

MODERN HISTORY (HSM315117)

EXAMINATION ASSESSMENT REPORT

GENERAL COMMENTS

As with last year, markers' feedback confirms the solid level of factual details students bring into the examination. Their recall is generally accurate, resulting in a continuing low percentage of Ds and Zs. Markers' comments across all sections lament the frequency of 'information dumping' – the habit of just telling us what they know about something. Feedback from the markers this year reinforces the growing gap between factual content and the students' ability to interpret that information and its context.

The nature of the Modern History course requires the learner to have a good *working* knowledge of events, movements and people in the post-World War One world. The ability to articulate this understanding is assessed in three formal essays. This raises three points for consideration: Can the student write a *well-structured, argumentative* essay? Does the student have the skills to build their essay around the question that has been asked? Is the student able to filter the *relevant evidence* to support their argument?

Examiners are looking for clear identification of the period of focus – stating it in the introduction is a good start – and a wide variety of evidence which may include: dates, events, statistics and quotes from both primary and secondary sources. Being an essay, examiners expect to read correct, 'formal' English using historical terminology which, in the best essays, is written tense appropriately. The better essays were succinct, avoiding overuse of adjectives and adverbs, hyperbole and informal language. As one examiner said, "...most of the papers were a lovely narrative read, with as little attention to dates as possible, although discussing various significant events in roughly a chronological order! The New Idea magazine of History."

The stimulus provided in a question needs to be addressed. It is the focus upon which the argument should be hinged. Better essays weave the quote, or elements of it, into each paragraph.

Each section of the examination addresses one specific criterion – either 5, 6 or 7; it is only assessed once so requires particular attention. Coached or prepared answers are obvious, and fail to answer the question (resulting in poor grading on criterion 3) while using broad, unsubstantiated references (lowering the grade on criterion 4). To achieve the best grades, a paper has to address ALL aspects of the question.

While it is important students know the content of the course, the assessment is around how the student uses that knowledge to discuss, argue or evaluate a certain position in relation to the events. Demonstrating understanding requires the student to make general statements which they support with poignant examples, rather than telling the examiner what they know about the period under review. It is this filtering that sets the stronger papers apart from the rest.

The Modern History course aims to develop critical “free thinkers”. The use of formula answers or scripts is counterproductive for students and tedious for markers.

SECTION A

[Stand-alone criterion assessed in this question: *5. Assess drivers of social, economic and political change and the nature and impact of changes in modern history.*]

QUESTION 1

What economic and political changes took place in America during either the period 1917 – 1932 or 1932 – 1945? How did these changes impact the international community?

No candidates answered this question.

QUESTION 2

“The effects of war and economic developments were the main drivers of change in Australia between 1918 and 1949.” Discuss with reference to either the period 1918 – 1939 or 1939 – 1949.

No candidates answered this question.

QUESTION 3

What economic and political changes took place in Germany during either the period 1918 – 1933 or 1933 – 1945? What was the effect on the life of the German people?

This question is structured to allow students of Germany to focus on the Weimar Republic or the rise and fall of Nazi Germany. It is, in no way, a biographical chronology of Adolf Hitler. Both periods drew their share of information dumping. Candidates responding to the early period frequently continued to draw evidence from the Nazi era. The highlight was that evidence was well used in this section; stronger answers used a range of evidence including primary and secondary sources. Most students understood that ‘the effect on the life of the German people’ in the exam question referred to the social impact and change.

The broad scope of this question presented difficulties for many candidates. Few students addressing the later period actually mentioned the war. While Hitler was an important figure in shaping political, economic and social change in Germany, he was not the sole cause of what occurred. Better papers avoided a factual recount of the events of the period they are writing on.

This section investigates the drivers of change. Better responses were able to identify what changed, why it changed and how the changes affected the German people, including the effect of hyperinflation, the changing role of women, the use of children and the effect of the Nazi regime on German Jews, Communists and other dissenters. They analysed the question and responded accurately and with clarity, supporting their argument with evidence.

Stronger answers were able to discuss the significance of drivers as well as the impacts of such. They were able to unpack cause and effect and the delicate interplay of various elements: were the changes a response to a need or a fear? Weaker papers tended to write about what happened; the events of the era, rather than the reason for and impact of the changes that took place.

QUESTION 4

What political changes prevailed in Russia during either the period 1917 – 1941 or 1941 – 1953? Why were these changes able to prevail and how did they impact on the lives of the ordinary people?

In a nutshell, the responses to this question were solid with few surprises! Good structure and use of evidence in the form of quotes and statistics was widely evident. Prepared responses dominated the weaker papers where students failed to adequately address the question. Rather than develop an argument around what they knew, they proceeded to tell all they had prepared. These essays lacked depth and analysis.

The question seemed to confuse a number of students in the way it was framed – the second word, 'political' led them to limit themselves to just this driver, where the second part of the question specifically asked for an exploration of how this impacted the lives of the ordinary people.

About 84% of candidates looking at Russia/USSR selected the first period. Knowledge of the factual content was high, particularly of the revolutionary period (and, dare I say, the preceding couple of decades!) As with all elements of this course, the backstory should only get a passing comment if its relevance to the argument can be shown. “Tsarist incompetence...” should cover that. The corollary of over-emphasising this period is that candidates did not allow sufficient time to fully discuss the drivers of change in the Russian/Soviet context. The bulk of students became trapped in a recount of the revolutionary/Leninist period. Some overlooked Stalin and the radical modernisation course he set for the Soviet Union. Changing social roles rarely got a mention. Students focussed on the terror and purges rather than exploring the impact on ordinary people.

Criterion 5 requires students to demonstrate their understanding of why the events, the changes, took place. While the changes were discussed satisfactorily, it was the better answers that took it to the next step and explored the notion of what drove the change. Stronger essays were able to articulate what was driving change such as ideology or Stalin’s paranoia. The opportunity to extend this discussion to the opening of the Cold War seems to be taboo. That leaves a gap of eight years of evidence, ... or supposition. The significance of 1941 is equally overlooked.

SECTION B

[Stand-alone criterion assessed in this question: *6. Describe and assess internal and external threats on the history of modern nations.*]

QUESTION 5

“Militarism impacted Japan’s foreign policy during 1931 – 1941 and 1941 – 1952.” Discuss this statement for either the earlier or later period. What changes did this foreign policy bring to Japan in the period chosen?

Candidates handled the Japan question reasonably well.

As has been a trend this year, front-loading with detail prior to the period under question detracted from the general quality of responses.

Markers acknowledge the changes following the demise of the Shogunates and the Meiji restoration. They know the snubbing of Japan by the West in the aftermath of World War One contra to Japan’s efforts to become a leader in Asia... but they are not the subject of this course.

Any time candidates think they must refer to this back-story, they should assume the examiner knows it, so a single word/phrase will suffice. Bushido is a case in point when writing about militarism in Japan. The context is necessary to explain how and why Japan became militarist (and nationalistic) but it is NOT the focus for this question. It is a fine line to tread.

Essays on Japan tended to be shorter and often lacked analysis.

Students need to make certain they stay focussed around the time period. That said, most answers specified external/internal threats and were able to discuss them.

Many of the responses tended to be chronological historical narrative and did not explore and evaluate internal and external threats.

Stronger answers were able to discuss the significance and impact of the Japanese military and most answers attempted to address the question. They were able to explicitly mention the internal pressures and external threats (lack of natural resources, factionalism). Stronger essays addressed internal pressures, particularly for first time period (1931-1941).

Weaker answers focussed heavily on Manchuria/China and tended to be quite brief and often failed to address criterion 6.

QUESTION 6

“Responses to internal and external challenges shaped the modern nation of India.”

Discuss this statement in relation to either the period 1930 – 1947 or 1947 – 1984.

Generally responses this year were better than have been seen in the last couple of years, much more focussed on the threats as opposed to telling the story.

Responses to the first era didn't engage with the debate as to whether Britain should be considered an internal or external threats.

Overall, the responses to the second era were better, strong on evidence and structured around the question, although some ran out of time for the second prime-ministership of Indira Gandhi

Students should keep criteria 3 and 4 in mind when preparing for the examination.

Generalisations and miscommunication are problematic. Avoid saying “he used ideology and nationalism to achieve his goals”. *Socialism* was the ideology and needs to be specifically referred to as does Nehru's commitment to a *secular democracy*.

Correct spelling of key terms and names is expected i.e. Gandhi.

QUESTION 7

“Indonesia's political destiny has been influenced by responses to both internal and external factors.”

Discuss this statement in relation to either the period 1942 – 1965 or 1965 – 1975.

The general standard of essays in this section was high. The criterion asks for a description and evaluation of threats. Essays were well structured and demonstrated a good working knowledge of the significant events in Indonesian history.

Understanding what creates a threat, whether real or perceived, is the aspect of this section that needs the most work. While *political systems and ideologies* are not at the forefront of this section, it is still fundamental. Better responses wove their assessment of the threats on the emergence of the modern nation of Indonesia, including the evolving dynamic of domestic and international relations.

QUESTION 8

“The rise of Communism in China led to significant challenges and changes for that country.”

To what extent is this true in relation to either 1935 – 1949 or 1949 – 1976?

The majority of responses focused on the first period from 1935 to 1949. Markers found it more common to read front-loaded facts in chronological order. Better papers kept to the prescribed time-frame. Strong papers were able to identify the facts as changes or challenges.

Long introductory comments on Sun Yixian's Three Principles, the emergence of the Guomindang, May Fourth Movement and the Shanghai Massacre were common, some even began in Imperial China. The Long March was discussed at length yet the Yan'an Way received a very cursory note. Or in the later period, Hundred Flowers, Great Leap Forward and Great Proletarian Cultural revolution.

The later period essays tended to be of a better standard. More thought was put into changes and challenges, internal and external threats. Better answers considered the extent of those threats and their impact, rather than just relating threats only. A few students discussed Mao's paranoia and desire for total control posing a threat to China's social and economic prosperity.

Candidates' attention to criterion 6 distinguished successful papers from weaker ones: the ability to use the detail, to effectively explain how they were threats. This was in tune with the general lack of discussion on ideology and the changes communism brought to the peasantry:

The idea that the Guomindang was the formally recognised government of China did not feature in the commentary.

Discussion of the Civil War tended to paint the legitimate government as 'baddies' and the Communists as 'goodies'. Zhen Fan and the death toll of the Campaign to Suppress Counter-revolutionaries highlight how seriously Mao and Liu Shaoqi considered this internal threat.

Korea and Mao's reasons for responding to this external threat by entering the war were rarely mentioned, and were poorly explained.

More successful papers were able to respond fairly well to the issue of 'threats' although a number didn't quite grasp the significance of the internal threats and simply told the story of the Mao era.

A significant number of students continue to use the former terminology such as Chiang Kai-Shek, rather than the preferred Jiang Jieshi.

SECTION C

[Stand-alone criterion assessed in this question: *7. Describe and assess key concepts of differing historical interpretations on issues affecting the modern world.*]

QUESTION 9

How have historians explained the beginning and the end of the Cold War? Discuss which interpretation you consider most convincing by referring to specific historical events in your answer. Continuing the trend of recent years, this is the most popular topic in the course. 90% of students this year attempted this question.

As was stated last year, this section focuses on *differing historical interpretations on issues*. It is not about the events themselves, but how context shapes the argument. A word of warning here: Post-Revisionism does not argue that no-one was to blame for the onset of the Cold War. (look to the 2017 Assessment Report)

Overall answers demonstrated a strong understanding of schools of history, stronger answers were able to analyse the origins and context of these and relevance of particular historians.

Weaker answers knowledge dumped and gave pre-prepared answers without addressing the questions clearly. Generally, students had more difficulty in discussing the end of the Cold War, many missing out Reagan's hard-line policies and Gorbachev's reforms.

The question required three things be addressed: Historiography of the beginning of the Cold War – up to about 1948 – 1950, the Blockade and its fallout or the beginning of the proxy wars; Historiography of the end of the Cold War – that is, within the last decade...you could argue the Reagan era or the Gorbachev years, depending on your perspectives but stronger papers would weave this into the third requirement; finally, the student is required to discuss which is most convincing, citing relevant and pertinent evidence to support the argument. Nowhere is the student asked to recount the course, the events, of the Cold War.

TO SUMMARISE MARKERS' COMMENTS

LESS SUCCESSFUL PAPERS

Focused heavily on beginning of Cold War

Referred to Russia, rather than USSR or Soviet Union

Information dump with pre-prepared answers; failed to address question

Wrote a narrative account of the period

Discussed historiography in general terms rather than as a tool to analyse actual events

Omitted key events from the debate

Just discussed events they knew about, Cuban Crisis, Vietnam,

Lacked relevant detail – and were very short, rather than succinct

MORE SUCCESSFUL PAPERS

Demonstrated a good understanding of historiography and the events that shaped it

Were able to articulate the connection between events in the Cold War era to shifts in thinking, even to the contemporary change of attitudes in the USA

Referred to specific historians within each School and provide context to their opinion

Went beyond arguing the validity of interpretations to argue which they thought the most convincing.

QUESTION 10

Discuss the changing relations since 1945 between Australia and one Asian country (China, India, Indonesia, Japan or Vietnam). With reference to specific historical detail, explain those changes. How have historians and commentators interpreted the developments?

No candidates answered this question.

QUESTION 11

With reference to various groups since 1945, what are the methods used, and the motivations of, modern terrorists? How have nations responded? Discuss how commentators have explained such activities.

Essays in response to this question fell into two clear groups:

- prepared information dumps about the subject, partially answering the question
- very capable, articulate arguments, well supported by varying commentaries

Of the 37 students, very few were left wanting on knowledge to convey. The students were well prepared regarding motives and methods for different organisations and, to a lesser extent, responses employed by target countries. It was pleasing to see the cliché, one person's terrorist is another's freedom fighter, had almost been eradicated this year. A broad base of terrorist groups was used and discussed. Many of these essays followed a similar structure and did not apply what had been taught to ALL aspects of the question. Nonetheless, they capably handled the first part(s) of the question. Essays that stood out used more examples to discuss the motives, in particular, and added poignant discussion of commentators' explanations. Exceptional essays went the next step evaluating the relative merits of governments' responses.

QUESTION 12

What have been the causes and consequences of the movement of peoples to Australia and other countries of the British Commonwealth since 1945? How have commentators viewed the causes of migration and the host countries' responses?

No candidates answered this question.