Cultures and Contexts: Russia – between East and West
Syllabus Spring 2012

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Office hours: Tue & Thu, 14:00-15:00, Richtruv House

Course description
The main subject of this course are the key ideas, beliefs, and values that have shaped the worldviews and cultural identities of Russians. One of the primary goals of the course is to provide students with an opportunity for improving their skills to analyze complex dynamics of interaction between cultures and the processes of identity formation at cultural crossroads, therefore the intellectual and cultural history of Russia will be explored in juxtaposition to parallel developments of Russia’s European and Asian neighbors. As the course is intended as a case study in cross-disciplinary inquiry into intellectual cultures that may differ in some respects from the traditions that the students may currently inhabit in contemporary North America, the students will be encouraged to think critically and with a historically informed sensibility about the diverse perceptions of reality expressed in the principal textual and artistic images of Russian culture, including those which are widely perceived as Russia’s unique contribution to world culture. The through-line of the course is the emergence of individual and collective self struggling for freedom of self-determination within the context of societies whose norms and values - expressed in particular construals of such fundamental categories as “community”, “national identity”, “religion”, “morality”, “belief”, “ritual”, “gender” - hinder such aspirations.

Grading policy
Class participation: 20% (Students will be expected to have read the assigned literature prior to class and to participate actively in the discussion.)

2 Short Papers (min. 5 pages each): 2 x 15% - to be handed by the end of Week 6 & 12
Short Paper 1: Sources of Russian Cultural Identity; Short Paper 2: Russia’s Cultural Space In-Between East and West

Midterm Paper (min. 7 pages): 20% - to be handed by the end of Week 8
The topic to be chosen by each student from the list discussed by the lecturer in Week 3. The list of topics will be organized around the main cultural themes explored in Weeks 1-7.

Final Paper (min. 10 pages): 30% - to be handed in by the end of Week 15
The topics will be formulated in the course of individual consultations of the lecturer with students, taking into account both the content and character of the course, and each student’s academic background.

Schedule of classes
Week 1 (14 Feb & 16 Feb): Course Overview and Introduction: Stereotypes of Russia
Recommended Readings: Orlando Figes’s Natasha’s Dance: A Cultural History of Russia is recommended to all students as a beautifully written introductory-level companion to the entire course. Students familiar with Figes’s overview of the cultural history of Russia will find the assigned readings more enjoyable and easier to study.
Week 2 (21 Feb & 23 Feb): **Defining Vectors of Russian Destiny: Geopolitics and Religion**


*Listening* to Russian Church Music (“The Divine Liturgy of St John Chrysostom”)

Week 3 (28 Feb & 1 March): **Community-binding Power of Suffering: the “Mongol Yoke”, Ivan the Terrible, and the “Time of Trouble”**


*Supplementary Readings*: Freeze, Chs. 2-3; Riasanovsky, Chs. 11-19.

*Listening* to excerpts from Mussorgsky’s opera *Boris Godunov* with a commentary

Week 4 (6 March & 8 March): **Ritual Space, Public Space: St. Petersburg - Peter the Great’s Window on Europe**


*Supplementary Readings*: Freeze, Chs. 4-5; Riasanovsky, Chs. 20-24.

*Watching* Aleksandr Sokurov’s film “Russian Ark” (2002)

Week 5 (13 March & 15 March): **Call to Liberty: Challenging Tsarist Autocracy**


*Supplementary Readings*: Freeze, Ch. 6; Riasanovsky, Chs. 26-30; Excerpts from Frederic Chopin’s letters (Links to fragments of the relevant texts in the public domain will be provided in class.)

*Listening* to excerpts from Tchaikovsky’s opera *Eugene Onegin* with a commentary and to the selection of Chopin’s works with a commentary on his life and works.

Week 6 (20 March & 22 March): **Moral Dilemmas of the Russian Elites in the Literary Mirror of the ‘Golden Age’**

*Short paper due* Exploration of the main existential themes of the great Russian novels (Turgenev, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy)

*Primary Readings*: Links to fragments of the relevant texts in the public domain will be provided in class.
Week 7 (27 March & 29 March): Between Enlightened Rationalism and Romantic Nationalism: Westernizers vs. Slavophiles


Weeks 8 (3 April & 5 April): Light from the East: Dostoevsky and Tolstoy on Russia and the West

Midterm paper due

Discussion of Dostoevsky’s and Tolstoy’s perceptions of the West

Primary Readings: Links to fragments of the relevant texts in the public domain will be provided in class.

Week 9 – Spring Break – no classes

Week 10 (17 April & 19 April): Listening to Subordinate Voices: Women, Serfs, and Industrial Workers in Imperial Russia


Supplementary Readings: Selection of short stories by Anton Chekhov (Links to fragments of the relevant texts in the public domain will be provided in class.)

Watching: Bernard Rose’s film Anna Karenina (1997)

Week 11 (24 April & 26 April): The Soviet Experience: Transformations of Identities in the Soviet Russia


Supplementary Readings: Freeze, Ch. 9-12; Riasanovsky, Chs. 35-43

Week 12

Short paper due

1 May – National Holiday – no classes

3 May: The Empire of Fear: Responses to the Soviet Terror


Supplementary Readings: Freeze, Chs. 9-12; Riasanovsky, Chs. 35-43.

Week 13

8 May- National Holiday – no classes

10 May: Individual vs. System

Primary Readings: George Orwell, Animal Farm


Listening to excerpts of D. Shostakovich’s compositions with a commentary on his life and works
Week 14 (15 May & 17 May): **Escape from Freedom? Post-Soviet Russia**


Week 15: **Concluding Discussion: Where is Russia Heading?**

*Final paper due*

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### Bibliography

*N.B.: All books included in this bibliography are available at the library of the New York University in Prague*

#### Primary Sources:


#### Secondary Sources:


