

# Principal Examiner Feedback Summer 2008

AEA

## AEA History (9846)

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## Contents

Title	Page
General Comments	4
Section A	5
Section B	6
Statistics	8

## Paper 01

### General Comments

The statistical profile of AEA History in 2008 was very much the same as that of 2007. Just over eleven hundred candidates presented themselves for examination in 2008, a fraction down on last year's figure. The mean mark of 2008's candidature was 31.2 as opposed to 31.3 in 2007. The standard deviation for the 2008 paper was 8.4 compared to 8.0 in 2007. In view of these similarities, there was no compelling reason to depart from 2007's grade boundaries - 37 for Distinction and 29 for Merit. These boundaries resulted in 25.8% of the 2008 candidature being awarded a Distinction and 38.8% a Merit. Last year's figures were 25.7% and 37.2% respectively. In qualitative terms, the entry for AEA History now appears to be pretty stable.

The questions on the 2008 paper worked largely in the ways anticipated. No question elicited work which was consistently poor. Question 1(a) perhaps discriminated between candidates of differing ability less effectively than the others but this perhaps has more to do with the nature of the introductory question rather than a defect in the particular question set this year. Question 1(a) is in essence a comprehension question whereas the others target the higher-order thinking skills of analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Few, if any, of the candidates entered for the AEA in History are going to find themselves unable to make significant headway with a comprehension question.

Readers of media punditry on educational issues will be familiar with a number of claims made about the contemporary examinee. One is that genuine intellectual curiosity is being eroded by an over-emphasis on high-stakes assessment. Another is that formal prose is fighting a losing battle against the ubiquity of text messaging and the e-mail. A third, specific to History, is that the prevalence of depth studies in examination syllabuses together with a preoccupation with the inter-war dictatorships have deprived candidates of the ability to range freely and confidently across periods and continents. Whatever the evidence which can be offered in support of contentions of this kind, it has to be said, emphatically, that the experience of AEA History examiners does not add to it. AEA History candidates are in the main articulate, knowledgeable and well-read. Their reading in more than a few cases extends beyond relatively obvious starting-points such as E.H. Carr's *What Is History?* and Richard Evans' *In Defence of History* and includes recently-published works of history which have made a splash such as Orlando Figes' *The Whisperers* and John Hatcher's *The Black Death*. Much of the writing seen in this year's scripts was brisk, economical and penetrating. At the higher end of the AEA range - that is, at Distinction level - the work offered by candidates is, quite simply, enormously impressive. And it is presented by candidates from schools and colleges of all kinds.

This is not to suggest, of course, that AEA History work is without its flaws. One which is not uncommon and to which attention might usefully be drawn is the failure to distinguish in terms of interpretive weight and significance between A Level textbooks on the one hand and monographs based on extensive archival research on the other. There is insufficient recognition that the authors of A Level primers, for all their virtues, do not enter into historiographical debate on equal terms with the likes of, say, Neale, Braudel, Elton or Kershaw. A stronger sense of what constitutes independent value would be welcome. There was as well this year - as in previous years - the odd jarring linguistic infelicity. Some candidates could usefully be reminded that use of the word 'incredibly' when they mean 'very' or 'highly' does little to advance their cause. Others, equally usefully, might be reminded that colloquialisms - as in 'Mary's policies were over the top' or 'Russia continued to hassle the USA' - are unwelcome in circumstances where formal prose is expected.

## Section A

Question 1(a) produced a little more 'bunching' within Level 2 than the examiners ideally would have liked. Most candidates identified Michael Howard's core point - that the professional historian has the responsibility of ensuring that views of the past which achieve common currency are not myths purveyed by this or that interested political or religious party but are instead rooted in historical reality - but many did so without real assurance, either groping their way towards it or failing to distinguish sufficiently between it and some of the more peripheral observations Howard had to make. Few were able to write on Howard's core point with the command and authority of one Distinction candidate:

According to Michael Howard, the past has the power to shape the 'collective consciousness' of society; therefore history can be used as a way of changing, or even controlling, the way people think or behave in the present. With this in mind, he goes on to say that the professional historian's primary responsibility is to ensure that our view of the past isn't distorted for political or social ends. Professional historians exist to prevent 'socially useful' history from being the basis of education.

This said, some of the common errors which have in the past undermined answers to Question 1(a) - notably unwanted attempts to evaluate the claims made in the source and the inappropriate inclusion of 'own knowledge' in answers - were much less in evidence this year. Some candidates, though, continue to write at excessive length in response to Question 1(a). Answers filling two sides of answer books were not uncommon and answers filling three sides were not unknown. Work of this kind invariably set its sights no higher than paraphrasing or recycling the source. The demands of this year's Question 1(a) could have been fully met in no more than twelve-fifteen lines of writing.

Question 1(b) discriminated effectively between candidates of differing abilities and at the higher end of the ability range was done exceptionally well. Periods, issues or controversies generating a good deal of high-quality work included Somerset and Northumberland, Neale's 'Puritan Choir', the 'Black Legend' of Philip II, the Spanish Inquisition, Cromwell in Ireland, the origins of the First World War and the origins of the Cold War. In relation to these topics candidates were often able to explain extremely convincingly how fresh perspectives involved a challenge to earlier interpretations. Work focusing on the Third Reich was often less successful because candidates simply juxtaposed conflicting interpretations without explaining the nature and basis of the challenge offered by one to another. On the Third Reich - and indeed on some other topics - some candidates focused on the work of only one historian, while others made no attempt to explore interpretations, writing instead a substantive history of a particular period or topic.

The format of Question 1 (c) would have been familiar to any GCSE or A Level History candidate, inviting as it did a discussion of relative importance - in this case of the different qualities needed by the historian. A disappointingly large minority of candidates failed to recognise the need to weigh the claims of imagination against other qualities. What they did instead was to explore the role played by imagination in historical writing. This was often done with considerable shrewdness, with the dangers of, as well as the necessity for, imagination being explored. 'Imagination', noted one candidate, 'can conflict with good history as well as support it. Dangers exist in both its over and under-use.' Often, too, the examples from 'own knowledge' used to support and develop the discussion were well-chosen and illuminating. Unfortunately, this did not alter the fact that answers which confined themselves to imagination failed to address fully the question as set. Those who did not recognise the comparative dimension in the question were usually unable to get beyond lower Level 2. The highest marks naturally went to those who not only recognised that (say) command of the sources and the ability to communicate were important qualities to set alongside the need for imagination but who were also able to offer well-founded conclusions on the matter of the primacy, or otherwise, of imagination.

## Section B

One of the main things the examiners look for in Section B is work which is argument-led rather than example-led - that is, work in which knowledge of historical context is deployed in a controlled way as evidence in support of a structured argument as opposed to work in which arguments are submerged in, and marginalised by, a mass of factual material. The Section B question which was most successful in eliciting argument-led work this year was the one which was least attempted of the four - Question 5, which focused on the value of local history. As the examiners anticipated, most candidates offered defences local history - many of them impassioned, and many of them drawing intelligently on individual studies offered in the A2 examination. What was notable about the best work offered in response to this question, however, was the range of arguments put forward. Frequently-advanced points included the way in local studies can be used to test hypotheses floated in larger-scale histories; the fact that some localities, such as eighteenth and nineteenth-century Lancashire, are important in their own right because of the significance of the developments which took place in them; and the suggestion that some of the most successful 'total history' which has been written, notably *Montaillou* (1978), has been based on restricted geographical areas. One Distinction candidate summed matters up with aplomb: 'Local history can provide both corroborative evidence for larger-scale trends and can act as a microcosmic representation of a bigger picture.'

A fair amount of the work produced in response to Questions 2 and 3 was relatively prosaic in comparison with that elicited by Question 5. Question 2 produced some pedestrian commentary to the effect that power corrupted Hitler and Stalin but didn't corrupt Martin Luther King or Nelson Mandela, so, overall, power couldn't be said to have a corrupting influence. More acute candidates contemplated the possibility that some of history's most notorious characters were corrupt and perverted before gaining power, while the most acute considered what range of meanings might realistically be attached to the phrase 'power corrupts'. Those who explored not only venality but also the difficulties involved in fully living up to ideals expressed in opposition got to the heart of the matter. 'It is certainly plausible to argue', noted one candidate, 'that once in power individuals turn their backs on their promises or apparent intentions. One another, more psychological level, political power can play havoc with the minds of its holders and in this sense render them corrupt.' Question 4 offered candidates the option of discussing the impact of religious institutions in relation to one historical period and many took it up. Those writing from an early modern perspective tended to produce non-committal answers - religious institutions were a conservative force in early modern Spain but not in early modern central and northern Europe - while those with a nineteenth and twentieth-century frame of reference invariably argued, by reference to the Orthodox Church in Tsarist Russia and the Catholic Church in Mussolini's Italy and 1930s Spain, in support of the idea that religious institutions were a conservative force. Many answers of both kinds were impressively knowledgeable but arguments were not infrequently under-developed. A mark within Level 2 was the most common reward.

Question 4, focusing on the impact of imperial rule, was the most popular of the Section B essays and in many cases was done extremely well. Some candidates opted for straightforward endorsement of the quotation and were usually able to offer a significant amount of evidence in support of their view. The majority, however, adopted an evaluative, balance-sheet approach which typically sought to weigh the claims of economic benefits, notably improvements in infrastructure, against the facts of physical subordination, cultural mutilation and economic exploitation. The most common conclusion was that 'unmitigated' needed to be qualified, but not all that much. Although some candidates tried to argue their case on the basis of a single historical context - the Roman Empire or nineteenth-century British India - most were able to make informed reference to a number of empires and to a number of different periods. A fair proportion of those attempting the question were familiar with the arguments of Niall Ferguson's *Empire* (2003) and some not without reason looked to *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (1979) for inspiration. A small minority of candidates answering Question 4 proceeded from the

questionable assumption that Germans living under the Third Reich or Russians living under Tsarist rule in the nineteenth century were a 'subject people'. If the said Germans or Russians were only one or two among many examples to feature in the essay little or no harm was done, but there were one or two candidates who based the entirety of their answer on one or other of these examples. Such candidates, quite apart from anything else, struggled to meet the question's requirement for consideration not of subject people but of subject peoples.

## Statistics

### 9846 Advanced Extension Award History (1116 candidates)

Grade	Max. Mark	Dist	Merit	U
Raw boundary mark	60	37	29	0
Cumulative % of candidates		25.8	64.6	100.0

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