Second Reaction: Living Inside a Revolution—The Value of Historical Literature in the Classroom


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In *Under Siege! Three Children at the Civil War Battle for Vicksburg* and *Leaving Glorytown: One Boy’s Struggle Under Castro,* the authors do an admirable job depicting social and military turmoil that was felt by the children and their families in each national revolution. I especially appreciated both author’s effort to take a social perspective when dealing with each family’s struggle under the national revolutions. Students relate to this type of historical writing far better than trying to digest mere historical facts. In this writing style,
children are learning history in a thematic style, as they see how war can affect children and families much like their own.

I would look to implement Calcines’ book on the Communist revolution in Cuba for a middle school to younger high school class, especially paying attention to the part concerning the author's turmoil during the Communist revolution. He not only shows students his family’s resistance to the revolution, but also uses these hardships to reveal vital historical events. Calcines even sheds some light on the terrible indoctrination and abuse at the Cuban schools and work camps that were endured during the 1960s. This elaboration by Calcines would provide the teacher an excellent opportunity to show the students how vital their current freedoms are and how they must be aware of the history behind those revolutions that provide or take away these freedoms. Moreover, Eduardo Calcines' age and development as a person in the book really provide a great connection to the students. This connection presents an essential opportunity to not only engage my students, but also guide them through a pivotal communist revolution that has and will continue to affect world history.

Even though each book is vastly different, the two books allow students to learn crucial facts about both the Communist revolution in Cuba and the Civil War battles in the Deep South during the 1860s. Andrea Warren does an excellent job of explaining various implementations of slavery and its depletion in the Deep South during the Civil War, which is vital knowledge for a high school student. Warren goes into great detail and research throughout the book, depicting the battle scenes and social atmosphere during the siege at Vicksburg. She also effectively displays the social setting in and around Vicksburg by tracing the lives of the Lord, McRae, and Grant families during this revolution. Each child’s life provides a varying perspective, but each is beneficial. She provided some valuable military history in this book that can be seen in many of Frederick Grant’s writings. Throughout her book, she finds ways to intertwine how General Grant devised ways to deplete Pemberton's Confederate Army that was outmatched in terms of resources. I would make sure my students grasped these themes as I assigned certain readings.

I especially appreciated the social setting that was depicted in Chapter 9. In this chapter, Warren elaborates on the cave life that was endured by hundreds of families during the forty-seven day Union siege on Vicksburg. I know my older high school students would be fascinated to see how Warren relates not only military strategy and slave involvement in the war effort, but also the new social world of the caves created while families sought refuge from the continual bombardment of Union gunboats shells. However, I feel that the military history would overwhelm my students if I assigned the entire book; nonetheless, Chapters 8, 9, and 12 would all be extremely valuable to my class's Civil War knowledge.

I would love to have the freedom to assign the entirety of both books in my class; Under Siege! would most likely only be used as I assigned selected chapters to my students accompanied by reflective writing assignments. However, time permitting, I would
implement all of Leaving Glorytown. Given the book’s fluidity and relation to the students, it would be harder to only select certain chapters; therefore, I would assign as much of that book as possible and look to have an in-depth discussion following the reading, as the book highlights such incidents as the Bay of Pigs and the lack of intervention from outside forces in Cuba. It could provide a great chance to discuss communism and its attempted spread throughout history. Nonetheless, Calcines’ book reveals why these vast movements failed. Equality is a great idea in government that rarely is fulfilled, and my students would see from this book that freedom is lost in national revolutions in order to promote personal agenda. Calcines is not shy about the theme of individuals/families having to sacrifice freedom for the success of another’s personal agenda, as he describes Oscar’s and his other friends’ fall to Communist indoctrination. Warren relates the same theme as she tells of the soldiers often coming together as friends at “cease fire” opportunities. Warren affirms that if it were left up to the soldiers and children involved, they would all stop fighting and return home – restoring their past freedoms.

Each book does a fine job portraying the social atmosphere that children faced during the respective national revolutions. However, because of time limitations, I would not assign each book in its entirety. Both authors’ careful depiction of the children’s lives enhance my opportunity to relate these historical events to my students. Warren and Calcines provide opportunities for students to dive into the time periods I am seeking to bring alive for them. When these revolutions come alive to students, they learn history in a new light, and their retention of facts and themes increases. The two books take vastly different approaches as Calcines uses his real experiences living under the communist revolution in Cuba, while Warren uses the lives of three children to depict a Civil War in America filled with vast military history and social change. For this reason, my students would most likely relate to Leaving Glorytown better than Under Siege; however, each book, time permitting, could be utilized in my classroom.

About the Author

Trevor Shields is a recent graduate of Purdue University with a degree in social studies education and has a specialization in both U.S. government and economics. He recently completed his student teaching rotation at Rossville High School, where he taught both U.S. and World History.