MODERN HISTORY (HSM315117)

GENERAL COMMENTS

Feedback from exam markers this year was in many ways very consistent. Overall, markers were very impressed with the level of factual detail that candidates were able to recall and the fact that only a very small percentage of students received D’s or Z’s. However, markers across all sections and questions expressed concern about the number of candidates who were not adequately addressing the question being asked. Very often candidates frontloaded their answers with context and background information that was not necessarily relevant. They would then proceed to give a detailed, narrative account of the history that they had learnt, sometimes making no reference to the question at all, or just adding a very brief statement about it at the beginning and end.

Element 1 of criterion 3 specifies that students must ‘structure main ideas to compose arguments in analytical responses’ (C rating). The large number of students who gave detailed factual recounts without reference to the question or low levels of analysis were therefore penalised on this criterion. Papers that were primarily factual recounts also made it very difficult for markers to award high grades on criterion 4, 5, 6 and 7.

It is clear that the challenge for many students is selecting the right factual content and adapting that content appropriately to suit the question. Although there is a large amount of factual content to cover in each unit, the learning outcomes outlined in each unit must also be a focus for teachers and students. For example, the learning outcomes for section A specify that learners will be able to assess the significance of modern political systems and describe their manifestations in the modern history of some nations. Considering the prominent role political ideology and political systems played in driving social, economic and political change in Germany, it was surprising to markers so few candidates were able make the connection between political ideology and change. It is worth noting that some of the strongest answers, across all sections, came from concise essays (sometimes only 3-4 pages) where the most appropriate evidence had been selected to suit the question and make an argument. These answers, while lighter of factual detail, offered analytical responses that showed depth of understanding. In short, a careful balance between knowing factual detail and understanding the learning outcomes outlined in the syllabus document is essential to achieving high grades in this course.

SECTION A

Question 1. Discuss the nature and impact of changes within American society and America’s international relationships during either the earlier period of study (1917 – 1932) or the later period (1932 – 1945).

Generally this topic was very well done. Students knew their content and generally used evidence well. It was pleasing to see the use of literature and song as evidence, particularly in relation to the Harlem Renaissance. Students dealt well generally with the changes although only the best students grappled with the drivers of change – why the changes occurred. It would have been excellent to see students make links between the domestic and international drivers – for example that fear of the other generally and the possibility of a Communist revolution specifically drove both an isolationist foreign policy after World War I and the nativist domestic policy reflected in the Red Scare.
Question 2. What were the main drivers of change in Australia during either the earlier period of study (1918 – 1939) or the later period (1939 – 1949)? How did these drivers change the life experiences of Australians?

Only 20 candidates, but a very high standard overall was notable for this section. The large majority of students demonstrated a thorough understanding of key events, including but not limited to, the soldier resettlement scheme, the changing roles of women, the impact of the great depression, immigration and the rights of indigenous people. All but one candidate addressed the 1918-1939 period. Given that most students who addressed this question were clear communicators with a large body of factual knowledge to discuss, it was disappointing that so few were able to use that knowledge to address the question. Both the ‘drivers of change’ and ‘life experiences’ part of the question was often addressed in only a very tokenistic way, if at all.

Question 3. ‘Political ideology and political systems had a dramatic impact on Germany during the period studied.’ Discuss the above statement in respect to either the earlier period (1918 – 1933) or the later period (1933 – 1945).

- Keeping to the specified time period was a problem for many students.
- Writing up to 1945 is required to address the question in full.
- Most students were able to identify major political changes in Germany, but, in general, there was far less discussion of economic and social changes.
- Many students neglected to analyse the drivers and impacts of political/economic/social changes.
- There were a number of solid, concise answers that directly answered the question and were able to discuss political, economic and social changes (and the drivers of change) as well as the impacts of political ideologies and systems.
- Strong responses were explicit in discussing how central political ideology was in understanding this period of history. For example, the political instability of the early Weimar period was ideologically driven. Or, the Nazification of Germany between 1933 and 1945 being driven by a specific set of fascist principles. Highlighting that Hitler’s ideology lead Germany into war and the dramatic consequences of that for Europe, Germany itself and the Jews and other minorities, was necessary to address the question and criterion 5 at a high standard.

Question 4. ‘Revolutionary ideology changed Russia during the period studied, impacting World History in the 20th Century.’ Discuss the above statement in respect to either the earlier period (1917 – 1941) or the later period (1941 – 1953).

- Some very strong responses, with most candidates demonstrating an excellent recall of key events.
- Linking the importance of ‘revolutionary ideology’ with the historical events was a challenge for most candidates. For example, many candidates missed the opportunity to link Marxist/revolutionary ideology with the NEP or Stalin’s five year plans, despite having a good understanding of these events.
- Far too many candidates spent more than a page talking about pre-revolutionary Russia, even going into detail about the 1905 uprising or bloody Sunday, this is not a good use of precious exam time!
- Most students tended to focus of the events of 1917 and Stalin’s early years of power. This is not necessarily a problem, however the question did ask students about the USSR’s impact on world history. For students doing the 1917-1941 period it could have been appropriate for this question to discuss Stalin’s foreign policy, the Nazi-Soviet pact and how the great purge left the Red Army underprepared for the Nazi invasion. Once again, taking the time to select appropriate evidence to suit the question is key.
SECTION B

Question 5. During 1931 – 1941 and 1941 – 1952 Japan’s foreign policy saw it involved in military activity outside Japan for at least some of that period. For one of these periods of Japan’s history, explain why it was involved in such activity and the changes this brought to Japan.

- Many candidates that attempted the first time period provided useful and relevant detail, but stronger responses were able to provide analysis for impacts of internal and external threats in relation to the question.
- Generally candidates were stronger in criterion 4 and 6, weaker in argument and structuring their response.
- Some candidates provided too much frontloading/irrelevant context.
- Sometimes a lack of understanding of the Japanese government model was apparent.
- For candidates to achieve at a higher level they needed to be making specific references to foreign policy, as the question asked. Candidates often ignored this part of the question and focussed too much on Japanese militarism, without linking it to internal/external threats.
- Stronger candidates avoided offering chronological recounts, and instead evaluated the nature of internal and external threats and integrated that analysis into their arguments.

Question 6. For either the period 1930 – 1947 or 1947 – 1984, discuss what internal and external challenges faced India and how the country’s response to these challenges impacted upon its modern history.

- The majority of students who chose the period 1947-1984 were able to satisfactorily discuss the impacts of a wide range of internal and external threats by referring to the significant domestic and foreign policies of Nehru and Indira Gandhi (as responses to those threats).
- Students who received a higher rating for criterion 6 were also able to relate the responses to internal and external challenges to the political ideologies and systems of Nehru and Gandhi.
- Students who wrote about the period 1930-1947 tended to retell the main historical events of the period without really analysing a wide range of internal and external threats (generally, only 1-2 threats were identified, e.g. the Hindu-Muslim religious divide and British imperial rule). In general, students failed to provide a deeper analysis of the internal and external challenges in this period, including discussing what constituted an internal or external threat (e.g. could British imperialism be considered an external threat during the period India formed an integral part of the British empire?).

Question 7. What internal and external threats did Indonesia face during either the earlier period (1942 – 1965) or the later period (1965 – 1975)? Did the tensions and threats influence the political system that emerged? Explain.

There were a significant number of ‘A’ papers in this section. Students with a good knowledge of the key events in Indonesian history were able to discuss the connection between the internal and external threats faced in both periods and the type of political systems that emerged. These students also made good use of secondary sources. The question gave a good opportunity for students to demonstrate the breadth of their understanding. This meant, however, there was less leeway for those students with only a general understanding of events.
Question 8. Identify the major changes that took place in China during either the period 1935 – 1949 or 1949 – 1976. Explain how internal and external threats influenced these changes.

- Once again, many candidates made little or no reference to how internal and external threats impacted the country and led to dramatic changes. Chronological recounts were common, but these candidates would not have achieved strong results for criterion 3 or 6. A number of students discussed the pre-1935 period in far too much detail.

- Note the course document specifies the use of the term Guomindang or GMD (not KMT) and Mao Zedong (not Mao Tse-Tung).

1935-1949

Most students were able to mention internal threats to stability - The Long March and growing peasant support of the CCP, the civil war and the failure of the GMD to deal with the external threat of the Japanese.

Better responses included the perceived external threats of the USA and Russia and their influence in the civil war, clarity on internal and external threats linking to change, an evaluation on the emergence of Maoism and its appeal to the masses and a brief backdrop to the civil war and the legacy of Sun Yat-Sen.

1949-1976

Most students were able to discuss significant cultural, economic and political change in a chronological fashion via The 100 Flowers Campaign, The Great Leap Forward and The Cultural Revolution. Better answers clearly identified how internal threats to Mao’s rule influenced policy e.g. the threat of intellectuals, China’s backward state and disunity within the CCP.

The external threat of the Korean War for the new republic was generally well referred to. Better answers included analysis of the Cold War and how Mao used this threat in the early days of his leadership to strengthen his position. The schism between China and Russia and the thawing of relations with the West is needed to take the discussion through to 1976.

SECTION C

Question 9. How has the cause and course of the Cold War been understood by historians? With reference to specific historical events, discuss which historical interpretation you consider has the most merit.

- Part C of the course is focused on historiography. It is vital, therefore, that students displayed a strong understanding of historical debate in their responses. Criterion 7 focuses on the analysis of differing historical interpretations. Even for a ‘C’ rating it is necessary to understand the aspects of context – the interaction between the events of the Cold War itself and how various commentators and historians viewed those events (for example the Red Scare and McCarthyism for Traditional/Orthodox, Vietnam and the opening of the US Diplomatic archives for Revisionist and Détente, Gorbachev and the collapse of the Soviet Satellite States and the Soviet Union for Post-Revisionists).

- Element 7 of criterion 7 specifies that a candidate ‘identifies relative merits of differing historical interpretations and representations.’ (C rating). This element was also explicitly made a part of the question this year; however a very large portion of candidates were not able to articulate a view about what was the best interpretation.
• Only a very small portion of candidates received an A rating on criterion 7, this was far and away the toughest criterion to achieve at a high level on. To ensure candidates can meet the standards required, teachers and learners must focus on interpretation, context and historiography rather than historical narrative.

• Post 1917, candidates must refer to the USSR or Soviet Union, not Russia.

• Avoid abbreviations, other than those in common usage (USSR, USA, UN, SALT etc)

• Generally candidates should employ the past tense in historical writing.

Question 10. With reference to one Asian country (China, India, Indonesia, Japan or Vietnam) discuss the changing relationship between that country and Australia since 1945. How have historians and commentators interpreted those developments?

• The majority of candidates who responded to this question failed to adequately address the criterion that is being assessed. Some responses were very informal, giving a brief overview of Australia’s relationship from Vietnam, but offered no evidence to support an argument or interpretation of evidence.

• One candidate offered a clearly written essay that used quotes and primary evidence well.

Question 11. With reference to three or four terrorist groups, identify how the nature of global terrorism has changed over the period since 1945. How have historians and commentators explained the causes of such terrorism?

• Generally students were able to identify aims and nature of terrorist groups but better answers were able to assess how the nature of terrorism has changed over time.

• Not all students able to provide commentary of the causes of terrorism, stronger responses were able to provide commentary throughout paper.

• Many responses addressed Al Qaeda and religious terrorism first and for this they were generally marked down on criterion 3, stronger responses were able to structure their paper in a way that identified the shift from nationalist --> political --> religious since 1945.

• Key issues included not answering the question and overly descriptive paragraphs about the activities of terror groups with little evidence or context.

Question 12. ‘Displacement arising from war and persecution has been the main reason for the migration of people to Australia and other countries of the British Commonwealth since 1945.’ To what extent do you agree? What other explanations have historians and commentators considered?

No candidates answered this question.