HISTORY 240/ RUSSIAN 240

A Soviet propaganda poster championing the connection between Marx-Engels-Lenin-Stalin, ca. the 1930s.

The Soviet Experiment

Spring 2020 – Williams College

Instructor:

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Virtual Office Hours: By appointment

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Click here  (https://open.spotify.com/playlist/4UtqtM4KFbJU12CkitgISY?si=O92rfXAkTq-Bjnp-K0S4Ew) for a link to a Spotify playlist with music from class!

Course Description
In 1917, the former Russian Empire became the site of the world’s first socialist revolutionary government and the twentieth century’s largest multiethnic state. Over the next quarter century, the Soviet Union witnessed the rise of one of history’s most violent dictatorships, an apocalyptic war that claimed upwards of 26 million lives, and communist expansion into Eastern Europe and the decolonizing world. It also became the site of vibrant and optimistic utopian cultural projects, flights into space, bitter and hilarious political satire, and a society that was, for the most part, economically equal. Then in 1991, everything fell apart. This course will survey the origins, life, and collapse of the Soviet Union, paying particular attention to the ideas that shaped its development, the mark its architects’ and leaders’ policies left both at home and abroad, and the impact it had on the people who lived and didn’t live to tell the tale.

MISC POLICIES

ON OFFICE HOURS

Due to the transition to online learning, office hours with Professor Skorobogatov and Jeremy Irzyk will be done virtually and by appointment. Please write to Professor Skorobogatov and Jeremy Irzyk directly to schedule a time to speak with them over video chat.

ON WRITING FEEDBACK

While we will write a good amount in this course, “mastering historical writing” is not one of the goals of this course or any survey course offered through the History Department. The line edits and comments that you will receive from me are designed to bolster your understanding of Soviet history and enhance how you use that understanding to make arguments about Soviet history. While I will use my feedback to introduce you to certain history-specific writing conventions (like active vs. passive voice, thesis statement construction, use of in-text quotes), and correct your spelling, grammar, style and the like on a basic level. If you wish to dramatically improve your writing (historical or otherwise), I recommend looking into 300 and 400 level courses and tutorials offered through the History Department.

ON REVIEW SESSIONS

We all love them, but it’s impossible to schedule them in such a way that each and every student can attend and benefit from them. Therefore, I will not be holding review sessions for our class’s midterm and final exams for the sake of fairness. I also find it nearly impossible not to “teach the exam” during review sessions, since I make our exams long before the start of the semester. I recommend getting to know a few people in the class at the start of the semester whose schedules and study habits match your own, and organize informal review sessions with them around the midterm and final exam.

ON COURSE PACKETS

I have chosen not to order hardcopy course packets for this course and all the courses I plan to teach in the future because paper waste contributes to the climate crisis we are all currently living in and enduring. Our campus also sources paper from politically problematic parts of the world where tree felling often comes at the expense of workers, local residents, and the environment, to say nothing of the carbon emitted to ship the final product to Williamstown. I know my students love hard copy course packets, and I know how meh it is to read things on screens. But if you, like me, are able to donate countless hours a
week consuming content on a smartphone, I ask that you consider reading our course readings on an
electronic device. If you find that you can only engage fully with the readings through hard copy, I invite
you to download and print individual readings as you please. I will happily reimburse you from my own
research account for any expense this may incur. Please come see me if you have any questions about
my course packet policy, or if you want some suggestions on how to enhance your experience with
electronic readings. Change is hard. Doing the right thing is hard. Together, we can do it.

"Sometimes we just simply have to find a way. The moment we decide to fulfill something, we can do
anything. And I’m sure that the moment we start behaving as if we were in an emergency, we can avoid
climate and ecological catastrophe. Humans are very adaptable: we can still fix this. But the opportunity to
do so will not last for long. We must start today. We have no more excuses." - Greta Thunberg

CAMPUS POLICIES AND RESOURCES

THE HONOR CODE

All students are expected to be familiar with the Williams College Honor Code and to reaffirm their
commitment to the Statement of Academic Honesty by signing an Honor Code Pledge at the beginning of
each academic year. Please read the official version of Honor Code (http://sites.williams.edu/honor-
system/academic-honesty/) here.

Students can exchange broad ideas or general approaches toward assignments with other students, but
may not engage in any joint writing or step-by-step problem solving. One way to be sure you are not
violating the honor code is to refrain from writing/typing/crafting your response to the assignment with
others. Rather, save the writing until you are on your own and working independently.

If you have any questions about how the honor code applies to your work, please come talk with me. I am
always happy to have those conversations.

HEALTH AND ACCESSIBILITY RESOURCES

Students with disabilities of any kind who may need accommodations for this course are encouraged to
contact Dr. GL Wallace (Director of Accessible Education) at 597-4672. Also, students experiencing
mental or physical health challenges that are significantly affecting their academic work or well-being are
couraged to contact Dean Marlene Sandstrom and to speak with a dean so we can help you find the
right resources. The deans can be reached at 597-4171.

INCLUSION AND CAMPUS CULTURE

The Williams community embraces diversity of age, background, beliefs, ethnicity, gender, gender identity,
gender expression, national origin, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, and other visible and non visible
categories. I welcome all students in this course and expect that all students contribute to a respectful,
welcoming and inclusive environment. If you have any concerns about classroom climate, please come to
me to share your concern.

COURSE SUGGESTION BOX
Feel free to leave anonymous, constructive comments, suggestions, and questions in our online Course Suggestion Box (http://freesuggestionbox.com/pub/apjtxjb). I will circulate address each submission aloud in class each time I receive one.

**GRADES**

Participation in 5 weekly, virtual 25-minute tutorials (30%), Final Exam (25%), Midterm Exam (20%), Two Primary Source Assignments (15%), Map Quiz (10%),

**COMPLETING THE FOLLOWING COMPONENTS WILL SECURE A “PASS” GRADE -**

- Participate in 3 out of 5 weekly (your choice which ones), virtual 25-minute tutorials
- Complete the midterm exam and receive a C- or above
- Complete the final exam and receive a C- or above

You are, of course, welcome to complete all of the components of the course, and I will grade and provide feedback on that work as usual.

**COURSE TEXTS**

The following texts may be purchased at the campus bookstore. I will upload PDFs of *Russia’s Empires* to Glow if you forget to/do not wish to bring your copy of the book home with you.

- Valerie Kivelson and Ronald Grigor Suny, *Russia’s Empires*
- Mikhail Bulgakov, *Heart of a Dog*

All other readings may be found as links on the syllabus here on Glow.

**Week 0: Introduction to History/Russian 240 - “The Soviet Experiment”**
Meeting 1: Wednesday, February 5 - Course Logistics and Introductions

- No reading due in class.

Week 1: The Two Soviet “Experiments”
An artistic rendering of the never-build "Palace of Soviets" designed to be the world's tallest skyscraper, with Lenin on top, ca. 1933

**Meeting 1: Tuesday, February 11 - The Soviet “Experiment” #1: The Political Experiment**

- Sheila Fitzpatrick, “1917: The Revolutions of February and October”
- Richard Pipes, “Did the Russian Revolution Have to Happen?”
- Begin filling out the [map of the Soviet Union](#), due in class on Thursday, February 20!

**Meeting 2: Thursday, February 13 - The Soviet “Experiment” #2: The Identity Experiment**

- Yuri Slezkine, “The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Embraced Ethnic Particularism,” pages 1-26 (end at the top with the block quote ending with "on a world scale")
Week 2: Revolutionary Days

A work by the Soviet avant-garde artist El Lissitskii, ca. the early 1920s

Meeting 1: Tuesday, February 18 - The Double Revolution - February-October 1917

- Richard Stites, “Utopias in the Air and on the Ground”
- *Russia’s Empires*, pages 266-275

Meeting 2: Thursday, February 20 - Class Visit to WCMA - 1ST PRIMARY SOURCE ASSIGNMENT PROMPT DISTRIBUTED IN CLASS

- Map Quiz due in hard copy in class!
- Click here for the prompt for the 1st Primary Source Assignment
- Click here for a link to a folder containing the worksheets and list of Soviet posters that you worked with at WCMA

Week 3: Revolutionary Retreat
БУДЬ НА СТРАЖЕ!

Польша выбросила на нашу территорию несколько новых значительных сил под руководством того самого чехословацкого бандита Тырьовича, который поднимал восстание на земле Польши. Несмотря на провокационный характер этого нового нападения, авангард наш встретился с ним и сбросил его до земли.

Каждый гражданин должен узреть себе действительное положение дел. В Польше есть не одно правительство, а два. Одно—официальное, легальное, выступающее в парламенте, несущее ответственность, подписывать договоры. Другое—несанкционированное, занимающееся административными вопросами, с тем же именем, что и законное правительством.

В то время как официальное польское правительство под давлением не только трудящихся, но и широких буржуазных кругов, нацелено стремиться к миру с советской Россией, провокаторы Польского штаба под всеми видами стремятся вызвать войну.

Мы не должны забывать о Польше этой, о которой мы говорим — это наша столица, наша вторая дата. Мы должны быть готовы к этому, чтобы не допустить подобных событий.
A Soviet Civil War-era propaganda poster, titled "Be on Alert!," with text by Trotsky.

**Meeting 1: Tuesday, February 25 - Civil War, 1918-1922**

- *In the Shadow of Revolution, excerpts*
- *Russia’s Empires, pages 275-288*

**Meeting 2: Thursday, February 27 - The New Economic Policy, 1922-1928**

- Mikhail Bulgakov, *Heart of a Dog*

*Week 4: Revolutions from Above*
A propaganda poster advertising Stalin’s Five Year Plan (2+ 2+ worker enthusiasm=5) and its ambition to fulfill the five-year plan in 4 years.

**Meeting 1: Tuesday, March 3 - The Death of Lenin and the Future of Soviet Nationalities, 1924-1928**

- *Russia’s Empires, pages 290-295*
- *Yuri Slezkine, “The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Embraced Ethnic Particularism,” page 26- (from the top with the block quote ending with "on a world scale") to page 36 (ending at the top with the paragraph that ends with "Soviet official culture.")*
- **FIRST COLLABORATIVE COURSE TIMELINE SUBMISSION DUE**

**Meeting 2: Thursday, March 5 - The Five Year Plan, 1928-1933**

- *Stephen Kotkin, “Speaking Bolshevik”*
- *Joseph Stalin, “Dizzy with Success”  (https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1930/03/02.htm)*
- *Russia’s Empires, pages 299-304*

*Week 5: Stalin in Power, 1928-1938*
“Yes, there is a Metro!” A Soviet propaganda poster celebrates Soviet achievements, and the Moscow metro's opening above all. ca. 1954

Meeting 1: Tuesday, March 10 - Stalinist Culture and Society, 1934-1938 - FIRST PRIMARY SOURCE ASSIGNMENT DUE
BEGINNING OF ONLINE INSTRUCTION

MARCH 14- APRIL 5 - SPRING BREAK - ENJOY A RESTFUL AND REJUVENATING BREAK. ALL THE BEST OF LUCK TRANSITIONING TO LIFE OFF-CAMPUS. PLEASE STAY HEALTHY.

MARCH 31 - "SOVIET HISTORY: 1917-1938"
(https://www.dropbox.com/s/llqxp2wv9l78kzb/Lecture%20X%20-%203.30.20.key?dl=0) - Keynote version

MARCH 31 - "SOVIET HISTORY: 1917-1938"
(https://www.dropbox.com/s/t9s4yma7gpz1jrk/Lecture%20X%20-%203.30.20.m4v?dl=0) - QuickTime Version

Week of Monday, April 6
Soviet women examine the damage during the nearly 900-day siege of Leningrad, 1944.

**Lecture: Stalinist Terror and Apocalyptic War, 1934-1945**  
([https://www.dropbox.com/s/llqxp2wv9i78kzb/Lecture%20X%20-%203.30.20.key?dl=0] - Keynote version  
([https://www.dropbox.com/s/cee5q5hw4ja39jr/Lecture%2012%20-%204.2.20.m4v?dl=0] - QuickTime version

Readings to do in preparation for our virtual tutorial (please do your best to complete the readings in the order listed):

**On Stalinist Terror** -

- **Hannah Arendt, “Totalitarianism in Power”**  
- **Nikolai Bukharin’s letter to Stalin**

**On World War II** -

- **Russia’s Empires, pages 311-314 (end at the very top of page 314, with the paragraph ending with “...equality and socialist democracy”)**  
- **Alexis Peri, The War Within, “Becoming New People”**

**Week of Monday, April 13**
Lecture: De-stalinization in Politics and Culture (to be uploaded on Thursday, April 9)

Readings to do in preparation for our virtual tutorial (please do your best to complete the readings in the order listed):

**On De-stalinization in Politics** -

- *Russia’s Empires*, pages 317-323

**On De-stalinization in Culture** -

- [Eleonory Gilbert, “Picasso in Thaw Culture”](https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/115995.pdf?v=3c22b71b65bc0be960fae9419c995)

TAKE-HOME MIDTERM EXAM DUE FRIDAY, APRIL 17 AT MIDNIGHT

Week of Monday, April 20
Participants of the 1957 World Youth Festival in Moscow.

Lecture: Confronting the Stalinist Gulag and the Nationality Question after Stalin (to be uploaded on Thursday, April 16)

Readings to do in preparation for our virtual tutorial (please do your best to complete the readings in the order listed):

On Confronting the Stalinist Gulag -

- Varlam Shalamov (selections)
- Denis Kozlov, "Finding New Words"

On The Nationality Question after Stalin -

- Yuri Slezkine, “The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Embraced Ethnic Particularism,” page 36 (starting with the paragraph that begins with "the pursuit and propagation") to page 40 (ending with the end--hurrah!)

Russia’s Empires, pages 329-344

Week of Monday, April 27
Yuri Gagarin, the first human in space, returns to the Soviet Union to a hero’s welcome, ca. 1961.

Lecture: The Cold War and Soviet Socialism & Black Internationalism (to be uploaded on Thursday, April 23)

Readings to do in preparation for our virtual tutorial (please do your best to complete the readings in the order listed):

On The Cold War -

- Kate Brown, Plutopia (selections)
- Russia's Empires, pages TBD

On Soviet Socialism and Black Internationalism -

- Julie Hessler, “Death of an African Student in Moscow: Race, Politics, and the Cold War”
- Video: “Our Friend Angela”  (https://idp.williams.edu/idp/profile/SAML2/POST/SSO?execution=e1s1)

SECOND PRIMARY SOURCE ASSIGNMENT DUE FRIDAY, MAY 1

Week of Monday, May 4

Lecture: The Soviet South Caucasus and the Stagnation Years (to be uploaded on Thursday, April 30)

Readings to do in preparation for our virtual tutorial (please do your best to complete the readings in the order listed):

On the Soviet South Caucasus -

- Erik Scott, “Strangeness for Sale”
- Watch:

  Mimino  (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P4k2LNPRV-0&vl=en)

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P4k2LNPRV-0&vl=en)

On the Stagnation Years -
• "Stagnation: The Making of a Historical Paradigm"
• Sergei Dovlatov, *The Compromise*
• *Russia’s Empires*, pages 344-349

**Week of Monday, May 11**

A queue waits outside the first McDonalds to open in the Soviet Union, January 31, 1990.

**Lecture: Perestroika and Collapse (to be uploaded on Thursday, May 7)**

*Readings to do in preparation for our virtual tutorial (please do your best to complete the readings in the order listed):*

**On Perestroika -**

• Courtney Doucette, “Letters to Sakharov”
• *Russia’s Empires*, pages 349-354

**On Collapse -**

• *Russia’s Empires*, pages 355-362
• Watch:
Mikhail Gorbachev's Farewell Address on Soviet Central Television
(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WnIRTbmKdrU)

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WnIRTbmKdrU)

- Svetlana Alexievich, *Secondhand Time* (excerpts)
- Vladimir Putin, “Annual Address to the Assembly of the Russian Federation”

TAKE-HOME FINAL EXAM DUE FRIDAY, MAY 22 AT MIDNIGHT

WHAT TO EXPECT AND WHAT NOT TO EXPECT FROM THIS COURSE

Because this course covers nearly a century's worth of history, certain themes will receive more coverage than others. We will spend a lot of time in this course talking about Soviet politics, culture, and society. If you enjoy (or think you might enjoy) learning, reading, and talking about things like the theory of totalitarianism, Picasso's reception in the Soviet Union, and the lives of ordinary Soviet people, you've come to the right place! If, however, you want to get into the nitty gritty of Soviet foreign policy, economics, and military strategy, you will almost certainly be disappointed. I also don’t expect to utter Vladimir Putin’s name until the final week of class. Also, we will spend a lot of time this semester analyzing “visual sources” - art work, photographs, the occasional video clip - so if this is something that puts you to sleep or doesn’t enhance your learning (if you’re not a “visual learner,” whatever that may mean to you), I recommend revisiting your decision to enroll in this course.

I do not assume that those enrolled in this course know very much about Russian or Soviet history because this is an introductory course open to students of all years. For this reason, this course will contain a significant lecture component designed to deliver information efficiently and universally. I will deliver this lecture component to you weekly on Thursdays, which will provide context for the readings you do and the virtual tutorial that you participate in the following week. These weekly lectures will be no more than 45 minutes in length.

Course Summary:

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