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Revision

Zero hour? The postwar reconstruction of West Germany

Nicholas Fellows

Consider the following question, then look at the sample student response and the examiner's commentary (in red).

Question

How successfully did Adenauer and his governments deal with the problems he faced in the period from 1949 to 1963?

Student answer with commentary

Adenauer became Chancellor in 1949 and faced a number of problems, both domestic and foreign. Although he dominated the political scene until 1963 there were political problems, particularly towards the end of his chancellorship. Foreign challenges were also a serious issue, particularly his relationship with both the West and the USSR. However, in 1949 perhaps the greatest challenge facing his administration was the economic situation, particularly the low productivity of both agriculture and industry. However, the sheer length of time he stayed in office and his ability to win four elections during this period suggests that he was successful in addressing the problems he faced.

The opening is strong and the response identifies the problems that Adenauer's governments would face in the period from 1949–63. It offers a view as to how successful the government was in the final sentence. The question requires candidates to cover a range of issues and therefore examiners would not expect detailed coverage of each issue when analysing whether the government was successful.

The most serious problem facing Adenauer's government in 1949 was the economy. Food production was only 51% of the level it had been in 1938 and industrial output was just 38%. However, during his period in office industrial production rose so that by 1959 it was nearly 80% higher than it had been in 1950. Furthermore, growth averaged 8% per year, unemployment fell from 8.1 million in 1950 to just 0.5 million in 1965 and incomes had risen by 400%. These figures certainly justify the term 'economic miracle' that is often applied to the performance of the West German economy under Adenauer's tenure. Although he was helped by the availability of raw materials, the less damaging reparations imposed on the West, cheap labour from the East, Marshall Aid, and the demand created by the Korean War, the policies of Erhard played a significant role because he created a 'social market economy'. This produced 'prosperity for all' and provides clear evidence that despite the advantages West Germany had, the economic problems faced in 1949 were overcome, creating the strongest economy in Europe.

The response suggests that the economy was the most serious problem and explains why, before going on to show that they were very successful in dealing with the problem. The level of detail in terms of figures to support the argument is impressive and shows a candidate in command of the topic. There is some balance in the discussion – the response suggests that West Germany had a number of advantages but is still able to argue that the challenges were overcome.

Despite overcoming economic problems, social inequality did remain. The distribution of wealth remained unequal. Although there were housing improvements, with some 4 million built by 1957 and the rise in wages and availability of consumer goods, there was little social change. The old elites still dominated the country and when economic growth slowed down in the 1960s, tensions re-emerged as there was growing electoral support at a local level for right-wing groups and unrest from the left, often led by the young who had new ideas. Similarly, the government's handling of the re-integration of former Nazis was not always well managed. Former Nazis continued to work as civil servants, in the judiciary and in universities, and pensions could be claimed for service to the Nazi state. While this helped to create stability and ensured they were not alienated, it meant that few felt shame or feared retribution for their past actions.

The social problems facing the governments are explained and again there is a balanced discussion as to how successfully these were managed. The response covers a wide range of issues and there is some precise support for the argument. There is some judgement as to how successful it was.

The government's record in foreign policy was one of success. Unlike the period after the First World War, Adenauer was able to reintegrate West Germany into Western Europe and ensure that it was treated as an equal. Rapprochement with France and the rebuilding of Germany's reputation in Europe allowed it to join the OEEC, ECSC, EEC and NATO and therefore it was not the outcast it had been in 1919. However, success in overcoming difficulties in the West was not matched by relations with the USSR. Not only did it not recognise East Germany as a separate state, but it refused to recognise those states that did. Known as the Hallstein doctrine, it was not abandoned until the 1970s. Adenauer was also unable to reconcile the USSR to German rearmament and even at home the creation of a German army created fear. However, Adenauer did visit Moscow and negotiated the return of former POWs. Despite this, Adenauer had more success in his relations with the West than the East and ensured that it was indispensable to the West.

The response displays a wide range of knowledge of foreign affairs and again produces a balanced and well-supported argument that reaches a judgement as to the success. The comparison with the situation at the end of the First World War is a particularly useful point for the argument.

Adenauer's political success in winning four elections suggests that he did not face political problems. There was little opposition, particularly in the 1950s, and elections became little more than a series of plebiscites in favour of the government. However, with a disappearing opposition, it removed the concept of popular self-government, although supporters of the regime argued that it led to responsible self-government and ensured that Germany would not return to the horrors of the 1930s. Despite this, problems did emerge in the 1960s and these were not successfully handled. Adenauer's decision not to run for President in 1959 damaged his reputation and this was further reinforced by his failure to intervene over the Berlin Wall. The government's handling of the Der Spiegel crisis only added to the difficulties. The raiding of offices and arresting of some of the journalists led to an outcry

as the government appeared to be acting like a dictatorship. Its failure to deal with the problem is clearly evident in that ultimately it led to the resignation of Adenauer.

Once again, there is a good range of material and a balanced discussion. There is detailed knowledge used to support the argument and the comparison with the 1930s is effective. The final sentence does reach a judgement on the issue.

The government was successful in dealing with two of the major problems it faced: the economic difficulties and relations with the West. Both were clearly overcome and the position of West Germany both within Western Europe and in terms of its international position were clearly strengthened. However, social issues and relations with the USSR were less successfully managed, as inequalities remained and the USSR feared a resurgent West Germany, particularly one armed and closely allied to the West. Although political challenges appeared to have been resolved with four successive election victories, it was ultimately the government's failure to handle the problems that emerged from 1959 onwards that brought about its downfall in 1963. It can therefore be argued that after considerable initial success in the 1950s, the government was less successful in its final years and was ultimately unable to solve all the problems it faced.

The conclusion is balanced and builds on the interim judgements at the end of each paragraph. It is able to differentiate between areas of success and failure and does offer an overall judgement based on success over time. The supported conclusion and interim judgements – although the latter could be more developed – take the response into the top level of the mark scheme.

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