



History 7042
Specimen Question Paper 2F (A-level)
Question 04 Student 2
Specimen Answer and Commentary

V1.0

Specimen answer plus commentary

The following student response is intended to illustrate approaches to assessment. This response has not been completed under timed examination conditions. It is not intended to be viewed as a 'model' answer and the marking has not been subject to the usual standardisation process.

Paper 2F (A-level): Specimen question paper

04 'The financial problems of the French Crown were entirely caused by Louis XIV's wars.'

Assess the validity of this view.

[25 marks]

Student response

It would be wrong to say that the financial problems of the French Crown were entirely caused by Louis XIV's wars but there is no doubt that these exacerbated issues. There were many problems with the French financial system anyway and there were other costs to be supported, but warfare was the biggest single demand on the royal purse.

France was at war through much of Louis XIV's reign between 1643 and 1715 and particularly after he established his personal rule in 1661. Consequently the Crown had to support a huge army and smaller navy as well as meet all the administrative and diplomatic costs associated with war. Louis' armies were transformed through the efforts of Le Tellier with new weapons, uniforms, artillery and professional officers, but all this all to be paid for. Furthermore, a line of fortresses was constructed along the northern and Eastern frontiers of France by Vauban, costing more than the Palace of Versailles. The development of the navy also involved an increase in the number of ships and the development of naval dockyards and naval academies. Such demands were a drain on Crown finances.

Louis' armies fought four major and costly wars - the War of Devolution (1667-8) and the Dutch War of 1672-8 in the Netherlands, and the War of the League of Augsburg (1689-97) and War of the Spanish succession (1701-3) in Europe and the colonies. The early wars were not entirely draining. Louis was reasonably successful in the Netherlands and by the 1680s he had acquired Flanders and through the policy of réunions, taken Franche-Comté and Strasbourg in 1678 and 1681 respectively. This semi-legal attempt to expand on the eastern border of France allowed Louis to claim 160 cities and areas on France's eastern borders. Overall this meant that France was in a potentially stronger economic situation than it had been and had there been no more wars, Louis might have been remembered for augmenting rather than diminishing the Crown income.

However, in subsequent years, his réunion policy broke down. The large number of sieges and naval battles that took place during the war of the League of Augsburg demanded more revenue and France found itself fighting on several fronts in the War of the Spanish Succession, increasing costs for the maintenance of the navy. Furthermore, although France kept many important gains in the Treaties of Utrecht (1713), it suffered major colonial losses in North America.

The state's finances suffered as a result of all this war-making. By 1715, income was 69 million livres and Crown expenditure, 132 million. The public debt increased tenfold between 1693 and

1715. To meet these ever-growing demands, the King resorted to a well-known Crown expedient - the sale of financial and judicial offices. This was a short-term fix with disastrous long-term consequences. Those granted positions in this way gained tax exemptions, so reducing the state's tax base and since they viewed their offices as their property rather than a public duty, their attitude to subsequent accounting was not always very scrupulous. The other way of financing wars was to increase taxation (A poll tax) was introduced in 1695, there was an experiment in paper money in 1701 and the dixième was introduced in 1710. These were temporary measures only and brought no real structural change to a chaotic taxation system. Consequently debts multiplied.

For Louis to sustain war on this scale at all was thanks taken to the development of the economy over the century by Sully, Richelieu and Colbert. However, even their successes were not enough to compensate for the demands on the economy in the 1690s. Colbert, created the Contrôle Generale in 1665 in order to improve the accounting of money. He also worked to boost canal-building, develop the navy, and set up state-trading companies. He boosted trade but there was so much state regulation of industry and trade, that it was stifling to enterprise. Colbert favoured mercantilism, so that all private activity was controlled by the state, which proved a handicap. The internal customs barriers and tolls hindered the development of the economy. Furthermore, nobles, in the Second Estate, turned up their noses to trade and in many cases their status actually prevented them getting involved on pain of losing their titles. The Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 was also a hindrance. The persecution of the industrious Huguenots, many of whom fled abroad, weakened the country commercially.

Agriculture was neglected. Colbert believed in regulated prices and cheap food, but this did nothing for the peasants that produced it. The peasantry constantly lived on the edge of starvation and there were particularly bad famines in 1693/4 and 1709-10. Tied to their feudal lords who had the right to their labour and services, most peasants remained 'triple taxed serfs' - owing dues to their lords, the Church and the State. There was just no more money that could be squeezed out of them and the Poll Tax proved a severe blow which sent many under.

The main reason why the Crown's finances were in such a bad way in the first place was the unequal spread of taxation in France. The First Estate clergy and Second Estate nobility were exempt from the payment of the taille and as long as this continued, the French Crown was unable to exact income from those with the most to spare. Furthermore, the pays d'états, like the clergy, offered a lump sum, rather than paying taxes through intendants, as in the pays d'élections, so that left the Crown income variable and dependent on goodwill. The system of accounting for revenue was also flawed. Corruption permeated the system as tax farmers (following the creation of Colbert's 'ferme generale' in 1680 to coordinate the collection of taxes) creamed off the profits of indirect taxation and corrupt officials lined their pockets at every stage of the process. Consequently, Colbert's efforts to encourage manufacture and colonial trade could, at best, only have a small effect on Crown income.

The Crown mostly survived by taking out loans which led to an accumulation of debt and a reliance on financiers. The ennobled financiers and the tax-exempt noble families who provided most of the capital consequently had an interest in preserving a system which was profitable to them. The financial problems of the Crown were therefore maintained because the influential nobility in France had no wish to see any reform.

It must also be remembered that Louis XIV had other calls on his income. He was a great patron of the arts and sciences, and he had the Louvre refurbished and the Place Louis-Grand,

the Place des Victoires, the Invalides and the Observatory all built in Paris. However, all this was overshadowed by the costs of the Palace of Versailles which provided yet another drain on his income. Louis was also known to be generous in his grant of pensions and the court lived an extravagant lifestyle at Versailles, oblivious of cost. Whilst the Court expenditure did not come near to equaling the costs of warfare, it should nevertheless be taken into account in assessing the cause of Louis' financial problems.

By 1715, almost 25 years of warfare had made its mark on the Crown's finances. However, the financial problems of the monarchy were less caused by Louis XIV's wars than by the faults in the social and administrative structure of France which meant there was too much tax exemption and that the collection system prevented much money from ever reaching the Crown. The King was unable to use the full wealth of his kingdom to finance his military ventures. Had he been able to do so, he would not have needed to incur such debt -nor made himself so dependent on the financiers. In addition the economy of the Kingdom was held back by excessive mercantilism, the limitation of reforms and the attitude of the nobility. Louis' wars, coupled with the other costs of his reign, proved unsustainable in the long run and burdened his successors with debt that would eventually help to provoke a revolution at the end of the eighteenth century.

Commentary – Level 5

This is a very effective answer. The demands of the question are fully understood and consistently responded to. The assessment of the impact of war is well supported and convincing, especially noting how the drain of war increased after the mid-1680s. The review of other causes of financial problems has range and appropriate comment, although there could be some further development of supporting references. The conclusion is clear and persuasive and this is a Level 5 answer.