

A-LEVEL HISTORY

7042/2T: The Crisis of Communism: the USSR and the Soviet Empire,
1953-2000
Report on the Examination

7042
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General

Many students displayed their enthusiasm for this option, writing confidently and drawing on a strong bank of knowledge, particularly in their essay answers. A few were more muddled, failing, for example, to distinguish between the satellite states (the topic of Question 01) and developments in the USSR (as required in Question 02) and a very few gave up, or ran out of time before completing the paper. However, for the most part, the standard of responses was good, although sometimes a little too mechanical in the answers to 01. Students appeared not to have problems choosing essay topics which they felt comfortable with and whilst Question 04 was the least popular, those who selected it were generally well-informed.

As always, the key differentiator between the most effective and least effective answers was the extent to which students focused on the words of the questions given. This was particularly true of Question 01, where the task not a simple evaluation of each of the three sources, but an evaluation in relation to a topic - a historian studying 'life in the Soviet satellite states'. In Question 02 the essential words around which the most effective essays revolved were 'ordinary people', in Question 03, 'as leader of the USSR' and Question 04, 'political reform'. No matter how good their overall knowledge, students who failed to argue a relevant case limited themselves to the lower levels. Those who not only seized on the key words of questions to produce a valid response, but also showed themselves capable of selecting relevant material to support their comments, were able to achieve much more highly.

Section A

Question 01

The most effective answers considered each source in turn and combined some meaningful evaluation of the provenance with that of the source content, to show how the source might be used as *evidence* by a historian wishing to know more about life in the satellite states in the given time period. Consequently, simple statements of provenance which did little more than identify the author, audience and date showed little comprehension of what was required. The most able students considered these elements and commented on how they made the source more or less valuable as a piece of evidence for the topic. Their comments not only linked to life in the satellite states but also showed an understanding of the context in which they were written.

Thus Source A, which was described by less able students as having a biased capitalist viewpoint and therefore having little value, was identified by the more able as the product of a period of 'peaceful coexistence' when the USA was inclined to be thinking more kindly of the Khrushchev era, but was still wary enough to have spies keeping a close eye on what was going on and faithfully reporting back. Similarly bland comments about Source B being more valuable because it was written from inside a satellite state or Source C having value because Khrushchev would be 'in a position to know' were equally unhelpful.

The degree to which students interrogated the source content as a whole, in relation to the question, also affected the quality of their answers. Less able students tended to look at the sources line-by-line and their literal approach was often given away with phrases such as 'Source A says....' 'Source B then states...' This approach not only led students to lose sight of the bigger picture, but also made some of their commentaries very long-winded, to the extent that they sometimes never reached the last lines. Such commentaries were often one-sided too, justifying what the sources said, as opposed to considering the ways in which what was written was, or was not, valuable for the purposes of the question.

Appreciating the context of each source was also essential for a valid analysis of the source content. Source A, for example was produced a few months after Khrushchev's 'secret speech', a month before the Poznan riots and 3 months before the Hungarian uprising. Appreciation of such facts helped keep evaluations relevant and enabled some sensible criticisms to be levelled at the American report. Similarly, Source B was produced at a time of escalating concerns over the situation in Berlin and when Ulbricht, known for his strict adherence to the party line, was well-entrenched as party leader. Khrushchev's speech in Source C was, as some strong students observed, given at a time when he himself was feeling more confident, having agreed to the construction of the Berlin Wall shortly before (August) and yet needed to keep his party on-side by reinforcing the success of socialism under his leadership.

Complete misunderstanding was relatively limited, but a few students accepted the content of Source B too readily, suggesting that it showed the GDR's desire for reunification being opposed by a militaristic West Germany. Another problem in Source C was to see the reference to 'virgin land development' and write about Khrushchev's scheme in the USSR, with no attention to the question. Finally, mention needs to be made of those students who tried to offer a balanced evaluation by providing a list of source omissions. Each source is necessarily a short and selective piece of evidence and the student's task is to consider its worth. Its limitations are less what it omits than whether it fails to supply relevant and reliable evidence.

Section B

Question 02

The quotation offered an opportunity for students to provide a balanced answer containing elements of support and challenge. The most able students decided which way they would argue before beginning to write and showed their ability to sustain an argument throughout their answers. Some failed to maintain a focus on the lives of ordinary people, or simply added a footnote to discussions of a variety of aspects of policy, including foreign policy, suggesting they affected ordinary people. Successful students had plenty to say about the 'golden age' of material satisfaction. Many pointed to the continuing - and perhaps widening - disparities between the lives of ordinary people and those of the elites, but the most able students considered a broader spectrum of areas where there was no, or little improvement. They pointed, for example, to the continued political restrictions, the pressures of an overly-bureaucratic governmental structure, as well as to repression and social issues, such as travel or human rights.

Question 03

Most students were well-informed about Gorbachev and his key policies and many were able to write at great length about perestroika and glasnost. What distinguished the more successful essays from the less effective ones was not so much what they knew, but how they used what they knew. Average and poorer essays were very much more an appraisal of how successful Gorbachev's policies were; good and excellent essays focused far more on Gorbachev's 'leadership' qualities in his attempts to carry through those policies. Gorbachev's work on the world stage was relevant, insofar as it exhibited some of his qualities (or otherwise) as 'leader of the USSR'. However, placing undue emphasis on his qualities as an international statesman tended to detract from what the question was asking about. Too many students saw him as successful because of his contributions towards the reduction in nuclear weaponry and the moves to end the Cold War, forgetting that this was not always so regarded within the USSR and that his success as leader of the USSR was really comparative to his ability to keep the country behind him. The other

problem with some answers was that they went beyond the scope of the question, looking at what happened to the satellites and the USSR after 1988. Obviously a reminder to observe all question dates scrupulously might be helpful for future students, as this kind of mistake can result not only in wasted time, but also in misplaced emphasis.

Question 04

Whilst few students had any difficulty in describing the many problems which beset Romania and Bulgaria in these years, equally few distinguished convincingly between political problems and other issues. The most able students were aware that Zhirkov only adopted Gorbachev's reforms in name and that governmental structures changed little, whilst Ceausescu perpetuated a family dictatorship which, if anything, grew stronger as the USSR and other satellites embraced far-reaching political changes. Less well-directed answers, however, saw all problems as political or emphasised an alternative issue, for example economic problems, with scant regard for any political concerns.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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