2014

387-01 USSR 1917-1991

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This course meets Ohio Education Standards: 1.1/1.2/1.3/1.4/1.5/1.6/1.7/1.10/2.1/3.2

History Department Student Learning Outcomes: The purpose of the 300 level courses is to introduce students to a body of knowledge in a field of history, such as a period course, or a national or regional history course, or through a central concept or perspective or some combination of these. The tasks are 1) to help students acquire a body of knowledge, 2) to understand how the field came to be determined, and 3) to understand how the central questions and schools of interpretation have emerged in the field.

During this semester we will be examining the history of the USSR beginning with the Russian revolutions of 1917 through to the end of the Soviet Union in 1991. We will be devoting most of our time to materials pertaining to the first five decades of Soviet history, precisely because it is history. Despite the fact that we are not entirely sure of the course of events in the USSR during the last twenty or so years, we will attempt to at least survey the information available to us in order to better understand the sudden demise of the Soviet Union only seven years ago. Much of our work will be historiographic. The most interesting materials pertaining to Soviet history are about the controversies in interpretation rather than simply reeling off facts. Starting from 1917—there are many ways of looking at and understanding the events that have occurred in Russia and the other states that made up the Russian and Soviet empires, it will be as instructive to look at these differing viewpoints as it is to know the various stages of Soviet development.

For Russians, history, especially their own national history, has always been a controversial topic central to their image of themselves. Totalitarian societies are compelled to control the telling of their history. Because the Soviet Union was the rival of the west throughout the Cold War, American historians of Russia, along with their western colleagues, have also entered into serious disputes over interpretations of the Russian Revolution and the era of Soviet power. Some of the questions we will be examining this semester have not as yet developed a historical consensus as a result of these disputes. We will be discussing such issues as how different was the new Soviet system from its predecessor? Was Stalinism necessarily the logical outgrowth of the Revolution? What were the alternatives to Stalinism? What fundamental propositions to Western and Stalinist interpretations of the Soviet era have in common? How do they differ? Why is it when social historians participate in the historical conversation along with the political historians and political scientists who always dominated it, do some of the answers change? Why did the rediscovery of the “truth” of the Soviet era—i.e., glasnost’, play such a crucial role in bringing down the edifice of Soviet communism? Can we identify areas in which the Bolshevik/Communist regime made positive contributions? If we cannot, why is that so many contemporary Russian citizens long for the Soviet era? Finally, and perhaps most relevantly, given the events in the Caucasus, we will consider what in the Soviet period was distinctly Communist vs. what was distinctly Russian. In exploring how the Soviet empire imploded we may well gain important insights into why the Putin government has taken such a hostile position to Georgia, NATO, and the United States.
To accomplish our task we will be reading the following book:
Ronald Suny, *The Soviet Experiment*
Documents from History Sourcebook

In addition to this book, each of you will read one additional book and write an eight to ten page book review/analysis of this work. A list of appropriate books is included at the end of this syllabus. Please select your book during the first two weeks of the semester, because during the course of the semester, when appropriate, I hope that you will comment on what your author has to say about the topic at hand. In order to make such contributions possible, you will all be reading Soviet fiction, or material pertaining to interpretations of the Soviet era, or books examining historiographic issues on Soviet history. You must have my approval if you wish to read a book not included on this list. Your book review is worth 200 of 1000 points.

Journals contain some of the most exciting new work on Soviet and recent Russian history. Each of you will also be required to read two journal articles and write a short review/analysis of each article. There are three journals you may use for these reviews, all of which we maintain in our library. In addition, you can obtain relevant articles by using J-STOR through the Xavier library webpage.

*Russian Review*
*Slavic Review*
*Kritika*

Your review will be worth 200 of 1000 points. Always clear the articles with me—some articles may not be suitable for you to read because their methodology is so cutting-edge that you may not be in a position to understand the material. Also, try to concentrate on articles from the past 15 years, what makes journals exciting is that they often feature new interpretations and ideas about history and politics.

There will be a mid-term and a final exam for this course. Each of these will be a take-home and you will be expected to cite appropriate readings in answering the questions. Each of these will be worth 250 of 1000 points. Grade equivalents run according to the following pattern: A=93+; A-=90-92; B+=87-89; B=84-86; B-=80-83, etc., based on each 100 points. To calculate a grade in terms of its points, multiply the number by 2.5. The remaining 150 points of your grade will be based on your attendance and participation.

In order to facilitate your participation, you will be expected to prepare three questions or comments per week—posting them on Blackboard—that are based on our class readings, your own reading of the book or journal article, or class discussion. Go back to the questions I introduced on the first page of the syllabus and ask how they apply to the topics for the week. We will also see some films that will further our discussions. My goal is to lecture as little as possible, but rather to focus on material that will help you understand the questions of Soviet history more clearly. Please post all your questions and comments by Tuesday evening. Your regular posting will be part of your overall grade under participation.

Remember: I expect all of you to do your own original work. I take plagiarism very seriously. If you quote or paraphrase, you must cite your source. Plagiarism literally means using someone else’s words or concepts and passing them off as your own. All forms of plagiarism are cheating. Even if you attribute your text to the correct author, but quote excessively without inserting your own writing, you are engaging in a form of plagiarism. Not only do we in the History
Department regard such activities as a serious form of dishonesty, the University devotes special paragraphs to plagiarism in the catalog. Any discovery of plagiarism in any work you submit to me will result in an immediate and irrevocable grade of F on the paper or project and the possible grade of F for the semester. In short, don’t plagiarize or engage in any other forms of academic cheating!

If you are not sure what plagiarism is, or how to avoid it, consult the following websites: http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/wts/plagiarism.html or http://www.utoronto.ca/writing/plagsep.html. These websites can give you valuable information regarding plagiarism.

One of the best sites I have found for helping with writing skills is the Purdue On-line Writing Lab (OWL), whose website is http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/679/01/. It is a great resource for all kinds of writing assignments, learn to use it effectively!

Although I do not take attendance, in a class as small as ours, I get to know all of you fairly quickly and I am aware of those who do not attend regularly. I expect you to be in class and arrive on time. There are perfectly legitimate reasons for absence, including illness, or a family emergency, etc. If you miss a whole series of Friday afternoons, or are absent prior to vacations, these are not legitimate excuses—and I reserve the right to lower your grade for excessive absence. On the other hand, if you attend, participate, and fulfill your end of the bargain, you will find that I am more than reasonable in accommodating your needs as they pertain to extensions on papers, etc.

Please feel free to visit me in my office if you have any problems with the work, questions about the readings or any other matters pertaining to the class that require extra time or attention. If my hours are inconvenient, I am often in my office at other times and I will be happy to arrange an appointment with you.

TOPICS AND ASSIGNMENTS

ALWAYS BRING ASSIGNED BOOKS TO CLASS WITH YOU!

Weeks 1-2: January 13 and Jan 22
Introduction to the course, the Russian Revolutions of 1917, the Soviets take power and the Civil War.
READ: The Soviet Experiment, chs. 1-3.
We will review of the events of February to October 1917, and discuss some of the controversies interpreting them. The Bolsheviks found themselves governing with no experience in anything but as revolutionary activists. What were their plans and intentions? How did they expect to go about governing? What kind of presumptions did they have about the tasks before them? Where did they find qualified administrators? How did the Civil War force the Bolsheviks to organize? What kind of measures did they take in response to the crisis?

Please select your book for review by Friday, January 31.

Week 3: January 27
War Communism, the end of the Civil War and NEP
READ: The Soviet Experiment, chs. 3-4.

Some historians, notably Richard Pipes, maintain that the real process of terror and totalitarian rule developed towards the end of the Civil War and during the NEP. Other historians have
always looked at NEP as a period when Russian capitalism revived. How can we reconcile these points of view?

Week 4: February 3
1921-1927: Culture and Society
   The Industrialization Debate
READ: The Soviet Experiment, chs. 4-8.

One of the major controversies in Soviet history has been whether Stalinism was a direct outgrowth of Leninism or whether there were alternatives to Stalinism. During the 1920s, it was not at all clear who would succeed Lenin and what kind of policies the Party should pursue. Stephen Cohen, for example, advocates that Bukharin was not only a major rival for party leadership, but that his viewpoint and policies would have provided a different face for communism. The most important vehicle for this discussion was the debate over industrialization.

Weeks 5 and 6: February 10 and 17
The 15th Party Congress and Alternative Roads to Communism
Stalin Comes to Power and the First Five-Year Plan is Approved
READ: The Soviet Experiment, chs. 9-10

In 1927, at the 15th Party Congress, Stalin came to dominate the Communist Party, and the Five Year Plan was approved thus ending the NEP period and introducing a concerted policy to industrialize the USSR. It was also at the 15th Party Congress that Bukharin, Zinoviev, and Kamenev were effectively eliminated as potential leaders of the USSR. Is this a second Russian revolution? If so, why? How does this “second revolution,” extend or change the character of the revolution of 1917?

Your book review is due February 12

Weeks 7 and 8: February 24 and March 10
Industrialization, Collectivization and the Stalin Revolution
READ: The Soviet Experiment, chs. 10 and 12

The early 1930s were a period of great mobilization and change in Soviet society. Collectivization was accompanied by great dislocations, brutality and loss of life in rural society. At the same time, this period is portrayed as part of successful struggle rapidly to outpace the west in industrial prowess thus proving Communist superiority to capitalism.

Your midterm is due February 26

Weeks 9 and 10: March 17 and March 24
Purges and Terror
The Stalin “Counter-Revolution”
Foreign policy in the 1930s
World War II
READ: The Soviet Experiment, 11, 13, 14.
The purges or Terror constitute the most bloody and inexplicable period of Soviet rule. What was Stalin trying to accomplish? How do various historians, both Russian and Western understand this horrible period? At the same time, the Stalinist totalitarianism imposed a remarkably “conservative” system of social and cultural values on Soviet society. This “counter-revolution” from above stands in stark contrast to the experimentation in society and the arts characterizing the 1920s. How did these internal developments square with Soviet foreign policy that emphasized the creation of a United Front against fascism?

Week 11: March 31
Zhdonovshchina
Stalin’s Last Days
READ: The Soviet Experiment, chs. 15-16.
Structure of Soviet History, ch. 5, Holloway essay, and pp. 315-325.
The Stalin Years, parts VI and VII.

World War II, or the Great Fatherland War was one of the most traumatic and triumphant moments in all Russian history. In order to win, Stalin initiated policies that seemingly indicated a relaxation of the totalitarian regime. The legacy of the Terror of the 1930s, including the purge of the military, may have facilitated initial German victories, but the Soviet popular response was undoubtedly the most heroic period of Soviet history. The end of the war brought a return to repression, associated with the name of Zhdanov, one of Stalin’s closest associates. What can we make of all this? Why return to such repression?

Weeks of April 7 and April 14
Stalin’s Last Days and the Rise of Nikita Khrushchev
The Khrushchev Era and its reforms
READ: The Soviet Experiment, chs. 16-18.

Stalin’s last days were marked by an expectation of a return to Terror. Yet, at his death, his successors rejected any resumption such policies and Nikita Khrushchev consciously set about to inform the Soviet people of the worst excesses of Stalinism. We will examine this turn-about and the effect of Khrushchev’s efforts to reform Soviet Russia.

Your article review is due April 23

Weeks of April 23 and April 28
Brezhnev’s Efforts to Step Back followed by Gorbachev’s efforts at reform of the Communist system.

Every period of relaxation breeds a reaction. Or, so it would seem. Leonid Brezhnev’s regime was marked by an effort to rehabilitate Stalin and to modify the leniency of the Khrushchev years. As we know now, this period was the last gasp of an increasingly decomposing Soviet system whose leaders sought to shore it up by returning to greater and greater rigidity but never to the kind of repression characterized by the Stalin era. In the Gorbachev era, the key question is how did the crumbling edifice actually tumble and why did so few recognize how fragile the Soviet system actually was. In 1982-3, President Reagan was still talking about the “evil empire.” By 1985-86, the USSR was no longer such a threat. By 1991, it no longer existed. How did the policies of glasnost’ and perestroika characterize Gorbachev’s effort to keep the
Soviet state afloat? How did they actually contribute to its breakdown? Why do you think that specialists in Soviet affairs the world-over failed to recognize the weakness of the Soviet empire?

YOUR FINAL IS DUE on MAY 7

BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR BOOK REVIEWS

Kendall Bailes, *Technology and Society under Lenin and Stalin.*
Alan M. Ball, *Russia’s Last Capitalists: The Nepmen, 1921-1929.*
Fred Corney, *Telling October*
Orlando Figes, *Peasant Russia, Civil War: The Volga Countryside in Revolution, 1917-1921.*
Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers.*
Sheila Fitzpatrick, ed. *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928-1931.*
Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin’s Peasants.*
Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution.*
Jochnen Hellbeck, *Revolution on my Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin.*
Moshe Lewin, *Russian Peasants and Soviet Power.*
Robert Thuston, *Life and Terror in Stalin’s Russia, 1931-1941.*
Lynn Viola, *The Best Sons of the Fatherland.*
Lynn Viola, *Peasant Rebels under Stalin: Collectivization and the Culture of Peasant Resistance.*
Mark von Hagen, *Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship.*
Dimitri Volkogonov, *Stalin: Triumph and Tragedy.*

Fiction:
Mikhail Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita.*
Mikhail Sholokhov, *And Quiet Flows the Don.*
Mikhail Sholokhov, *The Don Flows Home to the Sea.*
Alexander Solzhenytsin, *First Circle.*
Alexander Solzhenytsin, *Cancer Ward.*

Journals for Article Review:
Russian Review
Slavic Review
Russian History
Kritika
If there is a particular book that you want to read for your review and it does not appear on this list, please discuss it with me. As you identify a journal article, please be sure to discuss your choice with me.