

# Russia and the West

Fall 2024

REES-0190-401 / HIST-0824-401 / COML-2020-401

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Mondays & Wednesdays 1:45-3:05

Office Hours: Tuesdays at 2pm in Williams 752, or by appointment

## Course Description

“Europe took the path of fire,” wrote the Russian poet Maximilian Voloshin in 1924, “but we bear in our hearts a culture of explosion.” This claim—from Voloshin’s poem “Russia”—is many things at once: national fantasy, historical projection, aesthetic project, and a characterization of imperial violence as natural force, as inevitable and impersonal as fire. Perhaps most of all, though, Voloshin’s claim is staked on relation: his vision of Russian history acquires its form and meaning in binary juxtaposition to the West. Indeed the question of Russia’s self-understanding in relation to the West had been a central preoccupation of Russian thought for centuries, long before Voloshin’s poem framed it in such apocalyptic terms. And this question is very much alive in our own present, and with real and violent intensity—as any casual scroll through the daily headlines will confirm, particularly since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

With the unfolding contemporary situation as our context and backdrop, this course will explore the dimensions of the Russia/West relationship in the context of Russia’s anxiety about its own identity (what does it mean to be “Russian”? And, while we’re at it—what does it mean to be “Western”?) from the medieval period to the present day, with special focus on the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. We will pay particular attention to the politics and aesthetics of representation, both of “the West” and of “Russian-ness,” in Russian literature, philosophy, film, and music (including work by Dostoevsky, Chekhov, Blok, Mandelstam, Tarkovsky, Muratova, among many others, as well as music from Tchaikovsky to Schnittke to the phenomenon of Russian rap).

## Class Structure for Fall 2024:

- This course will be held in-person, with twice-weekly meetings on Mondays and Wednesdays. Each class session will have some combination of lecture and discussion.
- Weekly readings will range from around 100 to 200 pages.
- A short discussion post will be due the night before class. Each student will be responsible for one response per week.
- Each student will give one (thoroughly prepared, thoughtful) in-class presentation on a text of their choice, with accompanying bibliography.

- Final paper of approximately 2000 words, due at the end of the course. There will be opportunity to receive draft feedback on the paper.

**Outline of Assignments and Assessments:**

- Participation, 30%
- Presentation, 20%
- Discussion board posts (~200 words), 20%
- Final paper (~2000 words), 30%

**Required Books:**

This course will require purchase of up to three novel- or novella-length paperbacks. More detailed information will be made available prior to the beginning of the spring semester. All other texts will be made available on Canvas.