
A-level History

7042/1H Tsarist and Communist Russia, 1855–1964
Report on the Examination

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General comments

It was good to find that in this, the first year of examinations in a new A-level specification, there were many students who came to the examination well-prepared and able to write with confidence and enthusiasm about the period they had been studying. Strong knowledge of economic change under Stalin was exhibited in response to the compulsory 01 question and question 04, inviting consideration of change and continuity between post-war Stalinism and Khrushchev also elicited some thoughtful and perceptive answers. In the responses to questions 02 and 03, there was also evidence that students could think effectively across a broad period of History, selecting relevant examples to support a case and providing substantiated individual judgement. There were, of course, some, whose knowledge of material or understanding of developments, were inadequate for the tasks set. Those who, despite some effective revision, still under-performed may have failed to take on board some of the new A level requirements and it is largely to help such students that the following comments are offered.

Section A

01

Students were required to evaluate three separate extracts in relation to an issue –the impact of Soviet industrial policy between 1921 and 1941. They were not asked to compare the given extracts, nor evaluate their provenance and bias. Those that did this wasted valuable time, although they were not penalised for so doing. The answer did not require an introduction – nor an overall conclusion, but some concluding judgement on each extract in relation to the question posed was helpful to meet the criteria for the highest marks.

The most obvious differentiator between student answers to this question lay in the ability to identify and address the overall argument raised by each extract. Far too many adopted a line-by-line approach, which neither showed any overall understanding, nor kept the answer focused on the question demands. For the benefit of those preparing students for a future examination, it might be worth reiterating the importance of first considering the topic to be addressed (which follows the ‘in relation to...’ in the question) and then assimilating the whole extract before starting to write. Students should be reminded that the key argument of an extract does not necessarily appear in the first line.

On this year’s paper the overall argument put forward in the first two extracts, both of which accepted the success of Soviet industrial policy, concerned the impact of that policy on the workers. Extract A conveyed the view that the workers were enthusiastic and prepared to accept sacrifices for the greater good while Extract B took the reverse view that industrialisation was at the expense of the population. Extract C was slightly different in that it saw industrial policy as weakening to the Soviet economy as a whole; essentially arguing that its impact was wholly negative. Given these different interpretations, with their very contradictory arguments, it was surprising how many students found all the extracts ‘convincing’. Whilst there needed to be a balanced evaluation, those who took their full import on board provided much more nuanced judgement, demonstrating comprehension of, and sensible reflection on, the passages concerned. There were, of course, sub-arguments within each extract which the more able addressed. However, it was not necessary to comment on every statement, and those who did so often finished up providing lots of scarcely relevant information on peripheral details, not always linked to the key topic of ‘the impact of industrialisation’. Explanations of the Five Year Plan representing ‘a new and higher stage of planning’ sometimes provided the bulk of the answers on Extract A, for example, even though this did not relate directly to the given question. Similarly many students got

side-tracked into long explanations of the NEP (often in relation to the preceding policy of War Communism) and whilst collectivisation had some relevance (when referred to as the impact of industrial policy for the countryside), there was much description of changes in agricultural practice, at the expense of the evaluation of argument.

Sadly, some students were simply careless in their reading of the extracts and thus argued for or against suggestions that were not actually part of the passage concerned. Perhaps the most common was the assertion that Extract C stated that 'NEP agriculture did decisive damage to the rural economy'. In reality the extract said, 'Wholesale reorganisation of NEP agriculture did decisive damage to the rural economy' –the reverse!

Section B

02

Many students were knowledgeable about Alexander III and were at ease in discussing the extent to which his policies were reactionary. However, the question required rather more than this. Students needed to consider not only how far Alexander III's policies reversed those of Alexander II, they also needed to consider possible motivations behind Alexander III's actions –so addressing the issue of 'main aim'. Furthermore, the question asked for reference to the years 1855 to 1894, which demanded some explanation of Alexander II's policies too, and these were not always addressed in any detail.

Good answers showed an appreciation that not all the policies of Alexander III reversed those of his father. Continuity was seen in the attitude to emancipation, the economy and sometimes the military. However, key differences in initial attitudes to education, censorship, police control and the judiciary were frequently cited as examples of reversal, although the most acute were aware that Alexander II himself reversed some of his earlier policies in his later years and this provided good grounds for argument.

With regard to motivation, high-scoring answers analysed 'Tsarist autocracy' and understood that both Tsars sought complete control, the upholding of divine authority and social stability, even if they believed they would achieve this by differing means. More pedestrian answers tended to assume Alexander II's liberality and Alexander III's concern to avoid assassination as key aims. Some thought Alexander III was primarily driven by the need to strengthen Russia in the world (so concentrating on order at home to allow economic growth) and others saw Russification as his underlying ideology. Any argument was acceptable so long as it was clearly supported and convincingly argued.

03

This question focused on the peasants, asking students to assess whether or not they posed 'a major threat' to the tsarist regime. Unfortunately an appreciable number of students read the given quotation as though it said 'the major threat' and tried to argue in favour of alternative threats to the regime. Sometimes this approach worked – particularly when students took time to analyse what is meant by a 'threat' and compared like-with-like. There were, for example, a number of successful answers which argued that the peasants posed a threat –but not a major one –and that the group which posed the bigger threat was the workers in the towns. However, there were equally a number of very weak answers which tried to turn this question into an essay about every weakness of the tsarist regime, with contrived statements such as 'Tsar Nicholas II posed a major threat to himself'.

Those who approached the question as intended, and balanced the ways in which peasants posed a 'major threat' against the ways in which they did not, often scored very highly, but to achieve these top levels, they needed to draw on information from across the whole period –including the late 1890s and looking to the collapse of stardom in February/March 1917. A few seemed to confuse the two revolutions of 1917, either believing the Bolsheviks overthrew the Tsar in February 1917 - or writing about the 'peasant threat', encouraged by the Bolshevik appeal, through 1917 to the October Revolution, which was, of course, well after the collapse of the Tsarist regime.

04

Many students were comfortable with a comparison between the communist regimes of Stalin and Khrushchev and could easily identify areas of both change and continuity. Detail had been well learnt and in some cases, there was actually a danger of an overload of description, rather than too little evidence to back comments. What primarily differentiated between the answers, however, was the students' ability to address 'key features' (as opposed to all aspects of personality and policy) and to show an awareness of the particular traits found in 'post-war' Stalinism.

Most students wrote quite knowledgeably about the cultural and stylistic differences between the two regimes, with plentiful accounts of Khrushchev's Secret Speech and the extent of de-Stalinisation this entailed. A large number were keen and able to identify the similarity and difference in economic policies, although whether the success of those policies, which was often described at length, was actually relevant to the argument was more questionable. The detail on governmental practices was, however, less strong and 'key features' such as the one-party state and the dominance of communist ideology were often forgotten. Obviously the most successful students avoided a one-sided approach and the very best showed some depth of conceptual understanding as to the nature of the Communist State.

Use of statistics

Statistics used in this report may be taken from incomplete processing data. However, this data still gives a true account on how students have performed for each question.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.