

OxfordAQA

International GCSE

History (9245)

Scheme of work

The origins of the First World War, c1890-1915

For teaching from September 2026 onwards
For International GCSE exams in June 2028 onwards

Contents

You can use the title links to jump directly to the different sections of this scheme of work
(Use Ctrl and click to follow the link)

Section title	Page
Introduction	3
Assumed coverage and teaching hours	3
Assessment	3
Resources	4
Part 1: Two armed camps and increasing tension between the powers, up to 1913	5
Rivalries between the European powers	5
Kaiser Wilhelm II's aims in foreign policy	7
Rivalries in North Africa and the Balkans	9
Review	11
Part 2: The outbreak of the First World War	12
The short-term causes of conflict	12
The widening of regional conflict into a world war	14
Review and assessment of Part 2	16

Introduction

This scheme of work is intended to help teachers plan and implement the teaching of The origins of the First World War, c1890-1915 option of the Oxford AQA International GCSE History (9245) specification. The purpose is to provide advice and guidance to teachers, not to prescribe and restrict their approach to the specification. There are obviously many other ways of organising the work, and there is absolutely no requirement to use this scheme. We hope the suggested activities will support your teaching of this topic.

The scheme focuses on the causes of the First World War, combining long-term and short-term factors and considering a number of complimentary themes such as nationalism and militarism. It was a period of increasing international rivalry and tension due in part to the consequences of aggressive foreign policy ambition, but also the result of the unforeseen consequences of relatively minor events. The specification content is based on an unfolding narrative of key developments in the relationship between countries and allows students to explore the effect these developments had on increasing tension and on the eventual outbreak of war.

Students will study how international relations were affected by the political, social, economic and cultural aspects of the period and the role individuals played in influencing the direction of international affairs. They will also look at how factors worked together to provide a web of causation and discuss how far it is possible to identify a single origin for the outbreak of the First World War.

Assumed coverage and teaching hours

This scheme of work assumes that the OxfordAQA International GCSE History (9245) is taught as a two-year linear course, with a total of approximately 120-140 guided learning hours in total, in line with specification guidance. This equates to approximately two hours of teaching per week over two academic years, although this may vary according to local timetabling arrangements and students' prior experience of. As this particular optional topic equates to one quarter of the qualification, this scheme of work is designed to be taught in around 30-35 hours.

Work will also need to be completed outside of lessons. The amount of independent study required will depend on curriculum time, the pace of delivery and the extent to which assessment practice and consolidation activities are incorporated into timetabled lessons.

Assessment

Assessment points in the learning activity column indicate possible assessment opportunities. These could be short tests of about ten minutes (exam-style questions, short factual tests, source evaluation) or longer assessments (exam-style questions).

The assessment in Section B is based on a series of short and extended response questions.

- Question 1 tests AO1 and is worth 3 marks. It requires students to show their knowledge of a given issue.

- Question 2 tests AO1 and AO2 and is worth 6 marks. It requires students to explain one way in which a given issue developed, supporting their explanation with knowledge and understanding. It will focus on the 2nd order concept of cause/consequence or change.
- Question 3 tests AO1 and AO2 and is worth 9 marks. It requires students to explain two changes or two ways/ reasons why a given issue developed, supporting their explanation with knowledge and understanding. It will focus on the 2nd order concept of cause/consequence or change.
- Question 4 tests AO1 and AO2 and is worth 12 marks. It requires students to construct an extended response with a line of reasoning. It requires students to explain a given cause/ consequence/ change and at least cause/ consequence/ change in the context of a broader development leading to a judgement that evaluates their relative importance. It will focus on the 2nd order concept of cause/consequence or change.

Resources

Research exercises assume students have access to a textbook(s) and / or the internet. You can supplement textbook(s) by other sources.

OUP support this option with The origins of the First World War, c1890–1915 ‘, published in 2026 as part of the OxfordAQA International series and available in various formats.

A parallel product written for a similar AQA UK examination option about the origins of the First World War contains supplementary material: ‘Conflict and Tension: The First World War 1894-1918’.

Part 1: Two armed camps and increasing tension between the powers, up to 1913

Rivalries between the European powers c1890

Suggested timing

5 hours

Specification content

Rivalries between the European powers c1890: development of the Alliance System; the Triple Alliance, the Franco Russian Alliance, Entente Cordiale and Anglo-Russian Agreement; Britain's emergence from 'Splendid Isolation'.

Teaching guidance

- This study, by its nature, relates to the countries of Europe and the development of rivalries between them. Recurring questions will relate to knowledge of the individual events concerned, why they occurred and the consequences of these events. The study is tied together by the overarching theme of the causes of the First World War.
- At any early stage, students might consider what tensions existed in Europe c1890 and develop an understanding of the geopolitical ambitions of each power. Comparing the situation of the major European powers will be an important aspect in developing an appreciation of why subsequent tensions developed. The ambitions of each country and the tensions of c1890 can be tracked throughout the remainder of the course to consider aspects of change and of continuity and to consider the interaction between long and short-term causes.
- This course provides an opportunity for students to develop an understanding of the nature of causation in history and of how various factors often interact. In addition, concepts such as sequencing events and consequence will assist in developing responses to explain style questions.
- Here is an early opportunity to practice writing in response to 'explain' style questions: questions 2, 3 and 4. A common method to approach this is using the structure Point, Evidence, Explain, though this is by no means the only permissible approach.

Possible teaching and learning activities

- Centres could organise their teaching around the enquiry question: 'Why was there rivalry between the European powers c1890?'
- Students might be tasked with drawing up a table with a column detailing what each country had, what each country wanted, and how each country hoped to achieve its aims. As the course develops, students might be encouraged to return to this table and add further details.
- An important focus of this section will be to develop an understanding of why each alliance developed. Using the table developed above, students might use this to then explain whether each country had anything in common with the others and to use this to provide early background information about likely motivations for any alliance.
- For each alliance or agreement, (the Triple Alliance, the Franco-Russian Alliance, the Entente Cordiale, the Anglo-Russian Agreement), a class debate might be developed in which students advocate that their allocated alliance was essentially defensive in nature. Other students try to prove that it was aggressive in nature.
- Themes such as nationalism, militarism and the role of individuals might be introduced at this early stage to provide a broad foundation for an understanding of events in the period. Students might be encouraged to research these themes and to briefly present an explanation to the class of how they believe these themes can be seen at work in the development of alliances or to explain tensions c1890.
- Divide students into groups, each producing a presentation from the perspective of British diplomacy in this period. One presentation is to argue that Britain had no need to end its policy of splendid isolationism, with another group arguing the opposite. Use these presentations to develop a class opinion on why Britain ended its policy of splendid isolation. Here is the opportunity to talk about the role of balance in longer type evaluative responses.
- To complete understanding of progression in this section, students might be encouraged to think about how the formation of the alliances and agreements affected international relations / tension. This might be achieved by asking each student to allocate a mark of -5 to +5 for each agreement or alliance to indicate if it increased or reduced tension and by how much by a set date. This information might be conveyed by display work, by class debate or by a written response.

Kaiser Wilhelm II's aims in foreign policy

Suggested timing

5 hours

Specification content

Kaiser Wilhelm II's aims in foreign policy: fear of encirclement in the 1890s; Weltpolitik; 'a place in the sun' and colonial rivalries; attitudes towards Great Britain; militarism and the arms race – military and naval: the reasons why countries increased the size of their armed forces, including the Anglo-German Naval Race.

Teaching guidance

- The focus should be on developing knowledge of Kaiser Wilhelm's objectives in foreign policy and what impact this had on international tensions and rivalries.
- There should be a good understanding of policies such as Weltpolitik and an understanding of how foreign policy ambition and other factors explain the arms race in the period.
- Students should also consider how the broader themes such as militarism and nationalism continued to develop and what impact this had on relations between powers.
- This is an opportunity for students to develop an awareness of whether the powers, and especially Germany, were developing policies in response to genuine threat or whether there were other, more aggressive, motives that were of greater significance.
- This section also allows for consideration of the role that Germany played in the developing crisis and to begin to consider the difficulties of ascribing culpability in historical study, and the extent therefore to which Germany might be blamed for the eventual outbreak of war. This question can be returned to throughout the course.

Possible teaching and learning activities

- Centres could organise their teaching around the enquiry question: How far did the Kaiser's foreign policy aims contribute to international tension?
- Students might be given a range of contemporary German posters and postcards featuring the Kaiser. Students use these sources to identify what image of the Kaiser was conveyed to the world by Germany. Students might then research the early life of the Kaiser to determine if any links can be made between their research and the sentiments expressed. This also provides an opportunity to discuss provenance and value of source material.
- Students might be given contemporary depictions of the Kaiser from outside of Germany. Is the message of these images different? Students then use their knowledge of the Kaiser acquired in this section to determine which national depiction is the more convincing.

- On a map of Africa, students locate and label the different regions controlled or under the influence of European powers. They also label the areas that each power wanted to have control or influence in. Answer the question: 'Why was Africa a source of tension in the period?'
- On an illustration of a dreadnought, students research and label the various attributes of the ship, such as the range of the guns. Students then use this information and further research to explain why the Dreadnought became a focus of the naval arms race.
- Students divide into groups. Some are tasked with delivering a 4-5 minute presentation imagining they are Von Schlieffen and his team trying to convince the German High Command of the need for a plan in case of attack. Other groups are tasked with presenting Plan 17 from a French perspective to the French government. Further groups are tasked with presenting the British plan to their government arguing that Britain should be building up its navy as quickly as possible. This leads to a question: 'How far were the powers of Europe trying to avoid war in the years to 1914?'
- Students research the terms militarism and nationalism. Once the class has an agreed definition, a table is drawn up with columns headed 'nationalism', 'militarism', and 'the role of individuals'. For each event studied so far, they can then decide which column the event is best suited to and explain why, bearing in mind that some events may fit in multiple categories. This table can be added to as the course progresses.

Rivalries in North Africa and the Balkans:

Suggested timing

4 hours

Specification content

Rivalries in North Africa and the Balkans: the Moroccan Crises of 1905 and 1911; the Bosnian Crisis, 1908–1909; the Balkan Wars, 1912–13; Slav nationalism, ethnic tensions and their effects on international relations.

Teaching guidance

- The focus should be on broadening geographical range by considering the Balkans and North Africa.
- Students should consider how events in each region can be used as evidence of rivalry between the great powers, and why this added to tension.
- Develop your students' understanding of causation by questioning why these areas in particular became a focus of interest of individual powers.
- Explore further how nationalism, militarism and the role of individuals continued to have an effect, and even to drive the events forwards.
- The sequencing of these events will probably prove to be important to overall understanding of this section, especially in relation to Morocco and Bosnia. How did one event lead to the next?

Possible teaching and learning activities

- Centres could organise their teaching around the enquiry question: 'In what ways did rivalry increase in North Africa and in the Balkans?'
- Students complete a table which includes information on the causes, events and consequences of each event.
- To help students make connections between events, task them with writing out a chronology or timeline. Encourage students to make as many causal links between the events as possible.
- Alternatively, set a chronology exercise as a card sort in which students are required to place events in the correct chronological order or one in which one student draws a card, another student draws one and the task is to make a causal link between each.
- Strategies such as card sorts or diamond 9s can help students consider what might be the 'main reason' in comparison to others, which is a key skill in coming to a judgement in the 12 mark Question 4 on the exam paper.
- For each of the events, students are tasked with identifying as many consequences as possible. In groups, students discuss which they feel are the most significant consequences for each event and conclude on 2 or 3 for each. On the basis of this, students are then required to answer the question: 'Which event had the most significant consequence for international peace?'
- Students to devise display work from a British / French perspective arguing that the Kaiser had no place in Morocco. Complementary display work arguing the opposite

from the German perspective may allow further class debate about the justification for German intervention and the nature of propaganda.

- Task groups of students to create a 4-5 minute speech from the perspective of the Balkan League explaining why they wished to expel the Ottomans from the Balkans. Include how they plan to achieve their objectives. Discuss as a class whether these objectives appear to be justified and whether the method appears realistic.

Review

Suggested timing

1 hour

Specification content

Review and assessment of Part 1: International Relations, Two armed camps and increasing tension between the powers, up to 1913.

Assessment guidance

- This is the opportunity to develop your students' exam technique and to test their learning so far.
- You can use exam-style questions based on the content of Part 1.
- For second order concept questions, analyse students' effectiveness when writing Point/Evidence/Explanation paragraphs in answer to an 'explain' style question.

Resources

Specimen papers and Activities sections of the OUP textbook.

Part 2: The outbreak of the First World War

The short-term causes of conflict

Suggested timing

5 hours

Specification content

The short-term causes of conflict: the aims of Austria-Hungary and Serbia in the Balkans; the role of the Black Hand; Gavrilo Princip and the assassination of Franz Ferdinand at Sarajevo; the response of Austria-Hungary; the ultimatum and Serbia's response; the July crisis.

Teaching guidance

- The focus should be on the short-term causes of the First World War and especially the events in Sarajevo and the July Crisis.
- Building upon the material covered previously, students should begin to establish links between long term rivalries, and the short term sparks for war. Teaching would develop all of the themes covered so far such as nationalism, militarism and the ambitions of the Kaiser, but would be able to link these to specific historical events taking place in 1914. Indeed, without a good understanding of events from c1890 onwards, it is unlikely that a good understanding of the importance of events in 1914 can be established.
- Students should have good knowledge of the events surrounding the assassination, but should ensure that this knowledge does not exist in isolation and that it is instead used to explain the descent to war.

Possible teaching and learning activities

- Centres could organise their teaching around the enquiry question: 'How important were the events of 1914 in explaining the outbreak of the First World War?'
- Students might write a speech or produce some visual material imagining they are members of the Black Hand, explaining why they have formed, what they hope to achieve, and how they intend to do this. This might be presented as a promotional piece/example of propaganda trying to encourage others to join them.
- Simple factual knowledge of the events of the assassination might be deployed with some ease to task students to create a factual newspaper account of the events of 28th June. This might be altered to task students to write an account from the Black Hand or Austrian perspective.
- The consequences of the assassination might be presented as a sequencing exercise. It will be helpful for students to consider cause and effect and how one event led almost directly to the next.

- Students could write a letter from the Serbian perspective in which they comment on the 10-point ultimatum presented by Austria Hungary. Explain why they found it impossible to accept the last demand.
- Students might be presented with a range of images of crowds in various countries after the declaration of war. Discuss what these images have in common and what they therefore tell us about the approach of war and the actions of national governments.
- This presents an opportunity for students to practice questions that require a relative evaluation/ judgement. Perhaps 'How far was the outbreak of the First World War due to unexpected events / the role of individuals / nationalism/ militarism?' Discuss the idea that the core question is what caused the First World War. Well-prepared students should seek to prepare a range of factors in response. To be asked if factor x is the most significant is simply trying to drive an evaluative response.

The widening of regional conflict into a world war

Suggested timing

6/7 hours

Specification content

The widening of regional conflict in to a world war: the role of the alliances and European armed camps in 1914; military planning; the Schlieffen Plan and its contribution to the outbreak of war; Belgium and Great Britain's declaration of war on Germany; responsibility of different countries and leaders for the outbreak of war and the failure of diplomacy to maintain peace; the escalation of the conflict in 1914 and 1915 to include the European Empires, Turkey and Italy.

Teaching guidance

- Here, students are given the opportunity to consider how a regional event led to the wider war.
- Students should use all of the information acquired in earlier parts of the course, to explain the significance of both long-term and short-term factors.

Possible teaching and learning activities

- Students add to their previous knowledge / presentation on the Schlieffen plan to explain why this policy failed. Class discussion might consider if this failure was predictable or whether it was the result of unforeseen events. Was Schlieffen's original idea a poor one?
- Knowledge of the Schlieffen Plan might then be used to assess its relative significance in explaining the reason for Britain's involvement in the war.
- Students might research the Battle of Mons, especially the story of the Angels of Mons. Alternatively, students might be presented with various stories about the Angels of Mons, plus contemporary images, and asked to explain why this story and these images became so popular.
- Another approach would be to encourage students to produce their own propaganda related either to the story of the Angels or to the story of stiff Belgium resistance to the German invasion.
- Students might research contemporary accounts of the atrocities of the German troops in Belgium. Again, the focus might be to explain why these were produced and published so widely. Challenge might come in tasking students with trying to find out if these reports had much grounding in fact.
- On a map of the fighting area, students might label where the battles they have learned about took place with a key offering a brief explanation of significance. This should include the Eastern Front and battles involving the Ottoman Empire.

- Imagine that you are Churchill trying to justify the plan to attack the Dardenelles. Write the speech he might give in the war cabinet to try to encourage a broadening of the war.
- Research the number of troops that came from different colonies to fight alongside their respective 'mother' countries. Possibly use a map of the world to indicate which countries sent troops to fight with a brief explanation of why they did so, and how they contributed to the war.
- Research the sinking of the Lusitania in 1915. Provide students with newspaper clippings of the event, plus examples of contemporary propaganda. How far do the news stories reflect what happened? Class discussion on how valuable newspapers are to a historian.
- Students might be tasked with producing their own heavily subjective account of the sinking using specific factual material about German policy in support.
- Students might explore the successes and limitations of Germany's naval policies in 1914 and 1915, perhaps producing a table, before attempting to answer the question 'How far was German policy at sea a success in the years 1914 to 1915?'
- Students can explore the involvement of Italy through producing a spider diagram showing the reasons that Italy signed the Treaty of London. Alternatively, this can be presented as a class debate with one group advocating Italian involvement in the war, and the other arguing that Italy should not join on the side of Britain, France and Russia.

Review and assessment of Part 2

Suggested timing

1 hour

Assessment guidance

- This is the opportunity to develop your students' exam technique and to test their learning on the content of Part 2.
- You could use this as an opportunity to develop their understanding of how to answer AO1/AO2 questions such as the 6 and 9 mark questions and the bullet-point 12 mark evaluative question.
- Discuss exam technique with your students. Use low tariff questions to check acquisition of knowledge.
- For second order concept questions, analyse students' effectiveness when writing Point/Evidence/Explanation paragraphs in answer to an 'explain' style question.