

HIST 2257/REES 2730: Russia's 20th Century: History Through Literature Fall 2024

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T 1:45-4:45

To study Russia's twentieth-century history through its literature is to come face-to-face with a country for which works of fiction have often served, as the writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn put it, as "a second government." 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 and moral uplift in the face of tyranny, of history as a gigantic wheel that lifts some people – and writers - up even as it crushes others. Our readings will range from an avant-garde work intended to rewire your mind, to an epic representation of revolutionary social transformation, to surreal and absurdist representations of a world gone mad. In other words: fasten your seatbelts low and tight; turbulence ahead!

We will read literary works by such authors as Chingiz Aitmatov, Vasily Aksyenov, Svetlana Alexievich, Isaac Babel, Mikhail Bulgakov, Sergei Dovlatov, Venedikt Erofeev, Fyodor Gladkov, Vasily Grossman, Ilya Ilf & Evgenii Petrov, Ludmilla Petrushevskaya, Andrey Platonov, Varlam Shalamov, Andrei Sinyavsky, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, Yuri Trifonov, and Evgeny Zamyatin.

Class Structure

Preparation for each class will include reading literary texts, works on history, primary sources, and an occasional film. These will be available for purchase or delivered via the course Canvas site. Class meetings will be devoted to seminar discussion of the assigned materials.

Written Work

Reflections: Some weeks, you will have the option to write a short (500 words), informal reflection on a question that will propel us into discussion during our class meeting, graded with a check minus (65%), check (85%), check plus (95%), or check plus plus (100%). In the course of the semester, you are required to complete at least five such reflections from a total of ten opportunities.

Paper One: Close Reading—The first paper, of 3-4 pages (maximum 1000 words), will be due on Sunday, September 14 at 10pm. This paper will undertake a close reading of one of several passages from a literary work that we will select together.

Paper Two: Short Analytical Essay—The second paper, of 5-6 pages (maximum 1800 words), will be due on Sunday, October 26 at 10pm. This paper will respond to one of several questions that ask you to analyze one or more literary or filmic works in relation to historical contexts and cultural history. Additional research in and reference to primary or secondary sources beyond those works assigned in class will be optional.

Final Paper: Longer Analytic Essay—The final paper, of 8-10 pages (maximum 3000 words), will be due on Monday, December 9, at 10pm. As with Paper Two, this paper will respond to one of several questions that ask you to analyze one or more literary or filmic works in relation to historical contexts and cultural history. Additional research in and reference to primary or secondary sources beyond those works assigned in class will be optional.

Grading:

Your final grade will be calculated according to the following weights: Participation: 24%; Weekly Reflections: 10%; Paper One: 16%; Paper Two: 20%; Final Paper: 30%

Note on Participation Grading:

On October 1, November 5 and after the end of the semester you will receive a grade for class participation. The first of these grades you will assign to yourself, and we will report to you what grade we would have assigned had it been our decision. The second grade will be the average of a grade assigned by you and one assigned by the instructors. We will decide on and assign the last participation grade at the end of the semester. The final grade for participation will be the average of these three marks. In sum, 50% of your participation grade will be self-assigned, and 50% will be assigned by the instructors.