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EXPLAININGHISTORY.ORG — FOR TEACHERS

# AO3 Interpretation Teaching Pack

*Russia / Soviet Union — Four Historiographical Debates*

For use with AQA · OCR · WJEC · Eduqas · Period covered: 1855–1964 (extended to 1991 for WJEC/Eduqas)

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## The Nature and Causes of the 1917 Revolution

### Historian A: Richard Pipes

*The Russian Revolution (1990)*

Pipes argues that the 1917 Revolution was not the product of deep social or economic forces but was instead a political coup engineered by a small, disciplined revolutionary party. Russia in 1917 was not in a state of terminal social breakdown — the economy, though strained by war, retained significant capacity, and the peasantry was not ideologically revolutionary. What brought down the Tsarist order and subsequently the Provisional Government was the organisational genius and ruthless will of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, combined with catastrophic failures of political leadership at the top. Pipes is sceptical of the idea that mass discontent translated automatically into Bolshevik support; rather, the Bolsheviks manipulated popular grievances they did not share. For Pipes, the Revolution was essentially an act of seizure — a minority takeover that imposed a particular political project onto a society that had not chosen it. Agency lies firmly with political actors, and the Revolution was not historically inevitable but a contingent catastrophe brought about by ideologically driven men.

[VERIFY before publication]

### Historian B: Edward Acton

*Rethinking the Russian Revolution (1990)*

Acton situates the Revolution within long-term structural developments and genuine mass agency. He argues that 1917 cannot be understood primarily as the work of a Leninist vanguard but must be seen as an expression of deep popular grievances rooted in autocratic political culture, the uneven impact of industrialisation, and the catastrophic effects of the First World War on an already-strained social order. Acton takes seriously the evidence of popular radicalism — in the factories, in the army, in the villages — as an independent force that the Bolsheviks harnessed rather than created. His work engages fairly with competing liberal, Soviet, and revisionist historiographical traditions. For Acton, any account of 1917 that neglects the role of ordinary Russians is fundamentally incomplete. The Revolution was not done *to* the Russian people; in significant respects, it emerged *from* them.

[VERIFY before publication]

### EXAM-STYLE QUESTION

**"How far do Historians A and B differ in their interpretations of the causes of the 1917 Revolution in Russia?"**

Use both extracts and your own knowledge to explain your answer.

**Board note:** AQA asks "How far do these two historians differ...?"; OCR may ask which is more convincing; WJEC/Eduqas often phrases this as "How valid is Interpretation A compared to Interpretation B?" — check current question stems.

### MARK SCHEME GUIDANCE

#### Level 3

Identifies the clear point of difference (top-down political agency vs. bottom-up social forces) and supports it with reference to both extracts. Some own knowledge deployed but not consistently linked to the interpretations.

#### Level 4

Analyses the difference with precision — Pipes foregrounds Lenin/Bolshevik contingency; Acton stresses structural preconditions and mass agency. Own knowledge contextualises and tests both (e.g. worker soviets and army mutinies support Acton; Bolshevik organisational discipline supports a qualified Pipes).

#### Level 5

Additionally considers *why* historians differ — contextualising Pipes within Cold War liberalism and his émigré background, Acton within the revisionist social history movement. Assesses degree of difference and whether it is one of emphasis or fundamental principle.

### KEY COMPARISON POINTS

- Role of Lenin/Bolshevik agency vs. structural/social forces
- Whether popular discontent was *precondition* or *cause*
- Treatment of the Provisional Government's failures
- The First World War as accelerant

### EXPECTED OWN KNOWLEDGE

- February vs. October 1917 as distinct events
- The April Theses, July Days, Kornilov Affair
- Role of soviets, workers' and soldiers' committees
- Peasant land seizures (agrarian revolution)
- Provisional Government errors: continuing the war; land reform delays

### COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS TO WATCH FOR

- Treating February and October as a single event
- Assuming Bolshevik popularity = mass ideological conversion (rather than war-weariness and bread/land/peace slogans)
- Conflating Pipes's political conservatism with factual inaccuracy

### PROVENANCE PROMPTS

#### Historian A (Pipes)

1. Pipes was a Russian-born émigré who fled Soviet Russia. How might this personal

#### Historian B (Acton)

1. Acton writes from within the British revisionist social history tradition. How does this shape

background shape his moral and political assessment of the Revolution?

2. *The Russian Revolution* was published in 1990, as the Soviet Union was collapsing. How might this context have influenced both its reception and Pipes's framing?
3. Pipes draws heavily on political and diplomatic sources. What perspectives might be underrepresented in an account that prioritises elite political decision-making?
4. Pipes served on the National Security Council under Reagan. Does this suggest any potential ideological orientation, and how should students account for this?

what he looks for as evidence?

2. *Rethinking the Russian Revolution* is also a historiographical overview. Does the aim of engaging fairly with multiple viewpoints affect how far it advances its own thesis?
  3. What sources would a social historian like Acton prioritise that a political historian like Pipes might overlook?
  4. Acton's book was also published in 1990. In what ways does the end of the Cold War and the opening of Soviet archives shape what historians thought possible to argue?
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## The Consolidation of Bolshevik Power — Red Terror and the Civil War

### Historian A: Orlando Figes

*A People's Tragedy (1996)*

Figes presents the Bolshevik consolidation of power as a story of mounting brutality in which ideological extremism and the exigencies of civil war reinforced one another in a vicious spiral. He argues that the Red Terror was not simply a reactive measure forced by White counter-revolution and foreign intervention, but reflected deep features of Bolshevik political culture — the willingness to use violence as an instrument of social transformation, contempt for democratic procedure, and Lenin's view of coercion as a legitimate tool of revolutionary governance. Figes draws on memoir, local records, and peasant testimony to reconstruct the human cost, and is sensitive to the complexity of peasant responses — neither simply pro-Bolshevik nor pro-White. The overall portrait is of a revolution that consumed not only its enemies but the popular energies that had originally sustained it, leaving a traumatised society subject to an increasingly monopolistic state.

[VERIFY before publication]

### Historian B: Evan Mawdsley

*The Russian Civil War (1987, revised 2000)*

Mawdsley's military-political history emphasises the military and logistical dimensions of Bolshevik victory rather than ideological or cultural factors. He argues that Bolshevik success is explicable primarily through their control of the central Russian heartland, access to the industrial and population resources of the major cities, their ability to mobilise a conscript Red Army, and the critical failures of the White movement — its political disunity, inability to win peasant support, and counter-productive violence. Mawdsley does not ignore the Terror but contextualises it within military necessity and wartime state-building rather than foregrounding it as an expression of Bolshevik ideological character. His is fundamentally a work of military history that takes seriously the contingency of the outcome: the Bolsheviks could have lost, and understanding why they did not requires attending to military and political factors.

[VERIFY before publication]

### EXAM-STYLE QUESTION

**"How far do Historians A and B differ in their interpretations of how the Bolsheviks consolidated power in the period 1917–1921?"**

*Use both extracts and your own knowledge to explain your answer.*

**Board note:** OCR may ask students to consider which interpretation is better supported by evidence. WJEC/Eduqas may frame this as evaluating the relative validity of the two interpretations.

## MARK SCHEME GUIDANCE

### Level 3

Identifies the central contrast — Figes emphasising Bolshevik terror/ideology, Mawdsley emphasising military contingency and White weaknesses — and references both extracts.

### Level 4

Analyses with precision: Figes treats terror as structurally integral to Bolshevism; Mawdsley treats it as contextually explicable. Own knowledge includes specific episodes (Tambov rebellion, Cheka operations, Trotsky's Red Army, White failures in Ukraine/Siberia).

### Level 5

Contextualises the historians' methods and asks about the limits of each — Figes's reliance on memoir; Mawdsley's military focus and what it leaves aside. Assesses whether the two interpretations are as opposed as they seem.

## KEY COMPARISON POINTS

- Ideological determinism vs. military/political contingency
- Red Terror as planned policy vs. reactive emergency measure
- Role of White weakness vs. Red strength
- The relationship between mass violence and state-building

## EXPECTED OWN KNOWLEDGE

- Cheka and Red Terror (1918); assassination of the Romanovs
- Trotsky and creation of the Red Army (conscription, ex-Tsarist officers)
- War Communism — grain requisitioning, peasant revolts (Tambov, Kronstadt)
- White movement divisions (Denikin, Kolchak, Yudenich) and political failures
- Foreign intervention and its limited practical impact

## COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS TO WATCH FOR

- Assuming the Bolsheviks were always likely to win the Civil War
- Conflating Cheka operations with later Stalinist terror without differentiation
- Ignoring the peasantry as an active (if ambivalent) force

## PROVENANCE PROMPTS

### Historian A (Figes)

1. Figes draws heavily on personal memoir and regional records. What are the advantages and risks of memoir as evidence when reconstructing events as traumatic as the Civil War?

### Historian B (Mawdsley)

1. Mawdsley is primarily a military historian. What aspects of the Civil War experience — social, economic, gendered — might be underweighted in an account that prioritises military factors?

2. *A People's Tragedy* was a bestselling popular history as well as an academic work. Might the demands of narrative accessibility have shaped the moral contours of his argument?
  3. Figes wrote before the full opening of Russian archives in the 1990s. How might subsequent archival research revise or complicate his conclusions?
  4. Figes later faced controversy over anonymous reviews of rivals' books. What is the difference between assessing a historian's conduct and assessing the quality of their argument?
2. The first edition appeared in 1987, before the Soviet archives were opened. How might access to new material have affected his analysis?
  3. A military-historical approach tends to treat violence as instrumentally rational. Does this framework risk normalising the Terror rather than subjecting it to moral analysis?
  4. Mawdsley's relative detachment from moral judgement contrasts with Figes's more emotive register. Is detachment a scholarly virtue here, or does it risk obscuring the human cost?
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## The Nature of Stalinism — Intentionalism vs. Structuralism

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### Historian A: Robert Conquest

*The Great Terror (1968, revised 1990)*

Conquest is the foundational intentionalist account of the Stalinist terror. His central argument is that the purges of the 1930s — encompassing the show trials, the mass operations against peasants and national minorities, and the decimation of the Red Army officer corps — were the deliberate product of Stalin's will. For Conquest, Stalin was not primarily responding to institutional pressures or bureaucratic dynamics; he was pursuing a calculated strategy to eliminate all possible sources of opposition and establish a totalitarian personal dictatorship. Conquest draws on émigré testimony, Western diplomatic reports, and (after 1990) newly available Soviet archival material to build a picture of systematic, centrally directed mass murder. His revised edition incorporated archival findings that broadly confirmed his earlier estimates of the death toll. Conquest's Stalin is a rational monster: someone who knew what he was doing, planned it, and achieved it.

[VERIFY before publication]

### Historian B: J. Arch Getty

*Origins of the Great Purges (1985)*

Getty's structuralist account offered a revisionist challenge to the Conquest orthodoxy. Getty argues that the Great Terror cannot be explained as the product of a single directing will but must be understood in terms of the chaotic, dysfunctional, and weakly institutionalised nature of the Stalinist state. He emphasises the degree to which the party apparatus was fragmented and subject to competing bureaucratic pressures. The purges emerged partly from below — from local party officials pursuing personal vendettas, fulfilling quotas, or responding to central directives in ways that escalated beyond central control. Getty does not deny Stalin's role but argues that portraying him as the sole author of events misrepresents how Soviet political institutions actually functioned. His later collaborative work with Oleg Naumov (*The Road to Terror*, 1999) maintains a structuralist emphasis while acknowledging greater central direction than his earlier work allowed.

[VERIFY before publication]

### EXAM-STYLE QUESTION

**"How far do Historians A and B differ in their interpretations of the nature of Stalinist terror in the 1930s?"**

*Use both extracts and your own knowledge to explain your answer.*

**Board note:** All boards apply standard AO3 format here. OCR may ask for a judgment about which interpretation is better supported.

### MARK SCHEME GUIDANCE

**Level 3** Identifies the intentionalist/structuralist contrast and references both extracts.

**Level 4** Analyses with precision: Conquest's Stalin is a purposive agent executing a plan; Getty's purges emerge from systemic dysfunction and were not fully controlled from above. Own knowledge includes show trials, NKVD Order 00447, the anti-Trotskyite campaigns, and Kirov's murder as test cases.

**Level 5** Reflects on methodological stakes — what kinds of sources produce intentionalist vs. structuralist conclusions. Considers post-archival synthesis (Khlevniuk) and assesses whether Conquest or Getty was more prescient in light of archival findings after 1991.

#### KEY COMPARISON POINTS

- Top-down planning vs. systemic dysfunction/local initiative
- Stalin's personal role vs. institutional dynamics
- Whether the terror was rational (serving Stalin's goals) or chaotic
- Relationship between ideology and political calculation

#### EXPECTED OWN KNOWLEDGE

- Show trials (Zinoviev/Kamenev 1936, Bukharin 1938) as planned theatrical events
- NKVD operational orders and regional quotas — evidence of central direction *and* local over-fulfilment
- Decimation of the Red Army high command (Tukhachevsky)
- Kirov assassination (December 1934) and unresolved questions
- Khlevniuk's post-archival findings: greater central direction than Getty allowed, but also systemic chaos

#### COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS TO WATCH FOR

- Assuming structuralism = exculpation of Stalin (Getty disputes the mechanism, not the responsibility)
- Treating the debate as settled by archival research in one direction
- Conflating the Great Terror (1936–38) with collectivisation violence and post-war repression

### PROVENANCE PROMPTS

#### Historian A (Conquest)

1. Conquest wrote in 1968 largely without access to Soviet archives. On what types of sources did he rely, and what are their limitations?

#### Historian B (Getty)

1. Getty's 1985 book relied on limited available Soviet sources. How significantly did the opening of the archives after 1991 change what historians could argue?

2. Conquest was associated with the British government's Information Research Department earlier in his career. Does this background affect how you read his interpretation?
  3. The 1990 revised edition incorporated new archival evidence. Does retrospective confirmation of his estimates strengthen his overall thesis, or only specific empirical claims within it?
  4. Conquest's writing has a morally engaged, even prosecutorial tone. What are the risks of moral clarity in historical writing?
2. Getty was accused of being an apologist for Stalin. Is it possible to separate the question of historical mechanism from the question of moral responsibility?
  3. Getty's later work showed greater acknowledgement of central direction. Does revising your argument in light of new evidence reflect scholarly integrity or undermine the earlier work's credibility?
  4. What is gained and what is lost by a structuralist focus on institutions and processes rather than individuals?
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## De-Stalinisation and the Khrushchev Era

### Historian A: William Taubman

*Khrushchev: The Man and His Era (2003)*

Taubman's Pulitzer Prize-winning biography presents Khrushchev as a genuinely complex figure: a man shaped by and complicit in the Stalinist system who nonetheless undertook the risky project of de-Stalinisation. Taubman argues that Khrushchev's motivations were mixed — partly moral revulsion at the terror, partly political calculation, partly a genuine belief that Soviet socialism could be reformed and humanised. The Secret Speech of 1956 was, in Taubman's account, a dramatically courageous act, even if its revelations were selective and its author was himself implicated in the crimes he denounced. Taubman is attentive to the limits of the Khrushchev era — the continued Gulag (though reduced), the crushing of the Hungarian uprising, the erratic nature of Khrushchev's policy-making — but insists on its genuine historical significance. The thaw created real, if fragile, spaces for cultural and intellectual life, and the partial rehabilitation of Stalin's victims had lasting consequences.

[VERIFY before publication]

### Historian B: Polly Jones

*Myth, Memory, Trauma: Rethinking the Stalinist Past in the Soviet Union, 1953–70 (2013)*

Jones's social and cultural history approaches de-Stalinisation from a different angle — less interested in Khrushchev as an individual actor than in the complex processes by which Soviet society negotiated the memory of the Stalin years. Jones argues that de-Stalinisation was not a coherent programme imposed from above but a contested and incomplete process in which different groups — party officials, writers, former Gulag prisoners, ordinary citizens — held competing interests and memories. The Secret Speech unleashed demands the regime could not fully control, and the subsequent thaw was one of partial openings, sudden closures, and persistent ambiguity. Jones is particularly attentive to the experiences of returning Gulag survivors and the complexities of reintegration into a society that had, in many cases, benefited from the persecution of those now returning. Her work challenges teleological readings of de-Stalinisation as straightforward liberalisation, insisting on its messiness and incompleteness.

[VERIFY — Jones is a specialised text; confirm it is widely enough known to be usable without additional scaffolding for A-level markers]

## "How far do Historians A and B differ in their interpretations of the significance of de-Stalinisation under Khrushchev?"

Use both extracts and your own knowledge to explain your answer.

**Board note:** Standard AO3 format applies across all boards. WJEC/Eduqas may ask students to evaluate the "value" of each interpretation, requiring explicit provenance engagement.

### MARK SCHEME GUIDANCE

#### Level 3

Identifies the contrast: Taubman emphasises the significance of individual leadership and the Secret Speech as a turning point; Jones emphasises the complexity, incompleteness, and social messiness of the process.

#### Level 4

Analyses precisely: Taubman's biography foregrounds Khrushchev's agency; Jones's social history foregrounds the limits of top-down change and the persistence of Stalinist culture. Own knowledge includes the Secret Speech, Hungarian uprising, Pasternak, rehabilitation of victims.

#### Level 5

Reflects on methodological difference (biography vs. social/cultural history), considers what each illuminates and occludes, and assesses whether the two interpretations are compatible or fundamentally in tension.

### KEY COMPARISON POINTS

- Individual agency (Khrushchev) vs. social/structural processes
- De-Stalinisation as coherent programme vs. contested, incomplete process
- The Secret Speech as breakthrough vs. one moment in complex negotiation
- Continuities with Stalinism vs. genuine change

### EXPECTED OWN KNOWLEDGE

- The Secret Speech (February 1956): content, limited distribution, subsequent leaks
- Hungarian Revolution (1956) and Soviet intervention
- The Gulag: partial dismantling but not abolished
- Cultural thaw: Solzhenitsyn, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962); the Pasternak affair
- Rehabilitation of victims — selective and incomplete; many categories excluded
- Khrushchev's fall (1964) and partial re-Stalinisation under Brezhnev

### COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS TO WATCH FOR

- Assuming the Gulag simply ended under Khrushchev (it was reduced but not abolished)
- Treating the Secret Speech as a public document (it was delivered to a closed party session and not published in the USSR until 1989)
- Conflating de-Stalinisation with democratisation

## PROVENANCE PROMPTS

### Historian A (Taubman)

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1. Taubman conducted interviews with Khrushchev's family and former colleagues. How do oral history sources shape the kind of history he can write?
2. Biography as a genre centres the individual. What might be systematically underemphasised in an account framed through one man's personality and choices?
3. The book won the Pulitzer Prize — a marker of mainstream cultural reception. Does popular success tell us anything about the interpretive choices an author has made?
4. Taubman writes with evident sympathy for Khrushchev's reforming impulse. How should readers account for authorial sympathy when evaluating a biographical account?

### Historian B (Jones)

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1. Jones works primarily with literary, memoir, and documentary sources from below. What does this approach allow her to recover that a political biography cannot?
2. Her book focuses on 1953–70, extending beyond Khrushchev's removal in 1964. How does this longer timeframe shape her argument about the *limits* of de-Stalinisation?
3. Jones's approach draws on memory studies as a theoretical framework. What assumptions about the relationship between official memory and historical truth does this involve?
4. A social history that foregrounds complexity and incompleteness can risk appearing to say only "it's all very complicated." How can students distinguish a genuinely nuanced argument from one that avoids a thesis?