

2021 ASSESSMENT REPORT

HSM315117 - MODERN HISTORY

Almost all students who completed the external assessment demonstrated a strong understanding of the course content, across all sections. The criteria are being addressed explicitly, but not often in a fluent or evaluative manner. As in previous years, there were a large number of papers that did not address the specific question asked by the examiner, or the stimulus included in the question. Instead, students chose to give a long narrative of key events, sometimes in a rather informal fashion using colloquial language.

The deficiencies in formal communication are reflected in overall results. There were few As awarded for Criterion 3 and there was a noticeable variance between the communication achievement internally versus the external result. The less successful responses were characterised by poor sentence structure and incorrect use of terminology. Below are 3 examples of phrasing that indicate knowledge and understanding but are expressed in a way that was problematic.

- 'Winston Churchill released his Iron Curtain speech'
- 'Truman implemented the Truman doctrine'
- 'Political ideology was a key driver of change, but social and economic drivers of change were also drivers of change'

It appears that perhaps teachers are spending too much time covering course content rather than working on students' writing skills. It may be better to sacrifice some class time on course content and instead focus on crafting good topic sentences, using evaluative verbs, building vocabulary, and working on general sentence structure. A well written essay that misses some key events or content is likely to receive stronger grades than a poorly written but very detailed one.

This year it was particularly noticeable that students were not engaging with the stimulus quotes provided. This was noted by all markers of all sections. Sometimes the quotes would be referenced at the beginning or the end, but their meaning was not evaluated in any way. Other times students would engage with the quote to an extent, but in a fashion that indicated only a limited understanding of its meaning (see dot point three above). Once again, teachers should consider sacrificing some content teaching time to work on those key ideas that are outlined in the course documents learning outcomes.

Further to good language use, communication of the student's understanding of context, perspective, bias, and intention is important. A candidate that can use historical information to construct or respond to an argument is in a superior position from the outset.

In this report detailed feedback on each individual question will be minimised, as the above message is the main point that teachers should consider when planning to deliver this course in future.

Students should be commended for their level of knowledge about these complex historical periods. There were a number of outstanding papers that were evaluative, sophisticated and a reflection of the student's hard work and some expert teaching.

Question 1 - USA

Overall, this question was completed to a high standard. A variety of topics were chosen, but most students focussed on the 1917-1932 period. Some students focussed mostly on the marginalisation of African Americans and the great migration, while others were more focussed on economic factors and the fear of communism. Students in this cohort did a better job overall of addressing the stimulus quote in an evaluative way.

Question 2 – Australia

No students completed this question.

Question 3 – USSR

In weaker responses, too much time was spent retelling events and students seemed to run out of time. Some students wrote too much on pre-1917, without adding to an argument or addressing the question. Better responses had good structure and use of evidence, with appropriate quotes and statistics used to illustrate a point. Many students included a narrative account of social, political, economic change, but did not link this to the stimulus quote or the focus of the question.

Question 4 – Germany

Many students responded to this question. However, one of the major problems with the responses was that students did not take the time to define political ideology and explain its significance. For those answering 1933 -1945, discussing what Nazism was and what it was responding too would have been a useful starting point. Some strong papers on the early period talked about how political ideology was important, but economic factors were possibly more important in driving the change in Germany. For the later period, one candidate considered two different historians' perspectives on the influence of political ideology by looking at Hitler's political manoeuvring vs. the lack of public support for democracy and pointed to the rise of popular support for extremist groups in the early '30s to support the latter view. They did this in enough detail to get the point across smoothly, then moved on. They then discussed whether Lebensraum policies were intended to lead to war or not and compared two possible interpretations with the evidence.

Question 5 – Japan

Most responses addressed the question directly. The stronger responses were divided into internal and then external tensions. For the first time period they tended to cover the great depression as a starting point, then moved to focus on lack of living space and how this led to growing militarism and factionalism and the Manchurian Incident.

They then built on this to discuss the internal struggle between factions and the perceived external threats from China, Russia, and the League of Nations and the Lytton Report. They then tied all these aspects together with a discussion on ideology or religion, and militarism and how this led to the Second-Sino Japanese war, the co-prosperity sphere and eventually WWII.

For the second time period, they tended to begin from Pearl Harbor and then move onto a discussion of Japanese expansion and success in the Pacific, relating this back to militarism and religious fervour. They also tended to mention Island Hopping, General MacArthur and the fire bombings as context for the Potsdam declaration and Hiroshima and Nagasaki. These strong responses also focused more on the social consequences of the occupation, with stronger responses also discussing the human rights declaration and the educational reforms.

Weaker responses generally only focused on the first part of either time period or jumped through time without context. For the first time period they usually got caught up with the events of the Manchurian incident and the Lytton report and would then skip to either the Marco Polo Bridge incident or co-prosperity or Pearl Harbor. For the second time period, many responses tended to focus on the end of WWII and the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. They also tended to describe the significance of the occupation and how it helped Japan become the nation they are today, but without any specific details or dates and only presented it in a positive light.

Question 6 – India

More students looked at the first time period. Students should 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*.

The better responses were 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 threat.

A lot of misspelling of Gandhi!

Question 7 – Indonesia

No students address this question.

Question 8 – China

Weaker responses identified and outlined events like the 100 Flowers Campaign, Great Leap Forward, etc. and described what Mao did, but didn’t go further. Strong responses were able to identify more threats, including external ones, and the strongest used not just the Korean War but other events like the Sino-Soviet Split as an external threat. Some discussed internal class divisions as a threat too. Most students were described historical events and avoided evaluating or analysing too much (or at all).

The strongest essays were based on the second time period - students who chose the earlier one had difficulty sorting out the complexities of the events and ended up oversimplifying. There is a lot to keep track of in the earlier time period, but most students omitted basic information that would have been relevant to the question.

A good example was written in complex language that was still very clear and readable, which is no mean feat. It discussed the Agrarian Reform Law as a strategy of dealing with the wealthy landowner class; education, particularly of women, as a strategy of dealing with counter-revolutionaries; developments in the USSR as an external threat to the Maoist version of socialism; the second Five-Year Plan making worse the very problems it was designed to solve; and so on. In other words, the actual internal and external threats that were discussed in this essay were more nuanced, and the argument was structured to provide an answer to the question without leaving it to the very end.

Question 9 – Cold War

Some students discussed reasons why the Cold War continued for so long but did not explicitly connect those reasons to the idea of Soviet aggression and expansion. They seemed determined to answer the question ‘What were the causes of the Cold War?’ instead.

Specific events (e.g. Cuban Missile Crisis) were often described at length, but only some students tried to interpret them as evidence for an argument about Soviet aggression.

Better responses referred to historians by name and even quoted them, but many students did not go that far.

Most students chose to run through the three (or two) schools of thought one by one, then evaluate them in a paragraph at the end. Sometimes the evaluation was left to the conclusion. Better responses described a view on particular historical evidence, analysed its relevance to that view, and evaluated how well the evidence supports it.

One of the most successful responses contained the following features. The language was fluent; the argument clear and well-structured; the information was correct, and the details were there but not excessive. It also acknowledged that the post-revisionists are not a homogenous bunch with homogenous views (‘eclectic’ was the word they used). This response discussed events that could be seen as Soviet aggression by presenting two or more interpretations and then discussing why they thought one or the other was more consistent with other things they had talked about already.

Question 10

No students selected this question

Question 11 – Terrorism

The better responses tied what they knew to three terrorist groups in different decades since 1945, while weaker answers failed to cover the range required and in addition were often more of an information ‘dump’ than a response to the stimulus. Some answers were weakened by time devoted to events before 1945 and there was some confusion over the history of the IRA.

Question 12

No students selected this question
