

AS Level essay sample answer

REVISION PROGRESS



REVIEW

On these Exam Practice pages you will find a sample student answer for an AS Level essay question. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the answer? Read the answer and the corresponding Examiner Tips carefully. Think about how you could apply this advice in order to improve your own answers to questions like this one.



'In the years 1958 to 1963, both the USSR and the USA sought diplomatic discussion rather than conflict.' Explain why you agree or disagree with this view.

25 marks

REVISION SKILLS



AS questions will contain a quotation advancing a judgement followed by 'explain why you agree or disagree with this view'. Read page 7 for details on how to master the essay question.

Sample student answer

The years 1958 to 1963 are generally seen as a time of 'Cold War' when the USA and USSR came into conflict over Berlin, Cuba and Vietnam. Although these were very serious crises, they did not escalate because American and Soviet leaders realised that conflict could lead to nuclear war. They therefore engaged in diplomatic discussion to try to resolve these conflicts.

Between 1958 and 1963 the Americans and Soviets clashed over whether West Berlin would be absorbed into East Germany. When Khrushchev demanded that the Western powers withdraw from Berlin within six months in 1958, US President Eisenhower reacted strongly. The Americans collaborated with the British and French to guarantee that West Berlin would continue to have open communication and transport links to West Germany, but no aggressive actions were taken and in 1959 Khrushchev withdrew his ultimatum, and instead representatives from the four powers engaged in diplomatic discussion that led to Khrushchev's visit to the USA. Although there was no resolution, both countries agreed that there was a need for a peaceful solution to the Berlin issue and that disarmament should be a key aspect of this. Thus, a potential conflict in 1958 and 1959 was resolved through diplomatic discussions.

However, the situation in Berlin was still unclear, and attempts at further diplomatic resolutions were slowed by American actions. In May 1960, just before the Paris Summit, the Soviets shot down a U2 spy plane that was in Soviet airspace. At the same time, American hostility towards the newly installed Castro government in Cuba caused relations between the USA and USSR to deteriorate.

EXAMINER TIP



This introduction responds directly to the question and sets the context. The judgement on the question could have been stronger, however.

EXAMINER TIP



The information provided in this paragraph is accurate and relevant, but the approach is rather descriptive. To improve this, a reference to the question at the beginning of the paragraph would have offered the basis for an argument with supporting information.

EXAMINER TIP



This is good detail but it is, again, presented in a rather narrative fashion.

When he took office in 1961, President Kennedy inherited a difficult situation and relations with Khrushchev and the USSR were poor. Nevertheless, both leaders agreed to meet in Vienna in June 1961. Although both sides attempted diplomatic discussions, the American assistance to Cuban counter-revolutionaries in the Bay of Pigs and Khrushchev's demands for a change in the status of Berlin soured relations. Kennedy claimed that he was willing to engage in talks, but at the same time he requested an increase in military expenses from the US Congress, leaving the Soviets unsure as to whether he was interested in diplomacy or conflict. In addition, Kennedy increased US involvement in Vietnam, making the USA appear more interested in conflict than peace.

In August 1961, the Berlin Wall was put up preventing free travel of Germans from East to West. This stopped the East-West flow of Germans that had taken place since the establishment of two German countries with different ideologies. While the West was horrified, it can be argued that this actually began a move towards peaceful resolution of disputes in Europe. The West accepted the wall and American officials argued for diplomacy rather than hostile acts, showing a commitment to diplomatic discussions over conflict.

However, the American reaction to Castro's position in Cuba could suggest that the USA was still thinking of conflict. Khrushchev was alarmed by the presence of American nuclear weapons in NATO countries and Kennedy's request to build up the American military was seen as a hostile act and a threat to the peace by the USSR. When Castro asked for Soviet assistance and protection, the Soviets therefore responded positively and became involved in nuclear weapons installations in Cuba in the summer and autumn of 1962. This was the reverse of diplomatic discussion.

However, the Missile Crisis demonstrated the commitment of Soviet and US leadership to use diplomacy to resolve disputes, rather than military conflict. When the USA identified the installations, the Americans and Soviets came close to nuclear war. The USA sent an ultimatum to the Soviets and there were 13 days of tension during which Kennedy and Khrushchev engaged in a series of conversations. Ultimately the USSR agreed to dismantle and remove its weapons from Cuba and the USA made a similar (but secret) agreement regarding its missiles in Turkey, and agreed that it would not try to overthrow the government of Fidel Castro. Diplomatic discussion triumphed over armed conflict.

EXAMINER TIP



There is a lot of relevant information in this section, with some good links and balanced comments. However, it is primarily narrative in style and the last sentence on Vietnam needed further explanation.

EXAMINER TIP



It would be useful if the paragraph started with a sentence that was explicitly linked to the question to provide an argument. The points made here are again linked but undeveloped.

EXAMINER TIP



This paragraph is more analytical, balanced and more clearly related to the question.

EXAMINER TIP



This paragraph demonstrates a clear understanding of the issues and advances an argument with concise and appropriate supporting information.



Although the USA and USSR often acted as if they were willing to engage in conflict in the years 1958 to 1963, the dangers of nuclear war made both sides unwilling to confront the other directly. Neither the USA nor the USSR wanted to use nuclear weapons, so they relied on diplomatic means to solve disputes. These decisions led to the period of détente, a relaxing of tensions during the Cold War after 1962. The fear of nuclear war and 'mutually assured destruction' meant that the two superpowers turned towards peace.

EXAMINER TIP



The conclusion provides a strong and well-focused judgement on the question that is largely consistent with the arguments presented.

OVERALL COMMENT

The essay is well-focused on the question and there is a clear attempt to provide a balanced response. There is a good awareness of events and developments in the time period, although that knowledge is sometimes used descriptively, linking to rather than directly supporting arguments. Furthermore, although Vietnam is mentioned as an area of dispute, there is little detail on this.

Nevertheless, an argument emerges as aggressive actions and diplomatic responses are considered, which together with the reasoned conclusion would make this answer worthy of a Level 4 mark.

OVER TO YOU



Give yourself 40 minutes to answer this question on your own. Then review the Examiner Tips on these pages to check whether you have avoided making the same mistakes as the sample student answer.

- ☐ Did you explicitly link each of your paragraphs to the question?
- ☐ Did you make sure you fully developed your arguments to explain how your evidence supports your overall view?
- ☐ Did you include a judgement that you sustained from the introduction through to the conclusion?

Go back and look at chapters 9, 11 and 12 to help you refresh your knowledge of relations between the USSR and the USA in the years 1958–63.