

triumphs Show

Righting the Revolution: Eisenstein meets Figs in the Year 9 classroom

If asking Year 9 to read the work of a historian seems challenging, then how about helping Year 9 to evaluate the work of a historian, to compare his interpretation of an event to that of a film director and then to use his work to contribute to an online discussion of the film?!

It was period 5 on a wet Wednesday afternoon deep into the winter term. Year 9 were even more difficult than usual. Being cooped up inside at lunch, without supervision, had not helped the situation. What was I going to do with this untamed bunch? Put on a trusted video? Play historical hangman? Shout at Kieran ... again? No. We were going to dissect the written prose of an academic historian and put his interpretation to the test. Was I optimistic or just plain daft?

9A are a mixed ability group, legendary for their unruliness. Were they really going to engage for fifty minutes, without doing any writing? Of course they were. I had both Orlando Figs and Serge Eisenstein working for me!

Setting the scene

A famous 1937 painting depicting the storming of the Winter Palace was projected onto the whiteboard as they came in. What words could they use to describe the scene? *Brave, heroic, noisy* came the reply.

Next I flashed up a poster for Eisenstein's famous 1927 film *October* (Figure 1). Explaining that it had been made ten years after the real event, I played a short clip in which the Bolsheviks were preparing to take the Palace. What words would they use to describe this scene? *Determined, well hard, well ordered* came the responses. They were in the flow of it now. A picture was emerging of a heroic event in twentieth century.

Confusing the issue

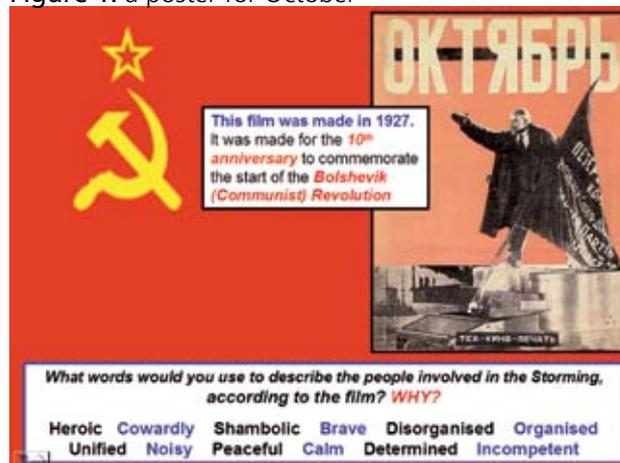
It was at this point I threw them the googly. Taking out my well thumbed copy of Orlando Figs' *A People's Tragedy*, I turned to page 485 and read Figs' version of events. What words would they use to describe his account of the storming? *Disorganised, rubbish, a disaster*. Eh? It's totally different to the film? Confused faces. Either the filmmaker or the historian was lying. Before we could decide exactly who the liar was, we had to take a closer look at Figs work. Thanks to Christine Counsell I now know what a subordinate clause is.¹ After spotting a couple of modern examples, so do Year 9. Could they find Figs' subordinate clause?

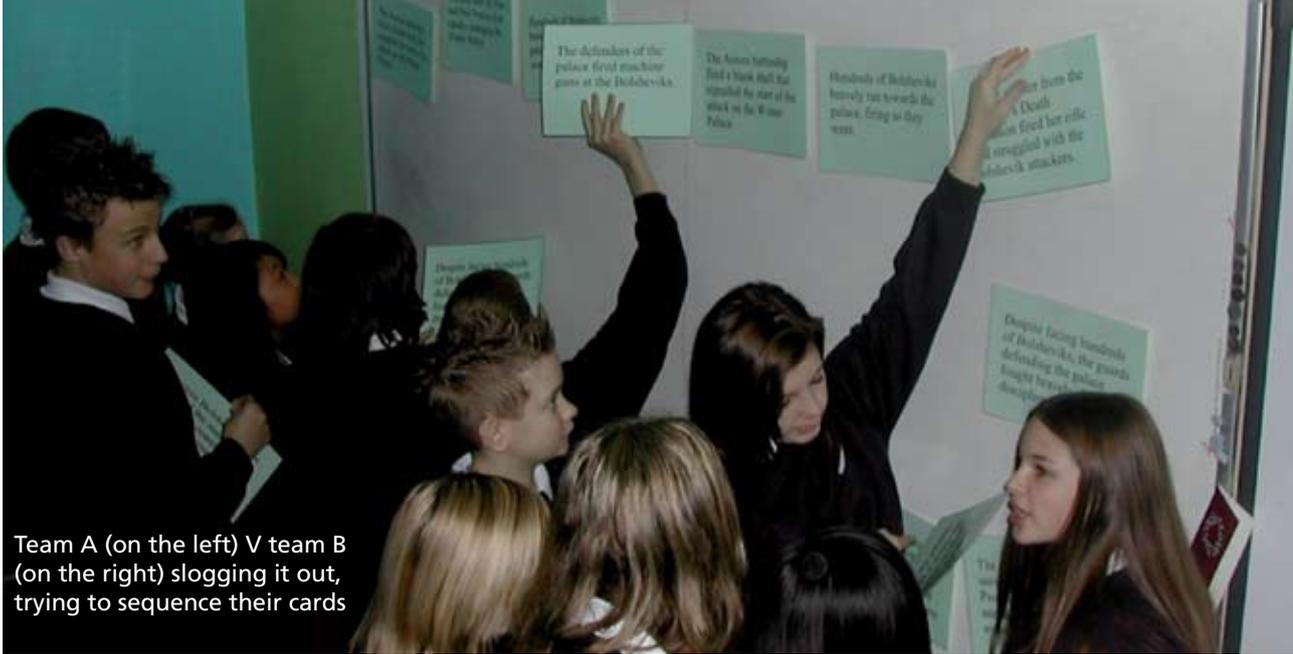
*The first major hold up was the late arrival of the sailors, without whom the Bolsheviks would not go ahead. Then there was another, **even more frustrating**, problem. The assault on the Winter Palace was due to begin with the heavy field guns of the Peter and Paul Fortress, but these were discovered to be rusty museum pieces which could not be fired.²*

Calvin underlined it on the board. Good work. Hold on, how does Figs know if the rusty guns not firing was *even more frustrating* than the late arrival of the sailors? Answer: he doesn't for sure. *He's leading us on sir*. After spotting examples of emotive language in the account, they were beginning to see that Figs might be using words to distort, rather than tell the truth. I drew their attention to the tag line on the front cover, 'award winning historian' *He should send it back sir*, exclaimed Nicole. What? *His award!* Are you sure Nicole? Don't be too hasty....

Our fifty minutes were up, and they had not written a word. The class had to decide whose version was closest to the truth. They were split. Half thought the film must be more accurate, because? *It's a film*. Others were backing the historian (phew,

Figure 1: a poster for October





Team A (on the left) v team B (on the right) slogging it out, trying to sequence their cards

some of them have been listening for the last two years). Next lesson we were going to find out ‘for sure,’ and I was going to dispel a few myths about moving pictures.

Judging the evidence

Lesson 2 began with a class challenge. Who was the more attentive, team 1 or team 2? Each team member was given a large description card. Could they watch Eisenstein’s famous storming scene and place their cards on the wall, as they appeared in the film before the other team? Yes they could, give or take the odd mistake, and they also saw how dramatic and brave Eisenstein made things seem. So was he telling the truth, or was Figes’ fiasco version more accurate? Giving them a selection of sources, and a specially designed ticking and crossing system, they checked (see Figure 2). By the end of the lesson it had become clear that it was Eisenstein who was the bad guy, and Figes, unlike them, had done his homework. Nicole had the good grace to let Figes keep his 1997 award. Let’s face it, it is a great book.

Beating the buffs

Lesson 3 began with a vote: Who has ever sent messages over the internet? Every hand went up. This was our task today. They were excited, thinking they were going to be allowed to ‘message’ something questionable to their peers. I flashed up a message posted on the the Internet Movie Database forum (it’s a film buffs website): **How much of Eisenstein’s October is propaganda, and how much is history?** They were a little surprised, and luckily not too disappointed. I showed them a response that I had written which strongly argued that the film was indeed factually accurate. Their challenge was to beat the teacher. They needed to argue that the closing scenes were propaganda, and back up their argument with evidence – and they did too, for the rest of the lesson and most of the next one! Although he needed a lot of help with the writing, I hadn’t shouted at Kieran for three lessons. Unfortunately, we couldn’t post our responses because our access to this ‘dangerous’ website is blocked.

When the term ended, we did play historical hangman. They got both of my clues easily. What were they? Serge Eisenstein and Orlando Figes.

Richard McFahn is an AST and teaches history at Fernhill School and Language College Farnborough

Figure 2: a chart for comparing interpretations

Film shows	A Orlando Figes	B Orlando Figes	C Eye-witness	D Eye-witness
The Aurora battleship fired a blank shell that signalled the start of the attack on the Winter Palace.				
Cannons from the Peter and Paul Fortress fired rapidly, damaging the Winter Palace.				
Hundreds of Bolsheviks ran bravely towards the Palace, firing as they went.				
The Women’s Death Battalion bravely defended the Winter Palace from the attackers.				
A brave Bolshevik sailor climbed the main gates, urging his comrades on. He threw a grenade that opened the gates.				
Despite facing hundreds of Bolsheviks, the guards inside the Palace fought bravely, firing in disciplined rows.				

REFERENCES

- Counsell, C. (2003) ‘Who cares about Charles I?’ Cunning Plan in *Teaching History 111, Reading History Edition*
- Figes, O. (1997) *A people’s tragedy: The Russian Revolution 1891-1924* London: Jonathan Cape