

Spring 2021: Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday, 3:00-5:00 CST

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Office hours: Monday and  
Friday from 11-12;  
Wednesday from 4-5

The history of the Soviet Union is a story of great contrasts. In October 1917, when the tsarist regime fell, Russia became one of the most chaotic and fast-changing revolutionary societies in all of history; by the time the USSR collapsed in December 1991, it was a stagnant, bureaucratic regime led by a corrupt and entrenched elite. The leaders of the Soviet Union claimed that they had liberated their country from centuries of tsarist oppression, but they ended up unleashing mass repression and state-sponsored violence on a massive scale. The Soviet regime could claim great successes—like the dramatic growth of literacy and the launch of the first man-made satellite in history—but it never lived up to the grand rhetoric of its leaders and became one of the world's most repressive states.

This course will examine the history of the USSR from the October Revolution of 1917 until the regime's sudden collapse at the end of 1991, focusing on the country's social and political history. Ever since the Bolsheviks seized power in 1917, scholars have debated the meaning and the legacy of the October Revolution; in every period of Soviet history, the country's leaders claimed to be following the true path of Communism, while denouncing their rivals (and sometimes their predecessors) for straying from socialism. This class will examine how the nature of Soviet communism was redefined by each successive generation and will seek to relate each part of the Soviet experience to the larger trajectory of the country's history. Was Stalinism a departure from the revolution's original ideology, or the inevitable result of 1917? Was the Khrushchev era an unprecedented liberalization of the regime's policies, or an attempt to return to the country's Leninist roots? We will not only seek to answer questions like these, but to examine the ways that everyday citizens experienced Communist rule and to understand how the revolutionary enthusiasm that at times dominated the country's political discourse ultimately gave way to the cynicism and corruption of the USSR's final days.

The following books are all on sale at the college bookstore and on course reserve at the library:

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*  
Ronald Grigor Suny, ed., *The Structure of Soviet History: Essays and Documents*

Many readings for this course are primary documents or secondary texts from Ron Suny's *The Structure of Soviet History* (listed above). On the schedule of readings below, those texts will be listed with the notation "[Suny]". Other readings (marked "[Pioneerweb]") will be available on the course's Blackboard site, either as pdfs or as links to library resources.



- explain how the Soviet Union was shaped by its Russian historical and geographical context, and the ways in which it was a modern political system shaped by forces that transcended national boundaries.

*Critical Reading Goals*

By the end of the course, students will have refined their ability to:

- interpret a primary source (historical document) by analyzing its structure, audience, goals, and biases;
- identify and critique the argument of a secondary text (a book or article by a present-day

(15% of your grade). This paper will be an analysis of the movie *The Death of Stalin*. It will be due at 5 PM on March 17.

A (20% of your grade.) This exam will be a take-home assignment, less formal in nature than one of the other papers. It will most likely include an essay section and a section where you identify and explain key concepts from the course.

(20% of your grade). Although this class will occasionally include brief lectures on the course material, it is primarily intended as a discussion course. The final requirement for the class, then, is active and informed participation in class discussions. You should come to class having read the day's reading and thought about its contents; you should be ready to talk about the course material, to remember the main strategies we'll use for analyzing and discussing primary and secondary sources, and to help the class have a productive discussion in whatever way seems most appropriate to you at the time.

Here are some general observations about class participation:

- Class participation is the largest part of your grade for several reasons, but the most important one is this: I believe that being able to delve into an intelligent, nuanced, civil, and respectful discussion with your peers is one of the most important skills a liberal arts education can give you. Moreover, having everyone participate—in one way or another—makes the experience better for everyone.
- Remember that there are many ways to participate in class discussions. The strongest participants in discussion will often make comments that analyze the readings (rather than merely recapping them), but I expect that active participants in discussion will play different roles at different times. For example, here are some different rhetorical moves you might make in class:
  - Answer a question posed by me or a classmate
  - Ask a question for the class to consider
  - Summarize a reading or part of a reading
  - Provide evidence or an example for a point someone else has made
  - Disagree (respectfully!) with a previous comment from class
  - Agree with a previous comment from class while adding an example or evidence
  - Connect two comments made by different discussion participants
  - Connect the day's reading to an earlier reading
- In general, any form of participation that shows engagement with the material and helps the class to understand the course's subject matter is fair game. Remember, too, that class participation depends not only on speaking, but on listening—both to me and to your classmates. Be respectful, listen carefully, and be ready to respond to your classmates and not just to me.
- All else being equal, it will help you to provide evidence for your arguments when you speak in class. Ground your participation in the text: be ready to quote the readings or to point out specific passages that you find useful, significant, or relevant.
- You should therefore come to class with copies of the day's reading and with your notes on what you've read. (You are welcome to bring the readings either in hard copies or on a computer, but you should remember that it is often easier to mark significant passages in

a paper copy of the readings.) In particular, I recommend that you make note of quotations and details in the readings that you find especially compelling.

- Although I hope that all students will take part in the discussion (ideally speaking at least once per class session on average), remember that the thoughtfulness of your comments is generally more important than the quantity of your remarks.
  - I also realize that some students will always be more talkative or more reserved than others. I'm happy to talk to you at any time about ways you might become more involved, and I think it's part of my job to make sure the classroom atmosphere is conducive to a broad, inclusive discussion.
  - Students sometimes ask if talking to me in office hours can substitute for participation in class. My answer: not entirely. Talking to me in class can show engagement with the material, so if you've been quiet in class, it can help me understand how you've understood our course materials. (If you've been active in class, I'm also happy to talk to you, but coming to office hours won't improve your grade.) On the other hand, I value class participation in part because discussion helps all your classmates to understand the course material and to have a good class experience, so coming to office hours is never a perfect substitute for class discussion.
- Class participation depends on attendance. I'll therefore keep track of your attendance throughout the semester; missing class once or twice won't affect your grade, but if you have more than two unexcused absences, your participation grade will go down. If you have more than six unexcused absences, you will generally receive a participation grade of F or zero. Please contact me at least a week in advance if you will be missing class because of an athletic event or another campus activity.
- If you will be missing a class, you can make sure your absence does not affect your grade by sending me a 300-to-500 word email on the day's reading. Under normal circumstances, this email will be due within 24 hours of the class period; it should analyze the day's reading using the approach discussed in our primary and secondary source handouts or answer a question I posed by email to the class.
- Finally, I will generally give each student a brief "participation update" each time I send you feedback on a written assignment. I also encourage you to check in with me at any point if you have questions about the class or about how you can become more involved in the discussion.

(5%). Because online learning is hard on everyone and can be unpredictable, 5% of your grade will be a bonus, which will be equal to the highest grade you received on one of the categories above. (That is, if you averaged a B+ on class participation, your 3-page paper, 5-page paper, and exam and an A- on your document analyses, an additional 5% of your grade will be an A-.)

Each student in the class can have one (and only one) 48-hour extension on a writing assignment over the course of the semester, with the exception of the document analyses (which will go over material we discuss in class.) To claim this extension, send me a brief email asking for an extension before the assignment's deadline; I will grant this extension automatically, so there is no need for you to explain why you need more time. Keep in mind, however, that once you've received an extension on an assignment, I will not give you an extension on another except in the

case of a documented emergency. (Note, too, that you cannot break up your one 48-hour extension into two 24-hour extensions or a 2-hour extension and a 46-hour extension.) In the absence of an extension, late assignments will be penalized one third of a letter grade per day.

The first two written assignments of the semester—the document analyses due in February—are due by email the night before class. Since we will be discussing these documents in class the next day, it is not possible to get an extension on them (since this would give you an advantage on the paper relative to your classmates.) If you cannot complete one of your short document analyses by the deadline, I will give you the chance to do an analysis of a document from later in the semester instead; however, if you choose to exercise this option, you will not have the chance to get an extension on a later paper except in the case of an emergency.

My goal is to create as inclusive a classroom as possible and to meet the needs of all of my students. I therefore encourage students with documented disabilities, including invisible or non-apparent disabilities such as chronic illness, learning disabilities, and psychiatric disabilities, to discuss reasonable accommodations with me. You will also need to have a conversation about and provide documentation of your disability to the Coordinator for Student Disability Resources, Jae Hirschman.

I will also, of course, excuse absences related to religious observance and will be flexible with deadlines that conflict with any religious holidays. Please let me know early in the semester if you expect to miss class because of a religious observance.

Monday, February 1: Introduction to the Course

Reading: Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution*, intro and ch. 1

Tuesday, February 2: Prelude to Revolution

Reading: Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy*, ch. 1 [Pioneerweb]  
Semen Kanatchikov,

Friday, February 5:





Monday, March 1: Voices of the Purges

Reading: Eugenia Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, excerpts [Pioneerweb]

Reading: *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

Friday, March 12: The Space Race

Reading: Amy Nelson, "Cold War Celebrity and the Courageous Canine Scout"  
[Pioneerweb]  
Slava Gerovitch, "The Human Inside a Propaganda Machine: The Public Image  
and Professional Identity of Soviet Cosmonauts" [Pioneerweb]

Monday, March 15: The Brezhnev Era

Reading: Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment*, pp. 447–475 [Pioneerweb]  
John Bushnell, "The 'New Soviet Man' Turns Pessimist" [Suny]  
James R. Millar, "The Little Deal: Brezhnev's Contribution to Acquisitive  
Socialism" [Suny]

Tuesday, March 16: Life under Brezhnev

Film: *The Irony of Fate* (Eldar Riazanov, dir.) (available online)

Wednesday, March 17:

Thursday, March 18: The Final Years of the USSR

Reading: Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment*, pp. 479-514 [Pioneerweb]  
Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted*, excerpts [Pioneerweb]  
excerpt from Mikhail Gorbachev's memoirs [Suny]

Friday, March 19: The End of the USSR

Reading: Alexander Dallin, "Causes of the Collapse of the USSR" [Suny]  
Nina Andreeva, "I Cannot Give Up My Principles" [Suny]  
"The Rehabilitation of Bukharin" [Suny]  
"Boris Yeltsin Resigns from the Communist Party" [Suny]

Wednesday, March 24: final exam is due