

REES 0430 Masterpieces Of 20th-Century Russian Literature

Dr. Aleksey Berg: aleksey@sas.upenn.edu

All readings/lectures/discussions in English
Fulfills Sector III: Arts and Letters

"Only in Russia is poetry respected. They kill you for it," famously quipped the poet Osip Mandelstam, who died in Joseph Stalin's concentration camps. Russia is a society that takes literature seriously—one in which the pen is assumed to have direct historical consequences. In this course, we will study how twentieth century Russian literature actively participated in war, revolution, totalitarian dictatorship, and resistance. The masterworks we will study open windows into worlds of revolutionary rapture, moral uplift in the face of tyranny, courageous subversion of the repressive state, and historical reflection on its failures. Our readings will range from an avant-garde play intended to rewire your mind, to an epic representation of revolutionary social transformation, to surreal and absurdist representations of a world gone mad.

Course Work:

Students in the course will write four two-page response papers of, a longer analytic essay, and a number of unscheduled, short in-class writing assignments. All your papers should be double-spaced, in Times twelve-point font, with one-inch margins on all sides. All written work will be submitted through Canvas.

Course goals:

The main purposes of this course are twofold:

- 1) To allow you to learn about the Soviet Union, a world complete distinct from our own, in all of its human complexity. While the economic, political and cultural realities of the era of state socialism are no more, they once appeared to contend for dominance across the globe and to hold out a possible model for the future of humanity. In many ways, although the Soviet experience is often dismissed as "irrelevant" to present-day realities, it in fact lay the foundation for them. Understanding that era will help you make sense of our world today.
- 2) To allow you to hone your skills as interpreters of literary works in their historical context, and to allow you to hone critical thinking and writing skills that allow you to understand the meaning of those works, both within those contexts and as they pertain to us in the here and now. These historical, critical and writing skills are portable: they will be useful to you in the future in any analytical writing task.