

# A-level **History**

7042/1E Russia in the Age of Absolutism and Enlightenment, 1682–1796  
Report on the Examination

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## General Comments

Whilst this is the first year of a new specification, there was some clear evidence of well-prepared students who were sure of the expectations of the questions and had evidently understood their study of Russia in this period and had good knowledge to demonstrate this. Almost all students attempted 3 questions, though it was notable that Q4, on Catherine the Great, was far less popular than the 2 questions of Peter the Great. There is also some evidence in the compulsory Extract question that knowledge on Catherine the Great was not always wholly secure. Some students had only a very sketchy understanding of the partitions of Poland, which sadly meant that even where they could show clear understanding of the interpretations their assessment of these was not convincing and their marks were limited. Students are reminded that it is crucial they are confident about all areas of the Specification as the exam paper will always be balanced between the 2 halves and over time the entire specification will be examined.

## Question 1

Students did sometimes struggle to identify the key interpretation in the extracts. Sometimes this was because they did not fully understand the extract; at other times it was because their technique of a line by line analysis did not lend itself well to doing this. A line by line analysis had a tendency to lead to a, sometimes lengthy, discussion of issues which were not central to the question. It also tended to lead to answers concentrated on the beginning of the extracts and important points towards the end were missed. Similarly, students sometime wrote reams on Extract A and then could only manage a short paragraph by the time they got to Extract C. Students should resist the urge to start writing as soon as they read the extract. They need to give themselves sufficient thinking time to identify, firstly, what the central interpretation is in the extract, and secondly, what are the key parts of the extract that support or explain this interpretation. There is no need for students to make a comment on every single phrase or sentence in the extract. Part of this task is testing the ability of students to undertake intelligent reading; it is by identifying the key interpretation and the support for this in the extract that they demonstrate this.

Once students are clear about the interpretation in the extract they will then be in a position to deploy their own knowledge selectively i.e. that which supports or refutes the interpretation in the extract. In many cases this may mean that they write less but what they write will be better focussed on the task which is an evaluation of the interpretation in the extract. Students also need to ensure that their comments are focussed on the relevant issue in the question. The quality of this discussion and the ability to select appropriate evidence in this analysis is what differentiates higher level responses. In this case it was Catherine the Great's policy towards Poland. Some students used the first sentences in both extracts A and B as a way to discuss Catherine's domestic policy arguing that foreign policy wasn't a key concern and instead domestic policy was. This shows the dangers of both not concentrating on the issue identified in the question and on failing to identify the overall interpretation of the extract.

Students are also reminded that because the focus of this question is an assessment of interpretation they should not comment on the use, accuracy or reliability of the extracts. Comments about the authors or the dates on which the extracts were produced do not add to this analysis. Similarly, comments that list what the extract tells the historian are not helpful. Finally, students should be aware that unlike AS there is no need to compare the interpretations. No credit will be given for a conclusion that does this and students would be better developing their analysis on each extract separately than in writing, a sometimes lengthy, conclusion which simply repeats points made earlier.

Most students grasped, at least, in part, the interpretation in Extract A. There were some useful comments made about Poland's vulnerability and Catherine's opportunism. Less able students were unable to wholly support their arguments. Many students' knowledge about Poland was based on Peter the Great's reign so they were only able to make very general points about the relationship with Poland after this point. However, more able students were able to refer to the Polish War of Succession in the 1730s and Polish resistance to Russian influence in Catherine's reign and/or Polish inability to resist the partitions to discuss how shaky Russia's grip was. Some students were confused that the extract showed Russia's lack of enthusiasm for partition in the context of the three partitions but others were able to put, especially the first partition, into the wider geo-political context.

In examining Extract B most students were able to make some comment about Catherine's view that she did not annex a single Pole, though weaker students were unable to provide much support. There were also relevant points made about Catherine's attitude to Catholicism, again with varying degrees of support. The majority of students also identified the interpretation of partition as a defensive strategy, though this was not universal. Again the quality of the support varied, though better students were able to refer to Russian fears of a Poland allying with Turkey and/or using the rebellions in Poland to comment on the threat that Poland posed. Some students again used their knowledge of events in Peter's reign to discuss the extent of threat of Poland; credit was given where arguments were relevant but some understanding of the context during Catherine's reign was expected for the higher levels.

The vast majority of students did identify the key interpretation in Extract C that Catherine the Great's Polish policy was based on a dislike of the Poles and/or Poland personally and politically. Less able students tended to see the partitions as sufficient evidence for this but more able students were able to pick up relevant points in the Extract such as the Polish people's love of freedom and democracy and discussed how this might affect Catherine's attitude. There was sometimes an inclination to dismiss the interpretation on the basis that Catherine was an enlightened monarch, but better students were able to demonstrate an understanding that Catherine's policies both within Russia and internationally were driven by pragmatism as much as by enlightenment. Quite a few students struggled to understand why Catherine would be hostile to the Polish nobility given her policies in Russia but this served to demonstrate a paucity of knowledge on events and attitudes in Poland that precipitated the partitions. More able students were able to discuss this and sometimes made some sophisticated points about the different contexts of the different partitions, particularly the fear of the spread of Jacobinism in the 1790s.

## **Question 2**

This was a very popular question, though students had varying degrees of success with it. The biggest problem was that students tended to structure their essay around different rebellions/examples of opposition, rather than by identifying different causes. Whilst this did sometimes work if links were developed, too often it led to descriptions of the rebellion/opposition with sometimes only very limited comment on the cause of them. Even if causes were clearly identified this structure did not make it easy for students to construct an overall assessment that answered the question. Students without a strong sense of chronology sometimes found it difficult to make convincing arguments, for example stating that the Bulavin rebellion of 1707/8 was a response to the Poll Tax. Less able students did sometimes just describe westernisation policies and assert that they were unpopular or comment on the seriousness of the threat with very little support or analysis on the causes. There was a wider tendency to assume that western policies were unpopular because they were western rather than recognising that sometimes it was the

nature of these western reforms that removed privilege or imposed burdens that was unpopular; sometimes students could not properly develop balance because of this. However, there were some very strong answers where students were able to demonstrate an insightful understanding of the reasons for rebellions and opposition and the links between these.

### **Question 3**

This was a very popular question and was generally done well. Students were usually able to identify a range of Swedish failings and compare them to Russian strengths. Weaker answers tended to follow a narrative but most provided reasonable links to the question. A more serious limitation was a lack of range, especially those responses that only really covered the period from 1700-1709, and sometimes only the period 1708-9. There were a number of students who seemed to think that there were only 3 battles in the Great Northern War and seem unaware of Russian successes before 1709 or have any understanding of why the Battles of Poltava or Hango did not end the war. More able students showed an awareness of the whole war and commented on a range of relevant factors including Russian diplomacy and reform as well as what happened in key battles. There was also some impressive analysis that compared the import of Swedish mistakes with Russia's ability to take advantage of these in order to come to a substantiated judgement.

### **Question 4**

This was by far the least popular of the optional questions and there was a varying standard of responses to it. Some students wanted to write a pre-prepared answer on assessing Catherine's enlightened ideas; where they were able to make comments that were relevant to the question these were credited. However, the question was focussed on change and better answers were able to refer to changes in policy for example on censorship, or continuities, for example in welfare, after the French Revolution. Sometimes students were hindered by a lack of chronology, for example in assuming the Charter of the Nobility was a response to the French Revolution. There was also sometimes a lack of conceptual understanding of the position of the nobility and their importance to the Tsar. However, there were some impressive answers that put the French Revolution and Catherine's response to it in the broad context of her reign, for example, arguing that she had become progressively more reactionary in response to the difficulties in ruling Russia and events such as Pugachev so there was a continuity in tone, even if there was a change in detail.

### **Use of statistics**

Statistics used in this report may be taken from incomplete processing data. However, this data still gives a true account on how students have performed for each question.

### **Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.