SS375: Politics of the Post-Soviet States

Course Overview

Россия - Сфинкс. Ликуя и скорбя, And drenched in black blood,
И обливаясь черной кровью, It gazes, gazes, gazes at you,
Она глядит, глядит, глядит в тебя With hatred and with love!..
И с ненавистью, и с любовью!...

– Aleksandr Blok, “The Scythians” (1918)

Russian symbolist poet Aleksandr Blok’s manifesto, “The Scythians,” penned in the wake of the Russian Revolution and addressed to the “old world” of Europe, captures Russia’s long, conflicted (some might even say tortured) relationship with the West – and ultimately, with itself. What is Russia, and what is Russia’s place in the world? These are the existential questions over which the Scythians of Blok’s poem agonize, and they are the fundamental questions with which we will struggle in SS375 as we explore the politics, economics, and society of Russia and the post-Soviet States.

Perhaps more than any other country or region of the world, the contemporary politics of Russia and the other successor states of the Soviet Union are inextricably intertwined with and forged by historical forces reaching back centuries across time and across the vast Eurasian steppe. Thus, the course begins where any class on Russia must: with some history. In Part I, we explore Russia’s pre-revolutionary history and the enduring legacy of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Recognizing that the shock waves radiating from “Red October” extended far beyond the Ten Days that Shook the World memorialized in journalist John Reed’s famous account, we further examine the Soviet political, economic, and social system, paying special attention to how the Marxist-Leninist ideology written into the Soviet regime’s genetic code explains not only the regime’s violent nature, but also its seismic collapse in 1991.

Part II begins amid the rubble of the Soviet collapse, surveying the broken pieces of state and regime as the engineers of a new post-Soviet reality sought to build new polities, economies, and even societies from the wreckage. In this section we will wrestle with key questions in the study of post-communist politics: why did the post-Soviet states chart such divergent political paths after transition? Why was political and economic reform successful in some countries but a failure in others? How do post-Soviet citizens interact with the state and engage in political activity, especially in the face of corruption and increasingly restricted political rights? Finally, what are the key elements of “Putinism” - is there even such a thing? Will the House that Vladimir Built – Russia’s Putinist edifice – outlive its architect?

Part III examines critically Russia’s place in the world, seeking to understand the ends, ways, and means that inform Russia’s strategic interactions with its neighbors and beyond. Through an exploration of Russian
grand strategy, Moscow’s use of frozen conflicts and hybrid warfare to pursue political objectives, and an increasingly antagonistic relationship with the West, we will come to terms with the case-specific question that cadets first encountered in its general form in SS307: Why does Russia do what it does? The course concludes with an opportunity for cadets to navigate for themselves the treacherous terrain of foreign policy making in the face of an aggressively revisionist Russia in Eastern Europe. Through a simulation of a national security crisis and NSC meeting, cadets will learn about the policy making process as well as the challenges that NATO faces in defending its Baltic members.

And so, the course concludes where Blok began: is Russia in the 21st century to be a part of Western civilization, or is her destiny to stand apart, gazing upon the West “with hatred and with love”?

Student Learning Objectives

Through SS375, each cadet will develop a sophisticated understanding of the complex interaction between politics, economics, and society in Russia and the other post-Soviet states. Furthermore, they will develop the knowledge, analytical skills, and communication skills to support their further intellectual development as they progress through the International Affairs major at West Point:

1. Think Critically: Students will think critically about the core puzzles and questions associated with the post-Soviet region, employing intellectual pluralism to evaluate different explanations for political, economic, and socio-cultural change and continuity.

2. Read Critically: Students will read critically a wide spectrum of academic, policy, and popular literature on the post-Soviet states in order to understand, analyze, and critique the arguments, methods, and evidence that are used in the literature on post-communist politics.

3. Gain Disciplinary Knowledge: Students will understand and critically engage the key definitions, theories, debates, and disagreements in the field of post-communist politics in order to understand how the post-Soviet states have diverged in their political, economic, and social development since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

4. Conduct Research: Students will identify the social science methodologies and data sources appropriate for a policy-oriented research project and memo, and will have the ability to conduct empirical research using those methodologies.

5. Assess and Develop Policy: Students will integrate and apply knowledge to describe, explain, and analyze a current policy challenge in the post-Soviet region, as well as develop policy options for addressing that challenge.

6. Communicate Effectively: Students will communicate clear and effective analysis and arguments about complex political issues issues verbally and in writing.
Requirements

Grading Scale

The following grade scale will be used to assess cadet work:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>QP</th>
<th>Subjective Interpretation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mastery</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A+</td>
<td>97.0-100.0</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>Above standards of writing</td>
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<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>93.0-96.9</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>Mastery of concepts</td>
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<tr>
<td>A-</td>
<td>90.0-92.9</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>Can apply concepts to new situations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Proficiency</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>B+</td>
<td>87.0-89.9</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>Meets standards of writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>83.0-86.9</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>Solid understanding of concepts</td>
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<tr>
<td>B-</td>
<td>80.0-82.9</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>Strong foundation for future work</td>
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<tr>
<td>Passing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>C+</td>
<td>77.0-79.9</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>Approaching standards of writing</td>
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<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>73.0-76.9</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>Acceptable foundation for future work</td>
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<tr>
<td>Below Standard</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Acceptable understanding of concepts</td>
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<tr>
<td>C-</td>
<td>70.0-72.9</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>Below standards of writing</td>
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<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>67.0-69.9</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>Doubtful understanding of concepts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Failing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Weak foundation for future work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Below 67.0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>Unacceptable standards of writing</td>
</tr>
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Graded Assignments

The course requirements, worth 1,000 points in total, are as follows:

1. **Assigned Readings, Lessons 1-30**: The key to success in SS375 is completing the assigned readings before each lesson. Though there are no points assigned directly to readings, they are the daily “homework” for the class, just like a problem set in math. Failure to do the readings might not have an immediate grade impact comparable to failure to submit a problem set, but the long-term consequences are significant: success or failure on ALL of the course graded events below hinges on your comprehension and utilization of the ideas presented in readings.

2. **Response Papers (200 points each, due 19 SEP/31 OCT)**: Cadets will write two response papers of approximately 1,000 words each. In each response paper, cadets will respond to a prompt that requires them to think critically and synthetically about course lessons, readings, and class discussions.

3. **CFR Model Diplomacy Simulation**: The capstone project of SS375 is a simulation of a National Security Council meeting responding to a crisis in the Baltic region involving Russia and NATO allies. The simulation is based on a scenario developed by the Council on Foreign Relations’ “Model Diplomacy” program. Cadets will be assigned in small groups to represent a specific agency or individual involved in the U.S. foreign policy making process. Cadets will read the assigned CFR materials, collaborate with their partners, and conduct additional research as needed to prepare for the simulation exercise. The graded components of the capstone simulation are as follows:

   - **Position Memo (300 points, due 14 DEC)**: Each group will prepare a two-page (single spaced) position memo. This memo is written from the perspective of your assigned role: it will present a set of policy options for consideration by the NSC and recommend one of them to the president.

   - **NSC Meeting Simulation (200 points, held during TEE period)**: We will conduct the simulation NSC meeting during assigned SS375 TEE period. During the meeting, each group will present their opening position for consideration by the president (Round 1). Round 2 consists of
discussion and deliberation of policy options by all members of the NSC. In Round 3, each group will make their final recommendation and the president will make a policy decision. Following the announcement of the president’s decision, we will set aside assigned roles and conduct a wrap-up and reflection of the simulation and its results. Grades for the simulation will be based on the quality of an individual’s participation in the meeting and discussion.

4. Class Participation (100 Points): As a seminar-style class, active cadet engagement is vital to creating the proper learning environment in SS375. Students will be awarded up to 100 points for their participation in class discussions. Worthwhile participation is based on completing assigned readings, good note taking during reading and in class, careful pre-class preparation, and thoughtful contributions to in-class discussion. Far more important than quantity of participation is the quality of an individual’s participation in class.

5. Bonus Points (Priceless, but 20 points max): SS375 cadets are required to join the course Facebook group “Politology” (https://www.facebook.com/groups/irtopia/), which will serve as an online forum for our class.\footnote{All cadets are required to join the Facebook group during the first week of classes and remain members for the duration of the semester. When the semester is over, you’re free to leave the group, but you’re also welcome to stay in it if you’d like to stay connected with the current events posted in the future. It is my policy to only accept friend requests from 2LTs and higher. If you’re interested in staying in touch after graduation, please wait until that time to send a request.} I will frequently post articles and items of interest that relate to course topics, and encourage you to do the same. Cadets can earn 5 bonus points (up to a max of 20) for each article they post with a paragraph of commentary linking that article to a concept from class.\footnote{In order to receive bonus points, articles must be posted NLT 3 December - the purpose of the bonus opportunity is to encourage active engagement throughout the semester, not a desperate last-minute flurry.} If you do not have a Facebook account, you may send your article and commentary to me, and I will post on your behalf.

**Guest Lectures**

We will have two required guest lectures during the semester:

- 15 October, 1235-1350: COL(ret) Richard Hooker.\footnote{COL(ret)Hooker served from April 2017 until July 2018 as special assistant to the president and Senior Director for Europe and Russia on the National Security Council.}
- 6 December, 1235-1350: Ambassador Michael McFaul.\footnote{Ambassador McFaul served from 2009 - 2011 as special assistant to the president and Senior Director of Russian and Eurasian Affairs on the NSC. From December 2011 - February 2014, he served as the United States Ambassador to Russia. Since returning to his position as a political science professor at Stanford University, AMB McFaul has been an outspoken critic of the Putin regime and its foreign and domestic policies.}

**Course Readings**

All assigned readings in the syllabus are available for download as a zip file on the SS375 BlackBoard page.

You are required to bring hard copies of all assigned readings/texts to class on the day that we discuss them. Much of our work in class will require close readings of scholarly writing, so it is essential that everyone has the readings at their fingertips during class.

Cadets should also get in the habit of following news from Russia and the former Soviet Union on a daily basis. The following are some reputable sources for doing so:


1. All cadets are required to join the Facebook group during the first week of classes and remain members for the duration of the semester. When the semester is over, you’re free to leave the group, but you’re also welcome to stay in it if you’d like to stay connected with the current events posted in the future. It is my policy to only accept friend requests from 2LTs and higher. If you’re interested in staying in touch after graduation, please wait until that time to send a request.
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Part I  The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union

1. The Soviet Experiment: Why Socialism? And Why in Russia? (21 August)

- Read SS375 Syllabus

2. Revolution and Its Legacy (23 August)


3. The Soviet Political System (27 August)


4. Life Under Communism (31 August, no class meeting)

Dr. Person has to miss class to present a paper at the American Political Science Association annual conference in Boston, but you will be better people for having read the pieces below. The following readings by two of the Soviet Union’s greatest exiled writers give but a fleeting impression of life under communism. The opening chapter of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s epic, The Gulag Archipelago, describes how the Stalinist secret police (the NKVD, predecessor to the KGB) conducted arrests during the purges of the 1930s and again after the war (as in Solzhenitsyn’s own case). The elegantly composed essay by Joseph Brodsky paints a more ordinary – but no less fascinating – picture of the writer’s early life growing up in a post-war Leningrad communal apartment. Both are literary masterpieces - enjoy reading them.


For those interested in truly coming to terms with the nature of the Soviet system, there is no substitute for a deep immersion in the incredibly rich body of fiction and nonfiction literature produced by Soviet writers – dissidents and disciples alike – throughout the 20th century. A more complete list of 20th century Russian literature worth reading appears at the end of the syllabus.
5. The Soviet Economic System (6 September)

6. The Soviet Union as a Multiethnic Empire (11 September)

7. The Soviet Collapse 1: Systemic Institutional Failure (13 September)

8. The Soviet Collapse 2: Nationalism and Mass Mobilization (17 September)
   - Response Paper 1 Due 19 September NLT 1600

Part II Brave New World: The Politics of Post-Communism

9. Trajectories from Communism (21 September)

10. Democratization in Post-Communist Countries (25 September)
11. Rebuilding State and Regime (27 September)

- M Steven Fish. “When more is less: Superexecutive power and political underdevelopment in Russia.” In *Russia In The New Century*. Westview Press, 2001

12. The Politics of Economic Reform (1 October)


13. Political Economy of Post-Communism (5 October)


14. Corruption and the Rule of Law (10 October)


15. Political Parties after Communism (12 October)

- Taras Kuzio. “Impediments to the emergence of political parties in Ukraine.” *Politics* 34, no. 4 (2014)

15 October: Guest lecture by COL(ret) Richard Hooker. Time/location TBD

16. Elections and Voting (16 October)

- Mikhail Myagkov, Peter C Ordeshook, and Dimitry Shakin. “Fraud or fairytales: Russia and Ukraine’s electoral experience.” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 21, no. 2 (2005)
17. Public Opinion and Regime Support (18 October)


18. The Politics of Identity and Historical Memory (22 October)

- Oxana Shevel. “Russian nation-building from Yel’tsin to Medvedev: ethnic, civic or purposefully ambiguous?” Europe-Asia Studies 63, no. 2 (2011)

19. Revolution Redux: The Color Revolutions (26 October)

Guest lecture: Ambassador Doug Lute


20. Protest and Political Action (30 October)

Response Paper 2 due 31 October NLT 1600


21. The Return of Authoritarianism (2 November, modified schedule)

- Vladimir Gel’man. “THE RISE AND DECLINE OF ELECTORAL AUTHORITARIANISM IN RUSSIA.” Demokratizatsiya 22, no. 4 (2014)

22. Putin’s System (6 November)

Part III  International Relations of the Post-Soviet States

23. Russian Grand Strategy (8 November)

- Stephen Kotkin. “Russia’s perpetual geopolitics.” Foreign Affairs 95, no. 3 (2016)
- Fyodor Lukyanov. “Putin’s Foreign Policy: The Quest to Restore Russia’s Rightful Place.” Foreign Affairs 95, no. 3 (2016)

24. Frozen Conflicts in the Former Soviet Union (13 November)

- Robert Person. “Here’s why Putin wants to topple Ukraine’s government, not to engineer a frozen conflict.” The Washington Post, October 6, 2015

25. Hybrid Warfare: The Russian Way of War? (16 November)

Guest lecture: Dr. Lionel Beehner, West Point Modern War Institute


26. Russia’s War against Ukraine (27 November)

27. The Future of U.S.-Russian Relations (29 November)

- Robert Legvold. “Managing the new Cold War: what Moscow and Washington can learn from the last one.” *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 4 (2014)

28. CFR Model Diplomacy Simulation: Russia and NATO in the Baltics (3 December)

During this lesson you will become familiarized with the Council on Foreign Relations “Model Diplomacy” simulation that will constitute the capstone experience for SS375. You should carefully read the following materials prior to lesson 28. You will have access to these once you’ve registered and logged on to the Model Diplomacy portal: [https://modeldiplomacy.cfr.org](https://modeldiplomacy.cfr.org)

- Model Diplomacy Student Guide
- Model Diplomacy Section 1: The NSC Guide
  - 1.1 Overview
  - 1.2 Interagency Process
  - 1.3 Timeline
  - 1.4 Departments and Agencies
- Model Diplomacy Section 2: The Case
  - 2.1 The Issue
  - 2.2 Context
  - 2.3 Recent History
  - 2.4 Timeline
  - 2.5 Root Causes
  - 2.6 Role of the United States
  - 2.7 Other interested Parties

5 December: Guest lecture by Ambassador Michael McFaul. Time/location TBD

29. CFR Model Diplomacy Simulation: Prep 1 (7 December, modified schedule)

Note: we will meet in Jefferson Hall.

- Model Diplomacy Section 3: Role-Play
  - 3.1 Role
  - 3.2 Research and Preparation
  - 3.3 Reading List
  - 3.4 Guide to the Memoranda
30. CFR Model Diplomacy Simulation: Prep 2 (11 December)

Note: we will meet in Jefferson Hall.

- No assigned reading. Conduct additional research as needed.
- Continue collaborative work on drafting policy memos.

Final memos due Friday, 14 December NLT 1600

Appendix: Soviet-era literature that you should read someday

As noted in Lesson 4, the only way to truly understand and appreciate Soviet politics and society is through its literature, much (but not all) of the best of which was written by dissidents, exiles, and the disillusioned. The following list, while necessarily incomplete, is at least a good starting point for those who want to take the plunge and attempt to unravel the “riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma” that is 20th century Russia.

The Russian Revolution, Civil War, and NEP Era:
- “The Twelve” (poem) by Aleksandr Blok
- *And Quiet Flows the Don* by Mikhail Sholokhov
- *The White Guard* by Mikhail Bulgakov
- *Doctor Zhivago* by Boris Pasternak
- *Red Cavalry* by Isaac Babel
- *Envy* by Yuri Olesha
- *The Twelve Chairs* by Ilya Ilf and Yevgeni Petrov
- *Heart of a Dog* by Mikhail Bulgakov
- *The Foundation Pit* by Andrei Platonov
- *How the Steel was Tempered* by Nikolai Ostrovsky

Totalitarianism, the Great Terror, and the GULAG
- *Darkness at Noon* by Arthur Koestler
- *Journey into the Whirlwind* by Evgenia Ginzburg
- *Hope against Hope* by Nadezhda Mandelshtam
- *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn
- *The Gulag Archipelago* by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn
- *Kolyma Tales* by Varlam Shalamov
- *We* by Yevgeny Zamyatin

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8. Though set in 1918-1921, Ostrovsky’s fictionalized autobiography (published in various forms from 1932-1936) is considered to be the quintessential socialist realist novel, written in the style that would dominate official Soviet literature from the 1930s until Gorbachev’s glasnost’.

9. Technically not a Soviet writer, Koestler was a German communist who, having spent time in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, became disillusioned with Stalin’s regime and the terror it spawned. His fictional account of the arrest and trial of the “Old Bolshevik” Rubashov – a composite of several real-life Bolsheviks purged in the 1930s – remains one of the most incisive explorations of the logic of Stalin’s terror.

10. Though written in 1920-1921, Zamyatin’s dystopian fantasy follows the logic of totalitarianism to its logical conclusions, anticipating the excesses of Stalinism to come in the ensuing decades and inspiring other classic dystopian classics including Huxley’s *Brave New World* and Orwell’s *1984*. 
- *Invitation to a Beheading* by Vladimir Nabokov\(^\text{11}\)

**Life Under Stalinism**
- *The Master and Margarita* by Mikhail Bulgakov
- *Children of the Arbat* by Anatoly Rybakov\(^\text{12}\)
- *The House on the Embankment* by Yuri Trifonov
- *Generations of Winter* by Vassily Aksyonov

**The Great Patriotic War (WWII)**
- *Life and Fate* by Vasily Grossman
- *A Writer at War* by Vasily Grossman
- *The War Within: Diaries from the Siege of Leningrad* by Alexis Peri\(^\text{13}\)

**The Soviet Union after Stalin**
- “In a Room and a Half” by Joseph Brodsky
- *Everything Flows* by Vasily Grossman
- *The Compromise* by Sergei Dovlatov
- *A Week Like Any Other* by Natalya Baranskaya
- *The Burn* by Vassily Aksyonov

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\(^{11}\) Like Zamyatin’s *We*, Nabokov’s *Invitation* is a semi-surrealist indictment of totalitarianism, considered to be among the author’s finest novels.

\(^{12}\) Considered by critics to be the best of the three, Rybakov’s *Children* is the first in a trilogy whose narrative arc spans from the early 1930s to 1943. All three are worth reading.

\(^{13}\) Though not a Russian author, Peri weaves together 125 unpublished diaries from the siege of Leningrad to paint a disturbing and vivid picture of that horrible episode in Soviet history.
Figure 1: Alexander Kosolapov, *Lenin Coca-Cola*. 1980. Acrylic on canvas.