

Institution: Birkbeck, University of London

Unit of Assessment: 30 History

Title of case study: Private life in Soviet Russia: transforming international understanding

1. Summary of the impact

Professor Figes's research on private lives in Soviet Russia has played a significant role in transforming public understanding of Soviet history in the UK and internationally. Two of his books are at the heart of this case study: *The Whisperers* (2008) and *Just Send Me Word* (2012) with combined international, multilingual sales of over 170,000. Between them, they have impacts both in cultural life – introducing a new understanding of life in Soviet Russia and new resources for education and research – and, as publishing successes, in economic terms. His research also provided the basis for retrieving archive materials belonging to the Russian NGO, Memorial, from a raid by Russian authorities.

2. Underpinning research

Professor Figes's research has made a significant contribution to contemporary public understanding of Russian and Soviet history. His accessible but authoritative books have illuminated two broad themes: the individual experience of the Revolution and Russia's cultural identity and place in the world. Following his second book, *A People's Tragedy* (Ref 1), published before he came to Birkbeck in 1999, he developed its insights into the human experience of the Revolution in his third book (written with a Russian scholar), *Interpreting the Russian Revolution* (Ref 2), which offered further insights on the political culture of 1917, informed by the theories, methodologies and types of source material previously unused in the subject. *Natasha's Dance* (Ref 3) further added to the body of work which provided the basis for his subsequent research that is the focus of this case study.

These publications contributed to Professor Figes success in gaining a significant AHRC grant in 2003 to develop his research into the private lives of ordinary Russian people during the Revolution. In this project, Professor Figes developed his focus on the individual experience of the Russian Revolution, creating a study of private life in Stalin's Russia based on interviews and family archives, which was published as *The Whisperers*, in 2008 (Ref 4). In contrast to other books, which have focused mainly on the external facts of Soviet life, *The Whisperers* engages with the impact of the system's repressive character on the interior world of citizens. It examines the influence of the Soviet regime and its campaigns of Terror on family relationships, emotions and beliefs, moral choices, issues of personal and social identity, and collective memory. The AHRC evaluated the research project for *The Whisperers* an 'outstanding achievement'.

Following the publication of *The Whisperers*, Figes won a grant from the Leverhulme Foundation to investigate the Mishchenko-Ivanova Correspondence, an extraordinary cache of 1500 smuggled letters between a Gulag prisoner and his girlfriend in Moscow between 1946 and 1955. The outcome of this project was the book, *Just Send Me Word* (Ref 5), which explores human relations inside a labour camp. Using the only major real-time record of daily life in the Gulag that has ever come to light, it reveals the personal networks of mutual help and solidarity which developed both inside the camp and across the barbed-wire divide and enabled prisoners to survive. It was featured by in the Leverhulme Trust's in-house magazine as a research project of special interest.

Both books exemplify the work he has done to expose the experiences of ordinary Russian people and transform public understanding of this previously obscured area of twentieth century history. This research has also created a significant body of new archival sources, accessible through his

website.

3. References to the research

1. Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution, 1891-1924* (Jonathan Cape/Viking, 1996), 924 pages
2. Orlando Figes and Boris Kolonitiskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution: The Language and Symbols of 1917* (Yale University Press, 1999)
3. Orlando Figes, *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia* (Penguin, 2003) (Worldwide sales: c210,000)
4. Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers: Private life in Stalin's Russia* (London: Allen-Lane/Penguin, 2007), 724 pp. International sales in 15 languages: 153,217
5. Orlando Figes, *Just Send Me Word: A Story of Love and Survival in the Gulag* (Allen Lane/Metropolitan, 2012), 328 pp. International sales in English: 16,751

Competitive grants awarded:

- 2003-2009 AHRC Grant (£245,000) Private Life in Soviet Russia (1917-1956) AHRC deemed this an 'outstanding achievement' in 2010
- 2009-10 Leverhulme Trust (£34,000) The Mishchenko-Ivanova Correspondence.

4. Details of the impact

The impacts of Figes's research can be seen in cultural life – in public discourse and education; in its economic value to his publisher; and in its organisational benefits for Russian NGO Memorial.

As a writer, broadcaster and public speaker, Professor Figes communicates his work widely in the UK and abroad. In May 2011 the *Guardian* listed him among Britain's top 300 'public intellectuals'. His books have had a major impact on public understanding of Russia, as indicated by their sales in many languages. His publisher at Penguin writes: 'From the point of view of his published work, it is almost certainly the case that he has had more impact than any other British writer in the field of Russian/Soviet history. He has sold at least 100,000 books during that time (*excluding* American sales or any of his numerous foreign editions – so this will comfortably be a minority of his total sales) giving him *the* key shaping role for an extraordinarily large group of readers in how they understand perhaps the single most important subject of the 20th century. In addition, so much of this impact is based on *original* research, not the retelling of old stories – in other words Orlando has given access to a huge body of readers to an entirely new experience of, for example, the Soviet experience in the Second World War, or the reality of life not only for the millions of Soviet citizens who went to the Gulag but also for their friends and relatives.' (Testimonial 1; also see Source 3)

Natasha's Dance alone had a huge impact, inspiring authors such as Graham Robb's *Discovery of France* (2008) and filmmaker Joe Wright's interpretation of *Anna Karenina* (2012), who says 'I took my lead from a book call Natasha's Dance by Orlando Figes, which is basically a history of Russian culture. In that he talks about Russian society of the period suffering from a kind of identity crisis. Not sure whether they were Eastern or Western. Choosing Paris and becoming French, almost. They were really performing these roles, and as Orlando writes, they were living their lives on a stage' (Source 4). The book inspired a performance celebrating '300 years of friendship between Russia and The Netherlands' at the annual Festival Gooisch Klassiek, in Hilversum, The Netherlands: 'We will focus on how Russians lived back then in Tsarist Russia: what interested them, how they raised their children, their habits and daily life. For three days in August (16, 17 and 18) the palace and its gardens will be the venue for a multitude of music performances, as well as workshops, hand craft activities, poetry, lectures, etc. ... On the 16th, at the Opening of the Festival, there is an opportunity to create a concert and staged performance, based on Natasha's Dance, with the palace as a splendid and historically relevant backdrop. Finally my dream is

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coming true! I am so excited about it!' (Source 5). The book has recently been translated into Chinese.

The Whisperers and *Just Send Me Word* have built on the influence of *A People's Tragedy* and *Natasha's Dance* in transforming public understanding of twentieth century Russian history and in changing the way Russian history is studied in schools and universities. *The Whisperers* (with sales of over 153,000 copies, in 15 languages, internationally) was nominated for the BBC4 Samuel Johnson prize and has been discussed in a wide range of media in many countries. It has been the subject of interviews in the *Guardian* in the UK (source 6); the subject of TV and radio interviews and features in the broadsheets and *Der Spiegel* in Germany; features in *Le Temps*, *Le Monde* and *La Libération* in France, where the book was short-listed for the Prix Médicis; a feature in *Polityka* in Poland; and the subject of an hour-length discussion on national television in Slovenia.

His research insights into the 'people's history' of Russia has led to Professor Figes being invited to give at least 20 public talks and lectures, since January 2008, at literary festivals (including Hay and Cheltenham), in public societies (such as The Royal Geographic Society), at the National Theatre, London, and bookshops internationally. He has made public lecture tours in Australia, Chile, Germany, Slovenia, Russia, and The Netherlands, where he gave the Telders Lecture in 2009.

The ongoing impact of *The Whisperers* is evidenced in a further revelation of papers which resulted in the publication of *Just Send Me Word* (May 2012) with 16,751 international sales in its first year. *The Whisperers* was adapted by Rupert Wickham for his play, *Stalin's Favourite* performed at the National Theatre, London, from November 2011, subsequently at the Unicorn Theatre, London, in January 2012 before it toured the UK (Source 7). The subject of a podcast *Platform* event at the National Theatre (June 2012) (Source 8), it has been optioned as a feature film with a \$20 million budget by Life and Soul Pictures.

Both books have been referenced in articles by teachers of Russian history. A major achievement of the *Whisperers* research was the establishment of an accessible archive (interview recordings and transcripts, unpublished memoirs, documents and photographs) available on Figes's website (www.orlandofiges.com). Although there is no way of indicating the exact online level of interest in the *Whisperers* archive, this portal has received c.923,000 visits from 105 countries (since October 2007). As a consequence, the research has had an educational impact. It has been the subject of two successful pedagogic trials in secondary schools sponsored by the Historical Association. According to a report on the first, Year 12 students were inspired by the book: 'In several places students took on particular language used by Figes. Their writing also became tighter, more passionate and more nuanced as they became involved with describing personal stories.' A further comment notes that the teacher was 'particularly interested in the role of *The Whisperers* in enabling students to encounter the diversity of human experience in Soviet society. She wanted to give students a new lens through which to analyse Stalin's purges and to challenge some common generalisations about the phenomenon. One student was so enthralled that she decided to buy and read the whole book' (Source 9). As well as this research being used by schools, he is regularly invited to give talks to schools and colleges.

Beyond the impact of this body of research on public ideas, the research also involved an international collaboration with Memorial, a Russian NGO which has had a significant impact on the development of human rights, democracy and the public memory of the Stalinist repressions in post-Soviet Russia. Professor Figes has helped Memorial by raising public consciousness about its work. The materials he collected with Memorial were among those confiscated by the police in St Petersburg during a raid in 2008. Professor Figes wrote about the raid in the UK and US press,

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and organised an open protest letter to the Russian President which was signed by several hundred leading academics from across the world. After a long legal battle the materials were returned to Memorial in 2009. In March 2012 the St Petersburg branch of Memorial received a special Anniversary Award from Index on Censorship, a UK NGO. The Director of Index on Censorship writes, 'Professor Figes's research was invaluable to our decision to award Memorial the Index on Censorship 40th anniversary award. His research and personal briefing to Index on Censorship staff provided some of the evidence for the decision we made to shortlist Memorial and our judges' decision to commemorate Memorial's work in this way. ... Orlando's campaign to help the Memorial archive helped, in part, to alert Index to the situation the archive was facing. More importantly, his specific knowledge of the case, helped us to brief the media on the impact of Memorial and why the award was important.' (Testimonial 2 and Source 10)

5. Sources to corroborate the impact**Testimonials**

1. Publishing Director, Penguin Press (factual statement)
2. Head of Advocacy, Index on Censorship (factual statement)

Other sources

3. An indication of media coverage can be found at [Orlando Figes's website](#)

Natasha's Dance

4. Joe Wright's reference to Natasha's Dance for his film Anna Karenina can be read [here](#)
5. The email from the director of Festival Gooisch Klassiek from which this quote is taken (April 9, 2013) can be supplied on request.

The Whisperers and Just Send Me Word

6. Guardian interview prior to the announcement of the BBC4 [Samuel Johnson Prize](#)
7. Reviews in the [British Theatre Guide](#), [The Public Reviews](#), and [Lippy](#)
8. A link to the National Theatre's [website](#) promoting Figes's appearance
9. Teaching History article: Laura Bellingier, 'Cultivating curiosity about complexity: What happens when Year 12 start to read Orlando Figes' *The Whisperers*, [Teaching History 132](#), The Historical Association, September 2008, pp. 5-14. The book is also referenced in other Historical Association [resources for schools](#)
10. Reports relating to the Index on Censorship [award](#) and [Figes's role in it](#)