

# Using *THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME* in Schools

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## Introduction

These notes include some suggestions for using the 1916 documentary *The Battle of the Somme* in schools. They are not, of course, the only ways in which the film can be used.

The film is most obviously useful when teaching the First World War within the national curriculum for History. However, it can be used to support other areas of study: for instance, there is much useful material related to the history of transport.

The film can have cross-curricular relevance beyond History:

- Geography: Teachers will find the county- or locality-based structure of the British Army's regimental system can support some kinds of geographical exercise (see Geographical Identification ).
- Maths: Some of the information offered in the film could be used as a basis for work on statistics.
- English: Classes may like to compare the view of the war given by the film to that expressed by the war poets, or analyse the language used in the film's captions (see Words and Pictures).
- Music: Teachers could consider the two different musical accompaniments offered for this 'silent' film and discuss the effect that different musical styles can have on the audience's reactions (see The Cinema-going Experience).
- Media Studies: Groups could use some scenes as an introduction to the discussion of issues such as propaganda techniques or the authenticity of film as evidence (see What is Truth?).
- Citizenship: The film can be used to prompt consideration of the rights and responsibilities of soldiers and issues of public presentation of warfare.

And so on.

## 1. Geographical Identification

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The regimental system of the British Army at the time of the First World War identified particular regiments with counties and large cities.

- Using the captions of the film (reproduced in the Viewing Guide, or from the film itself), have students make a list of the places with which regiments are identified.

Plot them on a map of the British Isles. Note that at least one Regiment – the Queen's, i.e. the Queen's (Royal West Surrey Regiment) – is named in Caption 33 without even being seen in *The Battle of the Somme*.

To what extent does the resulting chart look representative of the whole country? Remember that Ireland was still part of the United Kingdom in 1916.

- Discuss the possible reasons for areas of concentration or for apparent gaps.
- Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the local identification encouraged by this system (link to Citizenship).
- Go over the list again and note the difference between specific regimental identifications (like 'Lancashire Fusiliers') and general pointers (such as 'a Lancashire Battalion').

Refine the list by reference to the more precise identifications that can be found in the Viewing Guide. Some units are also known by quasi-official nicknames – for example, the London Scottish or the Hull Commercials – that give even more precise identifications. Use visual clues from the film – most obviously, the wearing of kilts.

- Note which units appear to get more than their fair share of the cameraman's attention. Discuss possible reasons for this.

See also *Getting the Picture*.

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## 2. Weather Watch

Modern audiences commonly think of conditions in the trenches on the Western Front almost exclusively in terms of mud. This has been a result of conditioning by some of the best-known photographs and poems of the war. (Poems include 'A Working Party' by Siegfried Sassoon and 'Exposure' by Wilfred Owen. A selection of the classic images of First World War mud can be viewed by accessing the Collections Online database on the Imperial War Museum website – [www.iwmcollections.org.uk](http://www.iwmcollections.org.uk) – and entering search terms such as 'Trench & Mud' or 'Passchendaele & Mud'.)

- Students can discuss in groups whether this film confirms or contradicts this often-held image of a war in mud.

Once the idea of using the films as a basis for thinking about the weather on the battlefield has become more familiar, the exercise can be extended.

A determining factor of the Battle of the Somme was the weather: the start of the infantry attack was delayed by rain.

- Invite students to comment on the weather in various scenes: is it raining? Are the men in their shirtsleeves or dressed for cold or wet weather? Is the ground wet or dry?

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See if anyone comments on the appearance of the men in goatskin jerkins in the scene following Caption 18. Bad weather is particularly apparent in the film following Caption 25.

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## 3. The Audience for the Films

Massive audiences saw the film. The Further Reading resource, which is also available for download, will help locate a variety of quotations suggesting reasons for why someone in Britain in 1916–1917 might have wished to go and see the film and gives the reactions of several who did.

The question of who went to see the film and how they reacted to it offers scope for exploration, possibly by empathy work.

- Students could be asked to write an empathetic account of someone's trip to see the film at the cinema in 1916.

Before watching the film and then starting on the exercise, each student should decide whose account they are going to write. If the 'audience' consists of a number of different types and attitudes, the class can compare and discuss reactions later.

- Who are they?
- How old are they?
- What are they and their family or peer group already doing in and for – or against – the war?  
(Bear in mind the passage of the Military Service Act in Great Britain: those in the Army before February 1916 were all volunteers; thereafter, they could be conscripted into service.)
- Why have they gone to see this film?
- What do they expect to see?

Possible characters that students might wish to imagine visiting the cinema could include (but are not limited to):

- A munitions worker
- A soldier who has not yet been in combat (either volunteer or recent conscript)
- A member of the family of a soldier in France (possibly of one who has already been killed)
- A schoolboy as yet too young for the Army
- Someone too old for the Army

See also *The Cinema-going Experience*.

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## 4. Quartermaster's Stores

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A controversial factor in the Battle of the Somme was the amount of kit an infantryman was expected to carry – especially those going ‘over the top’ on the first day of the attack. Did this hamper mobility and increase casualties?

The film shows in a lot of detail the personal kit of a British soldier. A class could be set the task of compiling a list of all the items seen throughout the film. Different groups of students could work to list examples in two main categories of kit:

Some of the equipment seen is *personal*, for use by the individual soldier.

Different types of personal kit to spot include:

- Items of clothing
- Special (protective) clothing such as gas masks and helmets
- Weapons
- Tools etc.
- In addition to things they *had* to carry, some soldiers are seen with items they *chose* to carry, like souvenirs, mascots, or books and letters.

In other cases, the equipment or supplies carried are *communal*, such as:

- A food or water ration for a squad or group of soldiers
- Ammunition
- Communication equipment, etc.

– The intended use of some of the kit carried is not always obvious: what are the mallets and flags for? Why is he writing on that slate? Get groups to discuss the possible uses of some of these mystery objects, and see if any of their conclusions can be checked by research.

– Given the amount of kit soldiers were expected to carry into the attack, comment on the loads carried by the troops in the ‘over the top’ scene from *The Battle of the Somme*.

See also *What is Truth?*

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## 5. Transport

Although in 1916 the First World War was not ‘a war of movement’, it was still a war in which armies were heavily dependent on transport. Front lines may have been frustratingly static, but behind the lines transport was needed for the vast quantities of men, munitions and supplies required by the campaign.

The film shows a wide variety of transport: draft animals (including humans), motor vehicles, stretchers (both carried and wheeled), horse-drawn vehicles, bicycles, traction engines and trains.

– Conduct a census of types of transport seen in this sector of the Western Front.

– Discuss the suitability of the various different kinds of transport for the purposes for which they are being used. What are the relative advantages and disadvantages of horse-drawn and motor vehicles in these circumstances?

– Does any particular requirement seem to be particularly well or badly met – for example, transport of supplies, the wounded or of healthy troops? Think about reasons why this might be the case.

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## 6. Getting the Picture

At the time of the making of this film, there were just two cameramen covering the whole of the British sector of the Western Front. They were, of course, no more able to be in more than one place at a time than anyone else, and no safer than anyone else because an enemy on the other side of no man's land was trying to kill people on their side. On top of this, they were obliged to operate under other constraints.

As cameramen in a war zone, they operated within the sphere of a military hierarchy. The first reaction of Lord Kitchener and the War Office on the outbreak of war had been to ban film and photography at the front altogether. Kitchener's ban was not relaxed until late 1915. Although many officers seem to have welcomed the arrival of the cameramen, the War Office of course maintained control through forms of censorship after the ban had been lifted.

The cameraman's equipment typically consisted of large hand-cranked cameras, normally needing a tripod for stability. The cameras could only be loaded with a few hundred feet of film at a time (100 feet of film = 30 metres = approximately 1 minute and 40 seconds of screen time).

Lenses and film stock were unsuited to work in poor light conditions or at long range (no zoom lenses were available at this time). All this equipment was very heavy; as much as 100 pounds (45 kilos) for the camera, tripod and film.

The description below comes from cameraman Geoffrey Malins's account of technical difficulties in his memoir *How I Filmed the War*. It relates to filming the explosion seen in *Somme*, Caption 29:

*'Time: 7.19 a.m. My hand grasped the handle of the camera. I set my teeth. My whole mind was concentrated upon my work. Another thirty seconds passed. I started turning the handle, two revolutions per second, no more, no less. I noticed how regular I was turning. ... I fixed my eyes on the Redoubt. Any second now. Surely it was time. It seemed to me as if I had been turning for hours. Great heavens! Surely it had not misfired.*

*Why doesn't it go up?*

*I looked at my exposure dial. I had used over a thousand feet\*. The horrible thought flashed through my mind, that my film might run out before the mine blew. Would it go up before I had time to reload? The thought brought beads of perspiration to my forehead. The agony was awful; indescribable. My hand began to shake. Another 250\* ft exposed. I had to keep on.*

*Then it happened.'*

(\*Note: these figures are as printed in the book but are not realistic – 1000 feet of film would have kept Malins 'turning' for over 15 minutes!)

See the Further Reading resource for more detail on the problems facing the official cameramen.

- Discuss why Kitchener would have banned filming:
  - For reasons of security?
  - In order not to deter volunteers for the Army?
  - Because of possible negative effects on civilian morale or support for the war?

Others might argue that the *absence* of pictures could be just as dangerous. Students could role-play an argument about censorship between personnel in the War Office.

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- Before looking at the film, discuss how all the difficulties noted would have affected the cameramen's ability to provide a complete and truthful record of a battle or the kinds of pictures the audience at home might expect to see. (Would these two goals be compatible? Would it occur to people in 1916 to think in these terms?)

Then look at scenes from the film and invite students to comment on how far they confirm – or contradict – the expectations expressed in the discussion.

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## 7. What is Truth?

One of the more contentious issues in documentary filmmaking is the extent to which the pictures tell 'the truth'. This is especially the case in films that combine a propaganda message with informational content (think again about the 'political' constraints on the cameramen). *The Battle of the Somme* contains one significant sequence – the 'over the top' scene – that is certainly a fake. It contains numerous examples of the many shades of authenticity that are possible between 'pure truth' on the one hand, and out-and-out faking on the other.

- Discussion of scenes from the film allows exploration of questions relating to how we do – or should – interpret the visual record. This applies to considering a film like *Somme* as historical evidence, but also to how we watch news or current affairs on television as 1916 audiences would have watched the film at the time.

The Viewing Guide and commentary will help identify scenes suitable for discussion and suggest reasons why the contents of those scenes might be suspect.

Sample discussion points include:

- What makes us doubt the authenticity of a scene?
  - How far can a filmmaker go in attempting to increase the interest of his film by persuading the participants to do 'more interesting things' before we feel truth is distorted?
  - Apart from forcing the creation of events in front of the camera, what other devices are available to filmmakers to make the audience see something that did not really happen quite as it appears? (Consider the juxtaposition of images in the editing process, or the use of language in the captions.)
  - Why do filmmakers typically indulge in these sorts of distortions? Might they ever backfire? Would an audience in 1916 notice? Would they mind?
  - Compare *The Battle of the Somme* to more modern films and consider the further possibilities now available to distort or fake reality (digital image manipulation software). Is there a moral issue here? Should viewers be told whether what they are seeing is simulated? Is it always obvious enough?
- One exercise could be to show a group the 'over the top' scene without giving any prior hint that its authenticity is questioned. Then ask them to describe what they have seen.

After this, lead a discussion about some of the details that make the scene

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suspect (the nature of the trench, the amount of equipment carried by the attackers, the danger to the cameraman filming from an exposed camera position, the behaviour of the 'casualties'). Then show the scene again and revive the discussion.

- Does an audience at the start of the twenty-first century notice more or less than the original viewer might have done? Why?
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## 8. Words and Pictures

*The Battle of the Somme* is, of course, a silent picture. The filmmakers could not use a voice-over commentary or interviews to explain what was going on. Instead, they had to use captions or 'intertitles'.

Using so much on-screen text to communicate all the information that is not obvious from the visual images is probably the most unusual aspect for a modern audience faced with such material.

Captions or intertitles represent a special challenge to the filmmaker:

- They interrupt the flow of the action
  - They must be kept brief without sacrificing understanding
  - The reading ability and speed of the audience are factors to be taken into account
  - Captions in silent films also offer a particular opportunity – because they are typically projected *before* the relevant section, they can be used to prepare the audience to respond in a preferred manner.
- Experiment with groups of students: show one a scene with its preceding caption and a 'control group' the same scene without it. Compare their understanding and interpretation of what they have seen. Invite students from these first two groups to write alternative captions, and then test their captions on other groups.
  - Another exercise uses the original captions, taken either from the film itself or from the Viewing Guide. Students could be asked to note examples in which:
    - The audience is given information that is not apparent from the film itself (eg. 'the Front Line trenches are just over the crest');
    - The audience is told something about the people seen in the film; either an event before filming began or after it was over (eg. 'This man died 30 minutes after reaching the trenches');
    - The audience is encouraged to react in a particular way to a scene that might not on its own provoke such a reaction (eg. 'Vast supplies of shells ... thanks to British munitions workers');
    - Personal characteristics are ascribed to British or enemy personnel.

Other activities based on the captions could include the following:

- Discuss why the captions were written in the way they were and how the perceptions of an audience then – and one now – would be affected if different wording were used.

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- Look at examples of caption style in other silent films, including those needed to convey dialogue or a story line, and then discuss the different challenges this involves.
  - Try to write and record a commentary for a particular scene from *Somme*. How does a voice-over differ from a caption?
  - Reverse the process and try to make a brief extract from a modern television programme make sense with the sound turned off by writing captions to appear between scenes.
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## 9. The Cinema-going Experience

The experience of cinema going was very different for people in 1916 compared to that of today's audience (not least because today's audience has the choice of going to the cinema or watching films at home). An exploration of what such an experience meant back in 1916 can be an interesting exercise for students.

The concept and technology of cinema were scarcely 20 years old when these films came out; the medium was still finding its feet. In the days before radio and television, film's main competitor in entertainment was the music hall. For providing information, competition consisted of newspapers and illustrated magazines.

Because of its novelty, the medium retained its rough edges. Editorial techniques appear extremely slow next to the slick cutting of a modern production – *Somme* shows little understanding of what is now accepted film 'grammar' for the building of a story.

- One possible exercise is to storyboard alternative treatments for some of the sequences in the film.

However, much of our typical expectation of 'old film' – such as scratched, monochrome film showing unnaturally accelerated and jerky movement – is not reflective of the real cinema-going experience of 1916. The *Somme* DVD tries to redress this.

Picture quality should not be bad: a good print struck from a good negative can be of excellent quality, although for a popular film, the negative is likely to have suffered from being used repeatedly to make more and more distribution prints. The distortion of movement arises from projecting film at the wrong speed: if it is projected or transferred to digital video at the correct speed, 'old film' will reproduce movement with the realism we expect today.

'Black and white' film was rarely seen only in black and white – the processes of tinting or toning added colour. The Museum has not tried to reproduce these effects on the DVD, as it has no record of their original appearance. It is known, however, that another 'Battle' film at least had all its captions tinted red.

Tinting and toning were not the same as 'colourising' – filmmakers did not attempt to re-create natural colour. Rather, they wanted to enhance the mood of scenes by staining the whole scene with a particular colour, so that instead of appearing in shades of grey, a night scene would appear in shades of blue, and a scene involving fire or combat would be in shades of red.

- Discuss how the use of colour could affect the mood of different scenes.

Similarly, 'silent' films were rarely seen in silence – there was usually a live musical accompaniment by a piano or even a larger ensemble. Music was initially used to

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drown out the noise of the projector, but was later used to enhance mood. The DVD includes a choice of two different musical accompaniments: one of them a modern orchestral composition, the other a re-creation of the music recommended for the film in 1916.

- Discuss with students the different impact that the film has with and without music, or with the two different accompaniments available on the DVD.
- Students could also be asked to think about the effectiveness of different types of music in directing an audience's response.

Then – perhaps specifically with music students – experiment with a range of accompaniments to the same scenes, using existing music samples or composing their own. Music could be found to make scenes come across as more 'pathetic', 'heroic', 'military', 'comic' and so on.

*The technology of cinema of this period is also considered in Getting the Picture and Words and Pictures.*

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For information on other educational resources available from the Imperial War Museum, please visit the Learning pages of the Museum's website, [www.iwm.org.uk](http://www.iwm.org.uk).

For further information of the filmmaking of the First World War, please contact:

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