

Improve your grade

The USA in the 1920s

A land of prosperity?

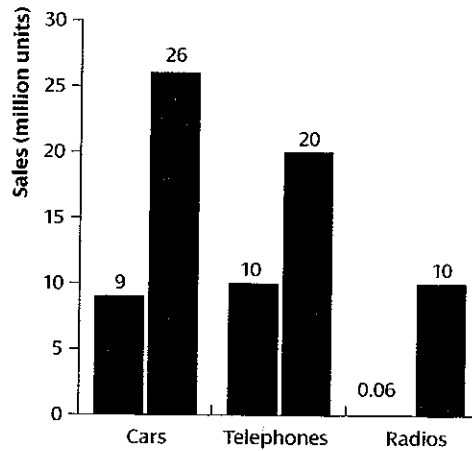
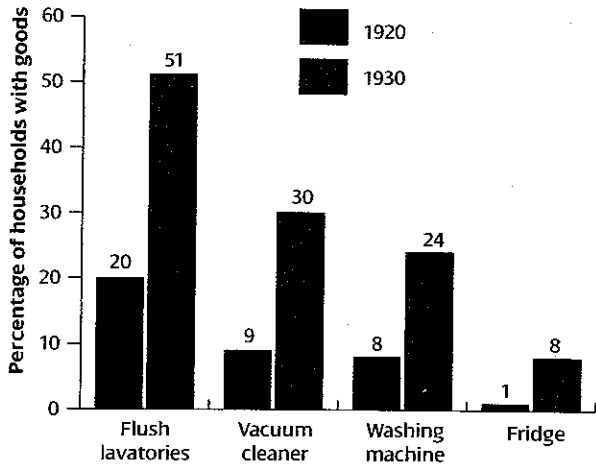
The use of knowledge — that is, ‘to recall, select and deploy knowledge’ — is the main assessment objective in GCSE history. Its overall weighting for the examination is 60%. This means that, to achieve a high grade, you will have to display a good knowledge of the topic areas you have studied by relating that knowledge

to the questions set. However, knowledge of events is only part of the process of being a good historian. That knowledge must be used to *explain* historical events and to *make judgements* on them. It is this that makes history such an interesting subject: there are no right or wrong answers, only interpretations of past events. This article gives

SOURCE A

‘Tin Lizzies’, awaiting delivery from their factory, 1925



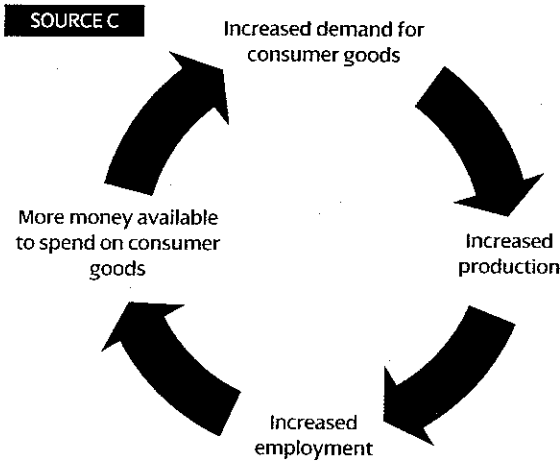


SOURCE B

The increase in consumer goods in the 1920s

SOURCE C

The cycle of prosperity



you guidance on how to apply knowledge by looking at an extended written question on the USA in the 1920s.

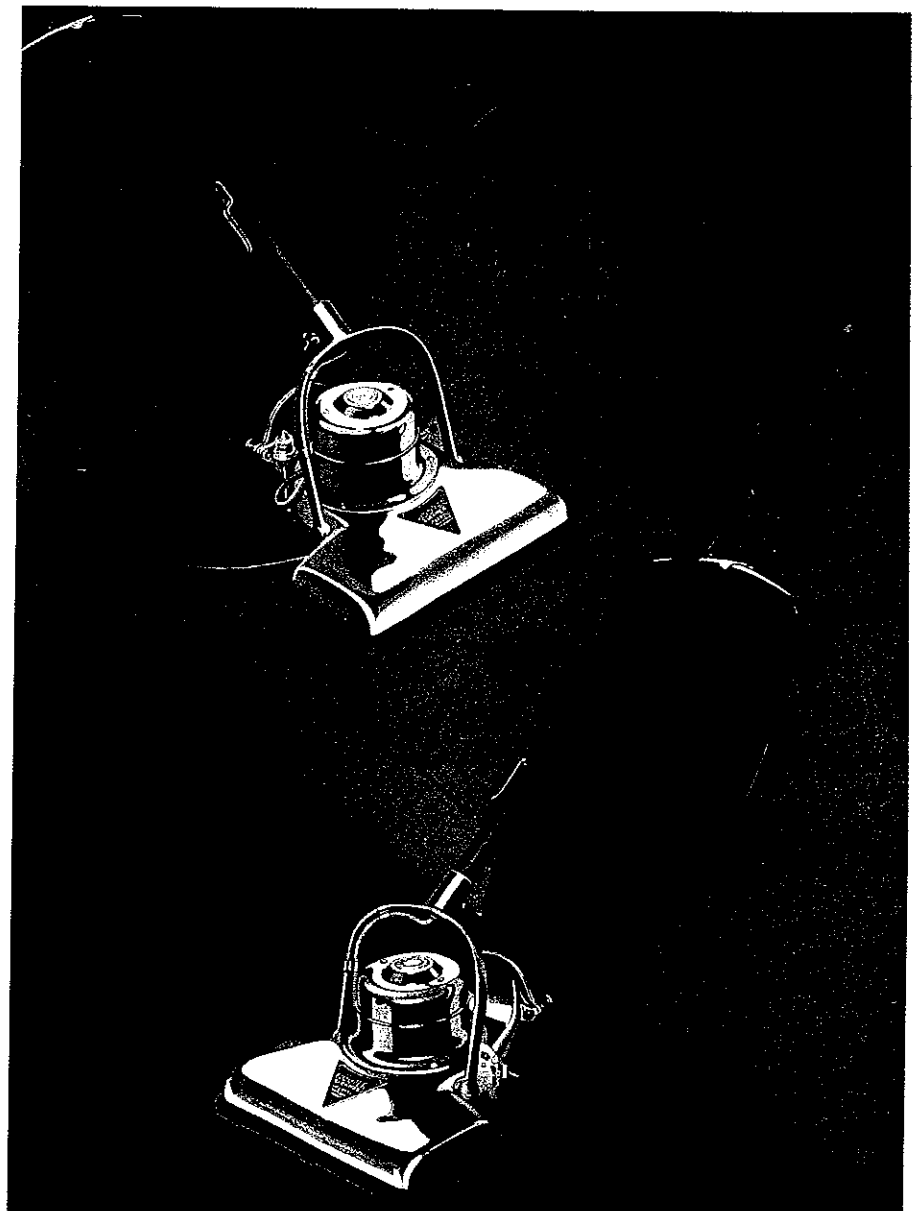
Key issues to explain the extent of prosperity in the USA in the 1920s

During the 1920s the USA experienced a 'boom' — an increasing economic prosperity. The reasons for the boom help to explain why millions of Americans were able to benefit from it and become richer. However, these reasons also explain why the boom was not shared by every American. Millions of Americans continued to live in poverty.

Why was there economic prosperity in the USA in the 1920s?

In the 1920s the USA was the richest country in the world. This was partly because the First World War had destroyed or weakened the economies of its rivals. There were also a number of reasons from within the USA that explain the prosperity.

- Mass production and the assembly line allowed goods to be made more quickly and cheaply and the number of goods produced to rise rapidly.
- The motorcar industry is the best example of the use of mass production. Henry Ford was the first to use it with the Model T Ford. Increased production of motorcars caused demand to rise in other industries such as oil, rubber and glass.



SOURCE D

Advertisement for a vacuum cleaner from 1926

- Mass production was used in consumer goods-based industries manufacturing washing machines, vacuum cleaners, refrigerators and telephones. The process lowered the price and thereby increased the availability of such goods.



SOURCE E

A cartoon from the 1920s commenting on the situation of farmers

- The tariff policy of the Republican governments, which increased the prices of goods made by the USA's economic rivals, protected these new industries from foreign competition.

Why did many Americans share in this prosperity in the 1920s?

- This was a time of lower taxes and higher wages for many Americans.

SOURCE F

South-eastern farms are the smallest in the USA. Family incomes are exceptionally low, the sickness and death rates are unusually high. Even in southern cities, from 60 to 88% of families on low incomes are not spending enough on food to purchase an adequate diet.

From a US government report of 1938

- Mass-produced goods were cheaper to buy because production costs fell. For example, in 1911 a Model T Ford cost \$1,200; in 1930 the cost was \$295.
- Americans were able to buy consumer goods on hire purchase (HP) — buying on credit. Mail order catalogues, which used HP schemes, further stimulated the demand for consumer goods.
- Americans invested in companies by buying shares. They could do this by buying 'on the margin' — borrowing to buy shares and paying the loans back from the profits when the share prices went up.
- All this created in Americans a feeling of confidence that encouraged them to buy goods by cash or by credit. A 'cycle of prosperity' had been created that brought further prosperity (see Source C).

Why did many Americans not share in the economic prosperity?

Some sections of the population continued to live in poverty.

- *Farmers:* improved agricultural machinery produced too much food, so prices fell. This meant that farmers' incomes also fell. Many were evicted from their land because they could not afford to keep up with their mortgage or rent payments (see Source E). Farm labourers, too, found themselves out of work. Half of the American people worked in some area of agriculture.
- *Black Americans:* lost many jobs from the slump in farming and in their jobs. This was especially true of sharecroppers in the South. Large numbers of black Americans moved from the south to the north in search of work, but any jobs they obtained were often the lowest paid. This was also the case for many immigrants.
- *Workers in older industries:* coalmines closed as people began to use new forms of power such as gas, oil and electricity. Textile factories closed as demand fell. Therefore there were millions of Americans who were unable to get credit and buy goods or shares by HP, mail order or on the margin.

Question

'The 1920s was a period of great economic prosperity for the American people.'

How far do you agree with this interpretation? Explain your answer.

Some points for you to consider

- Think about what knowledge is required to answer the question. This is a question about the economic conditions of the American people. So, other aspects of the USA in the 1920s that you know about are not relevant, for example, prohibition or the Ku Klux Klan.
- Look carefully at what the question is asking you to do. It requires you to assess the accuracy of the view presented in the opening sentence. The stronger approach will be to produce a *balanced* answer — one that shows that, while many

Americans achieved prosperity in the 1920s, many others did not share in this wealth. By adopting this approach you will have satisfied the requirements of the question, which asks for 'how far'.

- If your answer only describes the reasons for prosperity, such as mass production or the consumer boom, you will not have made the explanation or judgement required by the question. This will prevent you from reaching the higher levels.
- Leave yourself time to answer the extended written question — at least 20 minutes.

Now look at the three answers below. What are their strengths and weaknesses as answers to the question set?

Answer A

Mass production brought great changes to the USA. Goods could be produced faster and this meant that they could be produced cheaper. A wide range of goods was mass-produced: motor cars, fridges, washing machines and vacuum cleaners. The fall in prices of these goods coincided with an increase in wages and a lowering of income tax for many Americans. This allowed them to buy the new consumer goods for cash. Many Americans on lower wages could also take advantage of the prosperity by buying on credit — HP. This meant that goods could be bought by monthly payments rather than as one lump sum. Shares could even be bought in this way 'on the margin'. All this brought a feeling of confidence to the American people and, encouraged by advertising, millions took advantage of the prosperity.

However, not all Americans were able to share in this prosperity. Farmers, almost half of the American people, suffered from the overproduction of food. This brought a fall in prices and a reduction in profits. As a result many could not afford their mortgages or rents and were evicted from their land. Old industries like coal and textiles declined in the 1920s and workers lost their jobs. Black people were hit by the slump in agriculture. In any case, they were the poorest people in America and were unlikely to be able to buy the new consumer products.

So, while many Americans did take advantage of the economic prosperity, many others continued in poverty. The USA became a divided country.

Assessment: Level 4, 10 out of 10 marks

This is a well-balanced answer with an excellent focus on the question. A brief introduction covers the reasons for the prosperity — the candidate realises that this is not the main thrust of the question.

The two following paragraphs on the effect of the prosperity on the American people are well developed. Both sides of the argument are covered and, more importantly, explained. The candidate clearly understands why some Americans could take advantage of the prosperity and others could not. The conclusion is short, but the candidate has already told us all that is required by the question.

Answer B

Prosperity came to America for a number of reasons. The war had weakened America's economic rivals, especially Germany. The development of mass production, begun before the War, now increased. The motorcar industry, especially Ford, was the first to use mass production with assembly lines. Then other consumer goods began to use mass production — fridges, washing machines, radios. Because mass production was quicker in producing goods, more goods could be produced each day. It also meant that they could be produced more cheaply. The price of a Model T Ford fell by over three-quarters.

All this meant that many more Americans could now afford to buy these luxury goods. They were helped by hire purchase — paying by monthly instalments. Millions could share in the prosperity. However, not all Americans were able to do so. Poorer Americans like farmers, black people and immigrants did not have the money to buy the new goods or borrow on HP to buy them.

Assessment: Level 3, 6 out of 10 marks

The candidate is clearly knowledgeable about the topic. There is a detailed explanation of mass production in the first paragraph that shows good understanding. However, the answer does not relate well to the question set. The answer has focused on why America was prosperous and not on how far Americans shared in the prosperity. If the answer had been limited to the first paragraph, the mark would have been in the lower Level 2 range.

The second paragraph gives some content that is relevant to the question. It lacks detailed explanation, but there is an understanding of the effects and a balanced conclusion. This takes the answer into Level 3 — just.

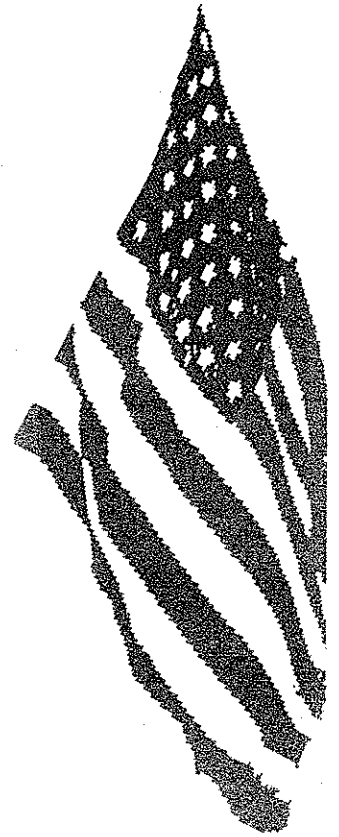
Answer C

Some Americans became prosperous in the 1920s. Others did not. Those that prospered were the ones who were already rich and had good jobs with good wages.

More Americans were also able to borrow money and pay back each week or month — this is called hire purchase. All these people were able to buy new luxury goods like fridges and washing machines. However, there were also many Americans who missed out on the prosperity because they were too poor. They included farmers and farm labourers and black people.

Assessment: Level 2, 3 out of 10 marks

The candidate understands the question and makes an attempt at a balanced response. What is missing is depth of both knowledge and explanation. There is no linking of the prosperity with mass production techniques. There is only a limited explanation of why some Americans prospered with reference to hire purchase. There is description, not explanation, of those who did not share in the prosperity. Credit is given for a general understanding of the topic but the lack of explanation seriously limits the quality of the answer.



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