

History

Paper 2H (AS) Additional Specimen Question
Paper

Question 02 Student 1

Specimen Answer and Commentary

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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 2H (AS): Additional Specimen question paper

02 'Before 1789, Louis XVI was an absolute monarch.'

Explain why you agree or disagree with this view.

[25 marks]

Student response

In the 1700s, the King of France ruled on the basis of his "divine right"- according to the Bishop of Meaux in the 17th Century, "Royal authority is sacred...Princes therefore act as ministers of God and His lieutenants on earth." In theory, Louis XVI should have been in absolute control of government. However, even before the constitutional changes of 1789, Louis was losing power and support as the notion of Absolutism seemed outdated and irrelevant to an increasingly well-educated population.

Traditionally, the Bourbon kings were absolute rulers- as Bishop Bossuet wrote, they "need render account to no one for what [they] order." Legally, there were no limits to Louis' power; at his coronation, he swore an oath to God, not his subjects. There is no doubt that the King saw himself as an Absolute Monarch-even as late as 1789, when Louis supposedly agreed to a Constitutional Monarchy, he was accused of seeing himself as an absolute ruler and failing to give up his power. The King gained his power from the acceptance of the privileged orders- the nobility and the clergy- who expected that, as Chief Judge and the source of all legal authority, the king would recognise their privileges, as the Crown always had, and in return, they would support him.

The King relied on the Nobility to legitimise his power and allow him to rule. It was expected that privileges such as being exempt from corvée (forced labour) would keep them loyal to him, and on the whole, the Nobility saw no need to embrace reformist Enlightenment ideas which would damage their privilege- the obvious exceptions being the King's own cousin, Phillipe Egalité, and the Marquis de Lafayette, both of whom challenged the absolutist Ancien regime.

However, the King was losing support within the first two Estates. Within both Church and nobility, conflict and division were rife and resentment towards the King was growing. In the clergy, poorer "curés" or parish priests resented the wealth and power of the Upper Clergy. The majority of Lower Clergy demonstrated democratic ideas and a desire to participate more in the running of the Church in the cahiers of 1789, as well as resenting the abuse of tithes by bishops, who demanded unquestioning obedience. The Upper Clergy, by contrast, were privileged and shared the King's belief that God had ordained the order of things.

Not only was there resentment within the Church, which meant that it was hard for the whole First Estate to support one idea- Absolutism- but there was also resentment between the Church and the King. Many Upper Clergy believed in ultramontanist, the idea that the Church was only accountable to the Pope in Rome. The Church worked hard to defend its identity as an individual state, refusing to pay tax, despite attempts by the monarchy, for example in 1780, to value Church property so it could be taxed. In lieu of a tax, the Church gave the King an annual "don gratuit", which was usually modest as no external powers were allowed to know the Church's income. The King may have

claimed that he had absolute power, derived from God, but without the Church to support this notion, it was unlikely to help him.

Both the Church and the nobility saw the King as the protector of their privilege, as both were exempt from taxes, such as the *taille* or *gabelle*, despite their immense wealth, owning between them up to $\frac{1}{2}$ of all land in France, by some modern day estimates. When the King and three different finance ministers, Turgot, Brienne and Calonne, attempted to spread the tax burden to fall on the privileged orders as well, he faced huge opposition, and lost the support of both orders.

Furthermore, the rural Provincial Nobles and the poorer *Hobereaux* nobility, who had ancient roots but little money to show for it, resented the newer *Noblesse de Robe*, who held power in government, and the *Grande Noblesse* or *Noblesse d'Epée*, who had both high ranks and ancient lineage. According to William Doyle, only 250 families had a large enough income to support the cripplingly lavish lifestyle enjoyed at Versailles; by contrast, 20% had less than 1,000 livres per annum, making them indistinguishable from peasants. These poorer nobles had less access to state employment and resented the fact that many of the older nobility families seemed to have been usurped by newer families. There was also open hostility between *Noblesse d'Epée* and *Noblesse de Robe*, demonstrated by the *Segur Ordinance* of 1781. This was designed by the old nobility to restrict the power of the *Noblesse de Robe*, as no one could become an army officer without first proving that they had been nobles for at least four generations. Unity was impossible and the nobility could not act, as the traditional Marxist view suggests, as one single exclusive class. At best they were ambivalent to the King and they did not show great support for his Absolute Monarchy.

Even without the issues caused by the first two Estates, the King would have struggled to rule absolutely. In the 1700s, France was not unified- as Napoleon Bonaparte commented, it was "more like twenty chequered states", each with their own language and customs. Spreading laws and collecting taxes equally was not feasible, and Louis himself was not strong enough to force the more privileged areas to give up their traditional rights. Moreover, it could take fifteen days on a good journey for news to reach some of the further provinces from Paris, meaning that absolute control of the country was strategically impossible.

The fact that Louis was not a strong King did not help him to rule absolutely- traditionally, French kings were not allowed to act despotically, but they were expected to act as an effective administrator. In order to act effectively, Louis would have had to be firm and strong, but he was then labelled a despot by some critics. As a young, uncertain King, Louis would immediately suspend any policy that lost him popular support, meaning he was changeable and often labelled as weak, as well as tyrannical. The system of Absolute Monarchy had been designed for the stronger Louis XIV, the Sun King, and it relied on good political acumen, which Louis XVI did not have, to control and unify the country under one ruler.

It did not help the King's power that, with growing literacy rates, there was an increased market for scurrilous libelles, pamphlets which mocked the King and his family, particularly his wife, Marie Antoinette, who was named "the Austrian bitch on the spree". Not only was she already unpopular as she represented the unpopular alliance with France's traditional enemy, Austria, and therefore France's failings as a great warring nation, but the pamphlets also painted her as excessively extravagant and promiscuous, even suggesting that Louis XVI was not the father of his children and giving rise to a wave of political pornography. Reports of her luxurious lifestyle were particularly poignant as many French people were struggling with poor harvest and the rising price of bread. Censorship did little to improve the situation; despite a growing army of 178 censors by 1789,

compared with 76 in 1741, the appetite for illicit material seemed stimulated, and many saw censorship as the taking of their basic right to free speech!

The rise of literacy rates and Enlightenment ideas also posed threats to Louis' role as an absolute monarch. By 1789, 90% of male Parisians and 80% of females could sign their name, signifying a tenfold increase in reading over the past century. With this came an increased desire to read, and Enlightened ideas of a meritocratic rather than autocratic society grew in popularity, with ideas from England, such as the writer John Locke's damning description in 1690 of Absolutism, becoming steadily more popular. The language of liberty used by these writers resonated with the unhappy French people, and undermined the king's authority.

The Parlements, particularly the Paris Parlement, seemed to be involved in discrediting the monarchy. Under the Sun King, the Paris Parlement had existed primarily to pass through taxes- the fact that Louis relied on the Parlement to pass his laws is clear evidence that he was not an Absolute Monarch- but Louis XV had banished them to Troyes and when the King brought them back to Paris, they were angry and suspicious of the Monarchy. They sought to mobilise public opinion by publishing their remonstrances and often delaying passing new laws, to demonstrate that they were in control. These remonstrances often used the "language of liberty" to appeal to the population and challenge the king. In addition, the Paris Parlement directly challenged the King in 1783, when it refused to pass a new tax suggested by the King's finance minister, Calonne. Not only did this demonstrate the Parlement's growing animosity towards royal authority, but it led to a failed attempt by Calonne to rig an Assembly of Notables to pass his tax. Although Calonne was fired, the Parlement remained suspicious of the King and his ministers, and continued to challenge his authority.

Although Louis was nominally an Absolute king, there is no evidence to support the idea that he had personal control over the country. The changing state of France and public opinion meant that, if the theory of Absolute rule was to become reality, a strong king was needed. Louis XVI's personal shortcomings, and the lack of popular support for him, meant that he could never claim to be an Absolute Monarchy in anything more than name.

Commentary – Level 5

This is a very strong response. The answer is relevant, analytical and is well supported by the extensive evidence cited. It has a clear focus on the extent of Absolutism and the threats that were developing to it, both structurally and in the abilities of the king himself. In parts it is not wholly convincing, for example, the divisions within the nobility are not fully linked to the issue of Absolutism and the fact that Louis could not rule despotically is not developed. Nevertheless, this is a very strong AS answer, Level 5.