

Principal Examiner Feedback Summer 2009

AEA

AEA History (9846)

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Contents

Title	Page
9846 Report	4
Statistics	7

AEA HISTORY 2009

INTRODUCTION

This year's paper was the eighth and final AEA History examination. It attracted a decent-sized candidature - significantly larger than that of its predecessor, the S level examination; it elicited from its candidature some work of quite exceptional quality; and, most important of all, it perhaps did something to encourage the ablest A Level historians to think outside the confines of their A Level units and to reflect on the nature of History as an academic discipline.

From the point of view of the examiners, AEA History has been a stimulating, if challenging, examination with which to be involved - stimulating because the overall standard of candidates' work has been so impressive, challenging because of the sheer range and diversity of the topics on which candidates chose to write.

The number of candidates who sat AEA History this year was 969 in comparison with just over 1100 in 2008. The decline was unsurprising in the circumstances and might indeed have been expected to be larger. Statistical outcomes in 2009 were very close to those in 2008: the 2009 mean mark and standard deviation were to all intents and purposes identical with the 2008 figures. In these circumstances there was no case for modifying the 2008 grade boundaries of 37 for Distinction and 29 for Merit. These boundaries saw 26.1% of the candidature being awarded a Distinction and 64.8% being awarded either a Distinction or a Merit. Both percentages were very marginally up on their 2008 counterparts.

SECTION A

Question 1 (a) and its associated mark scheme worked as well from the point of view of the examiners as any of the introductory comprehension questions set over the past eight years. There was a small minority of candidates who struggled because they failed to centre on the issue of the skills required by 'differentiated' and 'undifferentiated' historians, instead devoting their answers to an explanation of what these terms meant, but the vast majority displayed a good understanding of the focus required. In the middle part of the range there was much secure work which explained effectively the differences between the skills needed by 'differentiated' and 'undifferentiated' historians but did not address the matter of the extent of these differences. Other things being equal, such work was awarded higher Level 2. The strongest answers, a sizeable minority of the total, got into Level 3 by pointing out the similarities as well as differences between the skills needed by the two types of historian. Some of the weaknesses seen in answers to 1(a) questions in the past were less in evidence this year. Fewer candidates this year wrote at inordinate length; fewer felt the need to introduce superfluous own knowledge; and fewer opted to offer unwanted evaluative comment on the merits of the case put forward by the Source's author.

Question 1(b) also worked well and elicited a good deal of work of very high quality. Many candidates focused their attention on historical developments which were incontestably unexpected by all concerned - plagues, famines, assassinations and the like - but others, perfectly legitimately, chose to write about episodes where one historical actor was caught unawares or off-guard by the conduct of another. The 1941 attack on Pearl Harbour and the 1968 Tet Offensive, around which quite large numbers of answers were constructed, are cases in point. Examples of historical episodes which gave rise to outstanding work on this question included the assassinations of Alexander II, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X; the Black Death, the Irish Famine and the post-1929 'Great Depression'; Henry VIII's infatuation with Anne Boleyn; and the death of Edward VI. Pride of place, however, should be given to a superbly well-informed answer on the significance of Empress Elizabeth of Russia's death in 1761. Detailed knowledge and understanding of the relevant historical context was, of course, a key marker of quality in responses to 1(b), and there was a minority of candidates who struggled because they lacked the depth of knowledge needed to offer the kind of analysis required and resorted instead to simple descriptive writing. Among stronger candidates, the best differentiated themselves from the good by offering an assessment of the significance of their chosen event or episode as opposed to simply itemising its consequences. Answers relating to the assassination of Franz

Ferdinand were perhaps more prone to weakness than others. The most common weakness seen in 1(b) answers was the inclusion, usually at the start of the answer, of redundant philosophising about either the nature of chance in history or the concept of counterfactualism in history. What the examiners were looking for was for candidates to get down quickly to a consideration of their chosen historical episode.

Very few candidates indeed were unable to access question 1(c) or to understand what kinds of arguments needed to be weighed and considered in their answer. The two sources offered plenty to go on in terms of ideas and arguments, and most candidates were able to mine the sources to at least reasonable effect. What was disappointing, however, about many responses to 1(c) was the inability of candidates to get beyond the sources and to exemplify their arguments with reference to their own reading of historical textbooks, general histories or more specialised historical studies. On many occasions, exemplification was hypothetical rather than concrete. The outcome was that quite a lot of the work produced in response to 1(c) was unduly source-based and was rewarded with a mark in the middle part of the range. There were, of course, plenty of candidates who had read widely and were able to reflect critically and intelligently on what they had read. Naturally they excelled. For the record, the vast majority of candidates reacted strongly against the notion that the textbooks or general histories were in comparison to research-based monographs in some way inferior forms of historical writing. Not inferior, maintained most candidates, only different. The author of Source B, Professor Elton, who offered the inferiority judgement, came under heavy attack in the majority of answers. He was variously dismissed as ignorant, unworldly, snobbish and elitist. In some cases the argument offered in support of these descriptions was rather less than fully cogent. This was true, for example, of the commonly-made claim that Elton's stated preference for the historian who 'wishes to say about history something that is to him important' demonstrated that he was in favour of biased and opinionated history.

SECTION B

Answers in this Section were more or less evenly distributed across the four questions with no one question attracting a disproportionate number of responses. The fact that none of the questions on offer was universally cold-shouldered by candidates was welcome to the examiners.

The two questions which overall produced the most impressive work were Question 3, which focused on the usefulness and limitations of literary sources for the social historian, and Question 4, which was about the reason for the rise and fall of powerful states. Answers to Question 3 were almost invariably better developed on the limitations of literary sources than they were on their usefulness. There were other common weaknesses too - a failure to concentrate on social history, for example, though in practice the examiners here allowed candidates a good deal of leeway, and a failure to recognise the significance of the word 'invariably' in the first part of the question. What was pleasing about responses to Question 3, however, was the sheer range and quality of supporting evidence offered by so many candidates. Perceptive and authoritative reference to (among others) Chaucer, Shakespeare, Fielding, Austen, Dickens and Wilfred Owen abounded. On Question 4, by contrast, outstanding work was characterised not so much by quality of supporting evidence as by quality of argument. The most impressive candidates were able to identify confidently a range of common factors in the rise and fall of powerful states, with economies usually being put at the centre of things, while at the same time doing justice to specific and local circumstances. Mid-range work produced in response to this question, while lacking the historical sweep and command offered by the most outstanding candidates, was almost invariably coherently argued. The only disappointing work seen was presented by candidates whose knowledge appeared to be confined to Hitler and Mussolini, or more accurately to aspects of the Nazi and Fascist regimes, and this proved altogether too narrow a foundation on which to embark on an exercise in comparative history.

The quality of work produced in response to Question 2, about the primacy or otherwise of the study of causation in historical writing, and Question 5, about subjectivity in historical interpretation, was not as strong as responses to Question 4. Answers to Question 2 tended to focus on why it is important to study the causes of historical events rather than on activities other than the study of causes on which historians engage. In other words, the

comparative dimension in the question tended to be neglected. In fairness, a reasonably high proportion of those attempting the question made at least some reference to the importance of studying consequences as well as causes, but references to, for example, the business of seeking to establish precisely what happened were relatively few and far between. Candidates who attempted Question 5 predictably had little difficulty agreeing that historical interpretation was a subjective affair, and frequently they elaborated on this point persuasively, but at the heart of the matter was the question of whether one historical interpretation was in consequence as good as another.

Statistics

9846 Advanced Extension Award History (1116 candidates)

Grade	Max. Mark	Dist	Merit	U
Raw boundary mark	60	37	29	0