

Working with sources. Germany in 1848-9

Dr David Williamson. Latterly Highgate School, London

SOURCE PAPERS ARE KEY COMPONENTS of both the AS and A2 History papers. They have varied from a relatively short AS paper of an hour to, in the case of Edexcel, a long and taxing paper of an hour and three quarters. Many A-Level students find source papers the most challenging of all the papers they are required to sit. Above all, they find mastering the necessary technique difficult.

Types of questions set

1. Comprehension
Some boards, such as AQA, require candidates to explain particular references in the text, as a first question usually having a low mark allocation.
2. Comparisons
A more demanding type of question is one which asks you to compare the light two sources shed on a particular problem.
3. Essays involving a selection of sources and candidates knowledge to answer a particular question.
These are usually the most challenging questions in a source paper. Candidates are required to agree or disagree with a view or interpretation presented by the examiner using a combination of four or more sources and their own knowledge.

How you can achieve a good grade

a) Common sense points

1. The first requirement is to know your subject. Make sure that you have revised the syllabus thoroughly, as the sources set you in the exam will cover some key aspect of the course. Without having a good background knowledge, you will not be able to interpret the documents effectively.
2. Read the documents in the exam paper through carefully. They usually contain several different points. Note the mark allocation, as it indicates how much you should write. Each question also tells you which sources it is asking you to analyse.
3. Take time, but of course not too much time, to plan out your answers. This is particularly important when you are required to use the sources to critically assess a view on relevant events put forward by the examiner.

b) What analytical skills are needed?

1. Accurate comprehension and evaluation. This is the basis of all interpretive skills. You need to understand what the sources are saying. Are they a factual account, propaganda or satire?
Ask yourself what the particular document you are studying actually shows and how reliable is it as a source. For instance, where does it come from and what is its date? Use your background knowledge (this cannot be stressed strongly enough), to check its reliability and utility - i.e. what use is it to you in solving the question you are asked?

2. Ability to make accurate Comparisons between sources as to how they relate to a particular problem.

You might be asked to compare a couple of passages on the contributions of two individuals or to explain how two sources differ in their treatment of an event. In either case you must on no account just give a summary of the passages, and then a brief comparison at the end. It is essential to compare point with point from the very beginning. This process has aptly been compared to a game of ping pong. Your comparisons should also go beyond the more obvious surface features and explore the more subtle inferences.

3. The ability to combine relevant information from several documents with your own knowledge to answer a specific question.

The documents form 'the building blocks' of your essay and will inevitably dictate the structure of the answer. Your own knowledge must be applied to reinforce the sources and to develop the points they are making.

Illustration of the points of guidance.

Sources on the 1848-9 revolutions in Germany, and their consequences.

Source 1. From A.J.P. Taylor, *The Course of German History*, published in 1945. p 69.

Never has there been a revolution so inspired by a limitless faith; never has a revolution so discredited the power of ideas in its result. The success of the revolution discredited conservative ideas; and the failure of the revolution discredited liberal ideas. After it, nothing remained but the idea of Force, and this idea stood at the helm of German history from then on ... German history reached its turning point and failed to turn. This was the fateful essence of 1848.

Source 2. From an article by H.B. Oppenheim, in the left wing German paper, *The Reform*, 5 October 1848.

... the Frankfurt central state is floating in the air, and the basis of our reality, the place of our choice for our battles lies elsewhere. As certain as it is that German unity is to be founded only on and by freedom, just as certain is it that the victory or failure of democracy will be decided in the individual states and, as most recent events have shown clearly enough, in the German states of the first rank, in their capitals, in Vienna or Berlin. Dynasties do not waver before paper storms that have been flung at Frankfurt, but they waver before the hammer blows of social democracy in Berlin and Vienna ... If Prussia goes backward, German freedom is lost, but if democracy is victorious in Berlin, it is victorious for all Germany.

Source: J. Davis Randers-Pehrson, ed, *Germans and the Revolution of 1848-1849*, New York/ Washington, Peter Lang, 1999, p 427

but as elections later in the decade were to show [that] did not rule out the possibility of liberal majorities and the potential for political change. Within the Confederation the events of 1849-50 also damaged the Austro-Prussian partnership which had dominated Germany since 1815.

Questions

- Compare passages 2 and 3 for the light they shed on why the Frankfurt Assembly failed to create a united Germany.
- Using these five passages and your own knowledge assess the consequences for German unification of the failure of the 1848-9 revolution.

Comment

Question a) Both passages are contemporary documents but written from contrasting viewpoints. Source 2 is a perceptive newspaper article by a democratic journalist, while Source 3 is a private letter from the King of Prussia to a friend, Count Bunsen. Both in different ways are critical of 'the Frankfurt central state'. Oppenheim regards this state as weak, insufficiently radical and its government full of illusions, or 'floating in the air', while Frederick William, on the other hand, regards the elected assembly as 'riddled with the seeds of revolution' and 'the most evil thing of this century'.

Both passages, however, do in retrospect shed light on why the Frankfurt central state failed to create a united liberal Germany let alone a democratic Germany. Oppenheim points out that the question of German unity can only be decided by 'the hammer blows' of social democracy in Berlin and Vienna. The Democrats were far to the left of the liberals, who were in the majority in the Frankfurt assembly, and their revolutionary threats both frightened the traditional rulers of the individual German states and the more moderate liberals consequently making the creation of a liberal united Germany less likely. Regardless of his politics, however, Oppenheim was right to stress that what happened in Vienna and Berlin was more important than the theoretical debates in the Assembly. Firstly, the defeat of the October uprising in Vienna led to the creation of a reactionary government in Austria under Schwarzenberg. Secondly, the outraged rejection by the King of Prussia, of proposals that were being discussed in the Frankfurt constitutional committee for offering him the crown of a united constitutional Germany, indicated that he had only accepted the revolution under duress and would crush it if possible. Ultimately it was the hostility of both Austria and Prussia that led to the failure of the 1848 Revolution.

Question b) With question b), to achieve a high mark you need to have an accurate understanding of all five passages and be able to use your own knowledge to put them into context in a coherent and relevant essay. First of all, you need to plan your answer. The best way to do

this is to 'assemble the building blocks' by looking very carefully at each source to see how it can contribute to your overall answer. Ask yourself, also, why the examiner has chosen that particular passage.

Source 1 presents the traditional view of 1848, arguing that its failure so discredited liberalism that 'after it nothing remained but the idea of force', which according to Taylor 'stood at the helm of German history from then on'. Meaning in effect that this made not only Bismarck but, also, Hitler inevitable. Hopefully such a simplistic argument will give you cause for thought, but do the other passages back this up? Sources 2 and 3, as we have already seen, above, shed considerable light on why the revolution failed. Source 2 certainly suggests that the 'Frankfurt central state' had lost touch with reality, while Source 3 shows the reactionary attitude of the King of Prussia and his refusal to work with the liberal majority in Frankfurt. Bismarck's notorious blood and iron speech (Source 4) appears to bear out exactly what Taylor wrote in 1945. He dismisses speeches and majority verdicts and argues that only blood and iron will unify Germany. However Source 5 sounds a somewhat different note and directly challenges Taylor's arguments in Source 1. While stressing that the failure of the 1848 revolution made a Kleindeutschland under Prussia 'the most likely, if not yet inevitable, formula for a united Germany of the future', it queries the opinion that this would necessarily be authoritarian by mentioning that the revolts led to the establishment in Prussia of a constitution and Landtag, which by the end of the 1850s the liberals were able to dominate.

Once you have noted the relationship between the passages and the question, use your own knowledge to add depth and range to the points which can be drawn from them. While you must draw on each source, you do not necessarily have to deal with each one in the order dictated by the exam paper.

There is no question that the revolutions failed, but did that inevitably entail a German Sonderweg or 'special way' to Bismarck and Hitler, as Taylor argues in Source 1? How can your own knowledge add depth to Sources 2 and 3? Both show the significance of Prussia, but you can point out (in reference to Source 5) that the Prussia that emerged by the end of the 1850s was in many ways a liberal state and a supporter of free trade. Source 4 appears to challenge this idea and support the arguments in Source 1, but here you need to explore how authoritarian Bismarck really was. Be careful, at this stage, not to become bogged down in a long general essay. Bismarck certainly ignored the Prussian parliament from 1862-66 and in pushing the Army bill through the Prussian Upper House undoubtedly behaved in an authoritarian way. Yet in 1866 he did make a compromise with the liberals that gave Germany an elected parliament which he was unable always to dominate. The Reich that Bismarck created was a hybrid state that cannot simply be dismissed as 'authoritarian'.

Dr David Williamson, latterly Head of History at Highgate, is the author of *Bismarck and Germany*, Longman, 1997, *War and Peace. International Relations, 1914-45*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1994, *The Third Reich*, Longman - Seminar Studies series, Third edition 2002, and *Germany Since 1815: A Nation Forged and Renewed*, Palgrave, 2004.