
A-LEVEL HISTORY

Component 1B Spain in the Age of Discovery, 1469-1598
Report on the Examination

7042
June 2018

Version: 1.0

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General

This was the second year of the A-level specification on Spain in the Age of Discovery 1469-1598. There were many students who were demonstrably well prepared with considerable knowledge and were able to express themselves with enthusiasm.

The breadth nature of the component allowed students to show contextual and conceptual understanding within the assessment objectives in both a positive and determined way.

Section A, Question 01, addressing AO3 was an exploration of Philip II as a ruler. Many students offered extensive contextual own knowledge in support of their understanding and evaluation of the arguments presented within the three extracts by: Lynch, Woodward and Parker. There remained an element of avoiding the specific interpretations within the extracts whilst concentrating, in some cases, on wider context, lacking a more balanced approach.

Section B, Questions 02, 03 and 04 reflected a range of key questions where students could access appropriate choices. There was consequently a pleasing spread and range of answers.

Question 02 allowed students to address a range of social, economic, religious and political changes to analyse and evaluate the effectiveness of Ferdinand and Isabella in dealing with domestic challenges to the Spanish Crown in the years 1474-1504. Question 02 was very popular as expected and equally many students demonstrated their knowledge if not always their evaluative and judgemental skills. Whilst not a question directly on the nobility, some students saw it as such taking the opportunity to demonstrate what they knew rather than what they could do and show focused understanding on.

Question 03 considered the extent of the threat of religious dissent to the Catholic Church within Spain in the period, 1517-1556. Question 03 was well understood but there was equally some lack of understanding of the use of the word dissent. The threat of heretical movements within the reign of Charles and the extent they threatened the Catholic Church in Spain was a clearly defined aspect of the specification and key questions.

Question 04 offered students the opportunity to analyse and evaluate the benefits the conquest of Portugal brought to Spain in the years 1578-1598 leading to many, partially to well substantiated judgements. Most showed an ability to think across a broad period of history, selecting relevant examples. Whilst well addressed by many students, some clearly had little knowledge and understanding, preferring narrative and chronology of Philip's progress in the conquest. Student knowledge of change and continuity addressed within AO1 eluded some. Those who under-performed, despite effective revision, may have failed to take on board some of the new A-level requirements.

Question 01

Students were required to evaluate three separate extracts in relation to Philip II as a ruler. They had to assess the extent to which the interpretations were convincing by drawing on contextual knowledge to corroborate and challenge the arguments presented by: Lynch, Woodward and Parker. They were not asked to make comparisons between the extracts, nor were they expected to offer comment on provenance, tone or bias, whilst some did. Students were not rewarded, but equally not penalised for having done so. The answer did not require an introduction nor an overall conclusion, however some concluding evaluation in relation to the question was helpful in meeting the criteria for the higher levels.

Many students identified Philip as a weak ruler but did not proceed to use, or reference, the evidence presented in the extract beyond a simplistic acknowledgement and instead wrote everything they knew. Extract B within question 01 was largely narrative rather than analytical and evaluative. The evidence within the extracts must be addressed as part of the answer, the inability to do so can place an answer in a maximum level 3. It is also important for students to address the topic, which follows the “in relation to” in the question and then assimilate the whole extract before starting to write. Students should be mindful that the key argument of an extract is not necessarily in the first line.

In Extract A, Lynch suggested that Philip was a product of the belief in the divine right of kings, that he was capable of ruling through direct and incisive intervention. He believed in his own absolute justice and perceived sovereignty, the “perfect master in the art of ruling.” He was also ruthless and pragmatic in the exercise of power, preventing the Crown becoming the “tool of the factions”. He was capable of murder as in the case of Montigny in 1570, yet was also politically inept, as in the case of the public execution of Hornes and Egmont. Only a few students appreciated the deliberate juxtaposition made by Lynch of the successful secret murder of Montigny and the disastrous public execution of Hornes and Egmont. In these actions Philip was a wholly contemporaneous monarch. Extract B reveals Woodward’s argument maintained that Philip exercised limited control and was a less than effective ruler. He struggled with court factions, was cautious and indecisive and equally capable of disastrous decisions especially in the Netherlands. His control of the domestic policies with Spain underlined his innate inability as an effective ruler. Extract C by Parker was a measured assessment in which Parker offered a forensic dissection of Philip’s capabilities as a ruler. He offered a sympathetic assessment to rule a vast global empire with all its inherent challenges. He acknowledged he was overwhelmed by such challenges, yet maintained Philip failed to respond effectively spending as much time in the minute detail of the construction of the Escorial Palace as the rest of the empire. He acknowledged Philip was a flawed ruler.

Whilst many students understood the validity of the respective arguments, they found, when measuring against a range of contextual factors, they struggled to make the necessary links. The mechanistic reference to “convincing”, whilst not quite a mantra for some, came close. Importantly those who offered a balanced evaluation by taking the full interpretations on board produced more nuanced evaluation, demonstrating understanding of the convincing nature of the arguments and reaching defined judgements on “the more convincing.”

Students must recognise the need to avoid the almost indiscriminate narrative with mechanistic references to “and so this is convincing.” A number were careless in their reading of the extracts and the arguments, selecting what to refer to and unfortunately for some, what to ignore, which was more often the case.

Question 02

This question was attempted by most students. The AO1 target addressed change and continuity and allowed students to explore and reach judgements on how effectively Ferdinand and Isabella dealt with the domestic challenges to the Spanish Crown in the years 1474-1504. Many students gave very detailed narratives on the role of the nobility and the “threat” they represented. The question however, demanded a range of issues which were defined as challenges, including: Government and the respective Cortes of Castile and Aragon, law and order, inherent corruption, regional differences, finance and the economy and religion and reform within the Catholic Church. Relationships were looked for to support the full demands of the question. Students clearly knew a great deal of information but its application within the context of the question remained un-resolved

in some cases and elusive in others. It is worth noting that inter-related issues such as the nobility and law and order were addressed, allowing further analysis and evaluation, furthering the question of which were the most challenging and how effectively they were dealt with.

Resolution of challenge was generally understood and supported with relevant information. The weaker students often produced a list, albeit of relevant issues but lacked discrimination and evaluative judgement. The more able students recognised the term “challenges” rather than “threats” and made clear links to a range of issues beyond the nobility which were both supported and sustained with relevant own knowledge leading to effective analysis and evaluation and supported judgements to level 4/5.

Good answers demonstrated a clear knowledge and understanding of a balanced range of issues which could be interlinked. There was no expectation of a fully comprehensive coverage or fully balanced responses only an effective assessment was looked for. Continuity remained a feature of the reigns despite the changes that were made. The nobility remained a potential challenge, their loyalty tenuous. Regional differences became more marked. The financial crises and the economic conditions of the regions were not addressed beyond Castile. The Church was not reformed by 1504 and the Conversos remained a challenge for the Crown. They did successfully establish royal authority, the nobility remained sufficiently controlled, religious divisions had been mollified after 1492 and their “partnership” reflected the strength of their personal, dual monarchy.

Question 03

This question was attempted by a large proportion of the cohort with the second highest mean mark of the three essays. The question focused on the extent to which religious dissent represented a serious threat to the Catholic Church in Spain in the years 1517-1556. It was primarily on the impact of the Reformation within Spain and the year 1517 was set for this purpose. The key factors were: Lutheranism, Erasmianism, Alumbrados and the Illuminists. References could also include concerns over the continued existence of both Conversos and Moriscos. There was no expectation of reference beyond Spain unless as a context for the domestic threats. Students who wrote at length about the HRE or the Ottomans were not sufficiently focused or in some cases sufficiently relevant.

The key phrase was, “never a serious threat.” An opportunity for students to offer a range of supported judgements. Most recognised the limitations of the spread of dissent: The work of the Inquisition, The Counter-Reformation and the earlier reforms of Cardinal Cisneros. Yet, both Charles, as Defender of the Faith and after 1543, his regent son Philip, both failed to meet the threat head-on. Spain remained fractured by Erasmianism, Lutheranism in the more remote regions and latent intellectual inflexibility posed a continued threat to orthodoxy, hampered by a largely illiterate priesthood, lack of spirituality and the continuance of endemic abuses.

The question required an assessment of the extent to which the Church in Spain was threatened by the lack of internal reform to meet the rise of religious dissent. There were some contextual references to pre and post 1517-1556 but did not become a distracting or alternative focus of the answer. In a small number of student responses, this was the case. The Spanish Church remained fundamentally one of change within a framework of continuity.

Question 04

Whilst attracting the smallest number of students this question was generally well attempted. There was a degree of polarisation where a small number of students were attracted to it by an inability to

attempt question 03. Most students however obtained level 3 plus, although very few achieved level 5. This was indicative of centres fully embracing the extent of the specification. It is important that centres teach the full specification and encourage students to fully revise rather than have limited expectations of certain questions. Questions will cover the full range of factors within the specification.

This question focused on the extent to which the conquest of Portugal was of benefit to Spain in the years 1578-1598. This was a question which addressed the concept of significance. There was also an element of the key question on the role of individuals. Students were expected to present a range of evidence and arguments assessing the benefits of the conquest of Portugal. Whilst there were clear benefits to Spain in terms of personal and national prestige, unification of the Iberian Peninsula, a vast overseas empire, strategic importance and more tactical benefits: an ocean going fleet, naval and military capability, Atlantic ports and the significance of the Azores. Nevertheless, it remained a union of Crowns not of states. Considerable financial and political concessions were granted to Portugal, the burden of which were born by Spain. The administrative cost of the vast empire proved hugely expensive. Portugal contributed little to the Spanish economy, Castile paid for its taxes. Spain failed to exploit the wealth of the Portuguese empire. The cost of protecting this vast empire at a time of growing financial crisis within Spain outweighed the benefits.

There was no expectation that students covered both aspects of the question in equal detail. Range and example with relevance were looked for. It allowed students to offer a range of examples both domestic and international, trade and commercial, strategic considerations and foreign policy. Portugal allowed Spain to turn from the Mediterranean to the West. Yet some students saw the benefits as disadvantages. The ability which the conquest provided for the Spanish invasion of England led to its most humiliating defeat. The wealth of the Portuguese empire added to the financial burden of Spain. These were clear higher order skills and appropriately rewarded. These led to effective evaluation and independent judgement.

Ranges and Award of Grades

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