military resources than the Central Powers and enjoyed easier access to the oceans for trade with neutral countries, particularly with the United States.

All the initial belligerents in World War I were self-sufficient in food except Great Britain and Germany. Great Britain's industrial establishment was slightly superior to Germany's (17 percent of world trade in 1913 as compared with 12 percent for Germany), but Germany's diversified chemical industry facilitated the production of ersatz, or substitute, materials, which compensated for the worst shortages ensuing from the British wartime blockade. The German chemist Fritz Haber was already developing a process for the fixation of nitrogen from air; this process made Germany self-sufficient in explosives and thus no longer dependent on imports of nitrates from Chile.

Of all the initial belligerent nations, only Great Britain had a volunteer army, and this was quite small at the start of the war. The other nations had much larger conscript armies that required three to four years of service from able-bodied males of military age, to be followed by several years in reserve formations. Military strength on land was counted in terms of divisions composed of 12,000–20,000 officers and men. Two or more divisions made up an army corps, and two or more corps made up an army. An army could thus comprise anywhere from 50,000 to 250,000 men.

The land forces of the belligerent nations at the outbreak of war in August 1914 are shown in Table 2.

The higher state of discipline, training, leadership, and armament of the German army reduced the importance of the initial numerical inferiority of the armies of the Central Powers. Because of the comparative slowness of mobilization, poor higher leadership, and lower scale of armament of the

Russian armies, there was an approximate balance of forces between the Central Powers and the Allies in August 1914 that prevented either side from gaining a quick victory.

Germany and Austria also enjoyed the advantage of “interior lines of communication,” which enabled them to send their forces to critical points on the battlefronts by the shortest route. According to one estimate, Germany’s railway network made it possible to move eight divisions simultaneously from the Western Front to the Eastern Front in four and a half days.

Even greater in importance was the advantage that Germany derived from its strong military traditions and its cadre of highly efficient and disciplined regular officers. Skilled in directing a war of movement and quick to exploit the advantages of flank attacks, German senior officers were to prove generally more capable than their Allied counterparts at directing the operations of large troop formations.

Sea power was largely reckoned in terms of capital ships, or dreadnought battleships and battle cruisers having extremely large guns. Despite intensive competition from the Germans, the British had maintained their superiority in numbers, with the result that, in capital ships, the Allies had an almost two-to-one advantage over the Central Powers.

The strength of the two principal rivals at sea, Great Britain and Germany, is compared in Table 3.

The numerical superiority of the British navy, however, was offset by the technological lead of the German navy in many categories, such as range-finding equipment, magazine protection, searchlights, torpedoes, and mines. Great Britain relied on the Royal Navy not only to ensure necessary imports of food and other supplies in wartime but also to sever the Central Powers’ access to the markets of the world. With superior numbers of warships, Great Britain could impose a

blockade that gradually weakened Germany by preventing imports from overseas.