

Examiners' Report Summer 2007

AEA

AEA History (9846)

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Contents

		Page
1.	Introduction	4
2.	Section A	5
3.	Section B	6
4.	Grade Boundaries	7

Introduction

This year the Advanced Extension Award (AEA) examination in History was attempted by over 1200 candidates from 262 centres. The number of candidates represents an increase of nearly two hundred, or twenty per cent, on the 2006 figure. There was, however, no evidence which suggested that the increase in numbers involved a dilution in the quality of the candidature. The majority of centres are clearly selective in their approach to entry. Nearly two-thirds of participating centres entered fewer than five candidates for the examination. Only twenty-seven centres entered ten or more candidates apiece. The selective nature of centres' entry policies was no doubt a key factor in an out-turn which saw nearly two-thirds of all entrants awarded either a Merit or a Distinction.

The AEA examination in History benefits from the services of a notably committed and versatile team of examiners. AEA examiners naturally need to be sufficiently well versed in their subject to be able to cope with the wide range of detailed exemplification which the examination throws up - in the course of half a dozen scripts it can switch from Republican Rome to mid-Tudor England to the Civil Rights movement in the US in the mid-twentieth century - but historical knowledge is not by itself sufficient. Examiners also need a sharp awareness of how much very able A Level candidates can reasonably be expected to know and understand about different historical topics and periods. This calls not only for length of service in marking A Level History but also for the experience of marking across a variety of different topics and periods. AEA candidates' scripts pass through the hands of examiners who can offer precisely this kind of experience.

The two prime requirements of the AEA History paper are, first, that it should be accessible to all candidates regardless of their level of ability and, second, that it should discriminate effectively between candidates of different abilities. In these respects the 2007 paper did its job. There were few instances of candidates being unable to come to terms with questions at all because they were unable to understand the nature of the task they had been set. On the other hand, levels of response differed markedly in terms of quality of argument and breadth and depth of exemplification.

The work of the most successful AEA candidates is distinguished by three main qualities: detailed and wide-ranging historical knowledge; the ability to argue a case in a tightly controlled and penetrating fashion; and the ability to communicate ideas and information with economy and precision. In addition, the most successful candidates tend to have read widely and to have read beyond the standard A Level primers. In combination, these qualities can generate writing of quite exceptional quality, as in one candidate's response to Q2 which included the following observation:

Even in sceptical, empirical Britain, credible historians still use their craft to pursue an ideological hobby-horse. Andrew Roberts' recent *History of the English-Speaking Peoples*, as well as containing worrying factual errors (the Russians driving 'east' into Germany, for instance) degenerates in places into a thinly-disguised partisan diatribe against liberals and leftists.

In the work of less successful candidates, references to independent reading are often sparse, and such references as there are usually feature books of the *Access to History* type. Less successful candidates also struggle to shape and direct their writing. Not infrequently, they write at inordinate length and sometimes give the impression that they have embarked on their answer without a clear idea of what conclusions will eventually be offered. The time constraints under which AEA candidates operate are almost certainly less severe than those under which AS or A2 candidates labour.

The three hours' time allowance is sufficiently generous to allow candidates to plan their answers to 1(c) and Section B in particular in some depth. It is an opportunity of which advantage should be taken.

Standards of literacy within the scripts of AEA History candidates are high, often impressively so. Eyebrow-raising spelling errors of the ‘Crown Jules’, ‘Socratase’ or ‘Mine Kampf’ kind - each of which made an appearance in scripts this year - are thankfully rare. Examiners did, however, detect the emergence of two unwelcome stylistic trends of which centres may wish to take note. One was the increasing use of colloquialisms. In one script, for example, the Major-Generals were described as ‘Cromwell’s buddies’. In another, it was maintained that ‘Somerset was chosen by Henry to head up the Regency Council’. Elsewhere, belief in the superiority of academic over television history was dismissed as a ‘snobby’ attitude. The second unwelcome trend, perhaps not unrelated to the first, was the increasing use of abbreviations without any explanation of what was meant or intended. Examiners have become familiar with ‘NMA’ (New Model Army), ‘H of L’ (House of Lords) and ‘WW1’ (First World War) but ‘GRA’ (the 1832 Reform Act or Great Reform Act), ‘WSC’ (Wall Street Crash) and ‘GWD’ (the 1930s slump, or Great World Depression) were new. So too was reference to ‘L14’ and ‘L16’ for Louis XIV and Louis XVI respectively. The message here is straightforward enough. There is an expectation that candidates will write their answers in standard English. What is permissible in class notes or class discussion is not necessarily permissible in a written examination. The examiners’ obligation does not extend to seeking to decipher private codes.

Section A

As in previous years, Q1 (a) was designed as a source comprehension question of a challenging kind. It required the whole of the designated passage to be read and understood, as opposed to particular sections of it, and it called too for a capacity to make inferences about the author’s meaning and intent. This year’s 1(a) was in general done well, with few candidates failing to get into Level 2 and many getting to Level 3. The answers which reached Level 3 displayed a pleasing awareness of the architecture of Stephen Davies’ reasoning, in which a challenge to overly narrow conceptions of political history was offered on the basis of one general argument and a number of related sub-arguments. It was encouraging as well to see such a high proportion of the candidature having the intellectual self-confidence to communicate their understanding of the passage in their own words. Where answers to 1(a) were disappointing it was because one or more of four common weaknesses - all of which have been evident in poor answers to Q1(a) in previous years - made their appearance. These were (i) adopting an approach which did not get beyond cutting and pasting extracts from the source (ii) writing at excessive length, which in the most extreme cases involve writing an answer to 1(a) which was longer than that offered in response to (1b) (iii) importing unnecessary and unwanted ‘own knowledge’ into answers, and (iv) seeking to evaluate the argument offered by the author instead of seeking simply to comprehend it.

What was looked for in answers to 1(b) was an analysis of the distribution of power within a given society. This, of course, is not the same thing as asking for a description of the constitutional arrangements of a particular state. The ablest candidates showed themselves to be highly sensitive to the difference between these two things and fixed their attention on the amount of power attaching to different social groups in the society they selected. Societies which formed the basis of especially pleasing work included mid-Tudor England, Russia in the era of Catherine the Great, pre-revolutionary France and Wilhelmine Germany. There was also an exceptional piece of work from one candidate on British India in the nineteenth century. By contrast, a significant minority of candidates who chose to focus on National Socialist Germany came to grief, relatively speaking, because they thought it was sufficient either to write about decision-making within the Nazi state (‘working towards the Fuhrer’) or, worse, to describe historiographical disputes turning on the question of whether Hitler was a ‘weak dictator’ or ‘master in the Third Reich’.

There was also some disappointing work on the nineteenth and twentieth century United States which focused on the oppression and powerlessness of black Americans. Here, candidates - rather like their counterparts who wrote about National Socialist Germany - appear to have found it difficult to transcend the very specific issues around which their AS or A2 units were structured. Finally, it should be noted that candidates who wrote expertly about constitutional matters without focusing sufficiently on the matter of the distribution of power in society were allowed in to Level 2.

Q1(c) requires candidates to construct an argument on an 'unseen' topic based on unfamiliar source material and the necessarily swift adaptation of 'own knowledge'. It is by its nature a notably challenging task. This year a fair number of candidates rose impressively to the challenge, making out a case either for or, more commonly, against the idea that political history is the 'master discipline' within the subject. There were those as well who constructed their answers around the shrewd point that what weight and importance is attached to political history depends on how its scope is defined - the argument being that very broad interpretations of political history, such as Davies', can make it appear all-encompassing, virtually a species of 'total history'. For a good many candidates, however, 1(c) was the part of the paper least to their taste. Quite often, these candidates contented themselves with seeking to define the nature and scope of political history and of other genres of historical writing without making out a case for the centrality of one or other. Other candidates surveyed the field largely on the basis of the sources before offering the somewhat anodyne conclusion that all genres of history are important. Work of these kinds often contained enough that was relevant to get in to Level 2, but Level 3 was reserved for those with the confidence and the intellectual wherewithal to make out a case. A final word about 1 (c) is in order. It is designed as a 'synthesis' question. If a candidate neglects either the sources or 'own knowledge' it is difficult to award him or her anything much beyond half marks at best. This year rather too many candidates for comfort based their answers to 1 (c) almost exclusively on 'own knowledge', neglecting the sources more or less entirely and suffering as a result.

Section B

There were takers in reasonable numbers for all of the Section B questions, but Q3 (wars) and 4 (empires) were the most popular.

Broadly speaking, Q2 elicited two kinds of response. There were those, almost without exception very able indeed, who understood precisely what kind of 'committed' history was being described in the question and who went on to write in an illuminating and penetrating fashion. On the other hand, there were those who saw in the question an opportunity to rehearse prepared arguments about the impossibility of objectivity in history and who seized the opportunity with alacrity. Those who chose to interpret the question as one focusing on the broad issue of historical subjectivity did not go away entirely empty-handed but could not receive significant reward because they evaded the question rather than answered it.

Q3 elicited very little work which was seriously disappointing on account of either lack of ideas or lack of information. Virtually all candidates recognised that there were factors other than leadership which can account for victory in war, but the way in which this insight was developed differed enormously. Some candidates opted for an 'example-led' approach in which discussion of a war or wars in which leadership had been crucial to the outcome was followed by a discussion of a war or wars in which it had not. This was a relatively pedestrian approach in the circumstances but there was often sufficient pointing and contextual knowledge to get the answer securely in to Level 2.

Abler candidates adopted a more explicitly ‘analytical’ approach in which the claims of leadership were weighed against those of the other factors (economic resources, morale, geographical factors and so on). In the best of these answers the range and quality of supporting evidence was impressive to the point of being dazzling.

Q4 was in the main answered very well indeed. The vast majority of candidates recognised the comparative element in the question and saw the need to assess the importance of economic factors in imperial expansion in relation to other factors such as national prestige and the desire to undertake a ‘civilising mission’. Most candidates structured their answers analytically and, as with Q3, supporting evidence was often detailed and wide-ranging. The least convincing answers to Q4 were offered by candidates whose frame of historical reference was effectively limited to the 1930s or the era of the Cold War and who were as a result obliged to regard Germany’s expansion eastwards or American foreign policy in the late 1940s and 1950s as paradigms of imperial expansion. The most successful AEA candidates have the ability to range altogether more freely across historical periods.

Responses to Q5 often had perceptive things to say about the merits and demerits of televised history and many candidates were able to back up their claims with secure and well-founded references to their own viewing of history on television. There were candidates who struggled to exemplify their arguments to the point that they were forced to put *Blackadder* or *Rome* centre-stage but thankfully they were very few in number. The main weakness of responses to Q5 was that they tended to focus on television history to the point that ‘academic history’, with which comparison was expected, failed to get a look in.

Grade Boundaries

Grade	Distinction	Merit
Raw boundary mark	37	29
% Candidates	25.7	62.7

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