

Russia to 1917

Fall 2025 Syllabus Version 7.0

Course Information

Logistics

- **Instructor:** Dr. James Pickett
- **Course:** HIST 0301
- **Schedule:** Tues / Thurs 4-5:15 pm
- **Classroom:** Cathy 352
- **Email:** pickettj@pitt.edu
- **Office:** 3908 Posvar (in annex to the right of dept.)
- **Office Hours:** Tuesday 8:45—10:45 (email instructor if you wish to attend virtually: Zoom Link, 696-530-3747)
- **Course Policies:** <https://courses.bactriana.org/policies/>

General Education Requirements

This course fulfills:

- **Specific Geographic Region** (Section 2 of Global Awareness and Cultural Understanding)
- **Historical Analysis** (Section 6 of Division Requirements in Humanities and Arts, Social Sciences, Natural Sciences)

Content Overview

Course Objective The Russian Empire was among the largest in world history, spanning the entire Eurasian continent. This course explores the factors that made Russia so powerful at its height, only to collapse in the world's first socialist revolution – an event that shaped the twentieth century and reverberates through global politics still today. Coverage is comprehensive, beginning in the eighteenth century, but focusing on the latter half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth. Geographically, the course ranges far beyond the capitals of Moscow and St. Petersburg to consider questions of colonialism, ethnicity, and religious pluralism, from Poland to Siberia. Considerable attention will also be given to ideology, literature, serfdom, and underground revolutionary movements.

Organization of Course Content The course is organized chronologically, beginning with a prologue on the premodern period, and ending with the Revolution. The focus is on the latter half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth, a turbulent period defined by halting reform and the road to world war. Thematically, the content tends to begin with politics at the imperial center, then shift to cultural and intellectual trends, and then branch out to geopolitics and the less studied borderlands.

Learning Outcomes The principle learning outcomes of this course are twofold:

1. Ability to deploy original analysis through the engagement of primary sources
2. The articulation of that analysis through evidence-based writing

Both of these skills are developed in view of applying them beyond the academic field of history.

Course Requirements

Required Texts and Readings **Primary Textbook:** Nicholas V. Riasanovsky and Mark D. Steinberg, *A History of Russia*, Ninth edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

Cost-saving options:

- Available on physical reserve in Hillman Library
- Available for rent on Amazon.com
- Older editions acceptable and available inexpensively online

Recommended Reference: John Channon's *The Penguin Historical Atlas of Russia* (1995) - inexpensive and available on physical reserve.

All other course readings will be available electronically.

Workload Expectations

- **Weekly Reading:** 40-60 pages per week (complete before associated class)
- **Time Outside Class:** 4-6 hours per week
- **Platforms:** Canvas and TopHat (required)

Assignments

Study Guides

- Due on TopHat one hour after each class session
- Provide context for readings and focus attention on key points
- Additional guidelines available on Canvas

In-Class Participation

- Assessed primarily through TopHat real-time quizzes
- Credit given for participation, not just correctness
- Three “grace days” provided for absences
- Completing TopHat exercises without being present constitutes cheating

Midterm Essay

- **Length:** Approximately 700 words (3 pages)
- **Format:** In-class, handwritten
- **Date:** October 28
- **Materials:** Hard-copy references allowed (max 5 pages of printed notes)
- **Revision Option:** Typed revision due November 11 (replaces original grade)

Final Paper

- **Length:** 1300 words (5-6 pages)
- **Due Date:** December 9 (early in finals period)
- **Late Policy:** Half letter-grade deduction per day
- **Research:** Based on assigned readings only

Analytical Writing Skills Sequence (Optional) Three-part mini-assignment series to prepare for formal essays. Entirely optional but provides modest extra credit bonus to Midterm Essay category.

Extra Credit Opportunities

- Attend university lectures relevant to course themes
- Write short reflection (max 1 page) relating content to course
- Suggest assignments at least 3 days in advance

Grading Policy

Grade Distribution

- **Participation:** 10%
- **Study Guides:** 25%
- **Midterm Essay:** 30%
- **Final Paper:** 35%

Grading Scale Standard Canvas cutoffs with one exception: only the highest two overall grades eligible for A+; others in A+ range collapsed to A.

Study Guides and Participation If you complete most of the exercises (80% or higher), you will receive full credit (i.e., bumped up to 100%) in these categories; below 80% you will receive the raw score. If you have any questions or concerns about your participation grade, please discuss with the instructor during *office hours only*.

University Policies

This syllabus incorporates all policies from Pitt's Center for Teaching and Learning:

- Academic Integrity
- Disability Services
- Content Warning
- Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion
- Email Communication
- Gender Inclusivity
- Health Safety Compliance
- Classroom Recording Policy

Please read all linked policies carefully: they are part of this syllabus.

Course Schedule

Part I: Prologue - A Thousand Years of Eurasian History

Core Questions

What is Russia? When did the first “Russians” appear on the scene? Why on earth do Vikings and Mongols feature in a course about Russia?

Session 1 (Aug. 26): Course Overview Topics:

- Mini-Lecture: “Russia as a Great Power? Past as Prologue”
- Course policies and expectations
- Digital platforms introduction

Session 2 (Aug. 28): Origins Lecture: “Vikings, Rus, and the so-called ‘Tatar Yoke’”

Readings:

- Riasanovsky and Steinberg, *A History of Russia*: Part I, especially chapters 4 & 5
- Meletii Smotrytskyi and David A. Frick, *Rus Restored*, pp. 175-179

- Andrei Mikhailovich Kurbskii and Ivan IV, *The Correspondence*, pp. 70-81, 114-123

Session 3 (Sep. 2): The Eurasian Backdrop Lecture: “Ivan the Awesome’s Mongol Successor State”

Readings:

- Riasanovsky & Steinberg: Chapter 9, “The Rise of Muscovy”
- Carolyn Pouncy, ed., *The “Domostroi”*, pp. 69-73, 95-96, 124-127, 132-133

Part II: Peter, Catherine, and Westernization

Core Questions

How revolutionary was the reign of Peter the Great? What precipitated Russia’s infatuation with Europe? Who were the other contending powers in the neighborhood before Russia emerged as a great power?

Session 4 (Sep. 4): Russia Enters the Modern Age Lecture: “Out with the Old, In with the New – The Petrine Revolution”

Readings:

- Riasanovsky & Steinberg: Chapter 18, “Peter the Great, 1682-1725”
- John Channon’s *The Penguin Historical Atlas of Russia*: pp. 50-51
- “Reorganization of Russia by Peter the Great” in Basil Dmytryshyn, ed., *Imperial Russia*, pp. 12-20

Session 5 (Sep. 9): Empire of the Empresses Lecture: “Catherine the Great, Enlightened Despot”

Readings:

- Riasanovsky & Steinberg: Chapters 19 & 20
- “Catherine the Great’s ‘Instructions,’ ” in Thomas Riha (ed.), *Readings in Russian Civilization*, pp. 252-255

Session 6 (Sep. 11): Imperial Borderlands Lecture: “Integrating an Empire – Poles and Cossacks, Tatars and Georgians”

Readings:

- Nancy Kollmann, “The Cap of Monomakh,” in *Picturing Russia*, pp. 38-41
- E. R. Dashkova, *The Memoirs of Princess Dashkova*, pp. 31-38, 58-72

Session 7 (Sep. 16): Manifest Destiny Lecture: “From Sea to Shining Sea – Russia’s Wild, Wild East”

Reading:

- Aleksandr Nikolaevich Radishchev, *A Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow*, pp. 46-49, 102-103, 119-125, 142-156

Part III: The Empire Advances

Core Questions

How can we explain Russia’s emergence as a great power? Why was an allegedly “backwards” monarchy able to occupy Paris, capital of the most powerful land empire of the day?

Session 8 (Sep. 18): War and Peace Lecture: “Napoleon Threat and Great Power Status”

Reading:

- Riasanovsky & Steinberg: Chapter 23, “Alexander I, 1801-25”

Session 9 (Sep. 23): Murmurings of Dissent **Lecture:** “The Emergence of the Intelligentsia”

Reading:

- Marc Raeff, *The Decembrist Movement*, pp. 44-57, 124-133

Session 10 (Sep. 25): Political Oppression, Literary Efflorescence **Lecture:** “The ‘Remarkable Decade’: Culture and Intellectual Debates of the 1820s-1840s”

Readings:

- Riasanovsky & Steinberg: Chapter 24, “Nicholas I, 1825-55”
- Nikolai Gogol, *The Government Inspector* (complete play)

Part IV: Autocracy, Orthodoxy, Nationality

Core Questions

What did it mean to be a “multiconfessional” empire? How was Russia divided by religion, ethnicity, class? Who could be a noble, and what did it mean to be part of the nobility? How did Russia manage to control such a vast territory, and how tangible was the Russian administrative presence in the periphery?

Session 11 (Sep. 30): Governing the Eurasian Sprawl **Lecture:** “The Multiconfessional Empire”

Readings:

- Riasanovsky & Steinberg: Chapter 25, “Economy and Society before the Great Reforms”
- Willard Sunderland, “Shop Signs, Monuments, Souvenirs” in *Picturing Russia*, pp. 104-108

Session 12 (Oct. 2): Indigestible Hinterland to the West **Lecture:** “The Problem of Poland”

Reading:

- “Polish Freedoms under the Constitution of 1815” in Basil Dmytryshyn, ed., *Imperial Russia*, pp. 165-173

October 7: Midterm Exam

In-class Handwritten Essay

- No screens of any kind during the exam period.
- You may bring up to five pages of printed notes. (This cannot be a draft essay, but bullet points are acceptable.)
- You will have the full class period.
- Make sure to submit a scan of your essay on Canvas before you leave. (Take a picture with your phone; a PDF scan is ideal.)

October 9: No class

Session 13 (Oct. 14): Indigestible Hinterland to the East **Lecture:** “Insurgency in the Caucasus”

Reading:

- Lev Tolstoy, *Hajji Murad* (complete)

Session 14 (Oct. 16): The Meaning of ‘Progress’ Lecture: “Slavophiles vs. Westernizers”

Reading:

- Ivan Aksakov, “A Slavophile Statement,” in Thomas Riha (ed.), *Readings in Russian Civilization*, pp. 378-382

Part V: The Great Reforms

Core Questions

Why did Alexander II implement the so-called “Great Reforms”? Out of the goodness of his heart? Were they hollow reforms, or did they go too far? What were some of the unintended consequences? What was the nature of reform in subsequent decades?

Session 15 (Oct. 21): Making Peasants Backwards Lecture: “Emancipation (?) of the Peasants”

Reading:

- Olga Semyonova Tian-Shanskaia, *Village Life in Late Tsarist Russia*, pp. 6-61

Session 16 (Oct. 23): Governing Diversity Lecture: “The Pale of Settlement and Nationalities Policies”

Readings:

- Riasanovsky & Steinberg: Chapter 26, “Alexander II, 1855-81”
- “Moscow Court Reporting: The Moscow Sheet (Early 1880s)” in *Entertaining Tsarist Russia*, pp. 212-213

Exam Day (Oct. 28): Mid-Term Essay

- Handwritten essay for full class period
- Open-book, open-note, but no screens
- Makeup essays can be written during office hours

Part VI: Lurching toward Modernity

Core Questions

What was the nature of autocratic government? Was Russia a colonial empire?

Session 17 (Oct. 30): Revenge of the Intelligentsia Lecture: “To the People – Populists and other Radicals”

Reading:

- Olga Semyonova Tian-Shanskaia, *Village Life in Late Tsarist Russia*, pp. 157-169

Session 18 (Nov. 4): Autocracy Lecture: “Retrenchment of the Romanov Monarchy”

Reading:

- Riasanovsky & Steinberg: Chapter 28, “Alexander III, 1881-94, and Nicholas II to the Revolution of 1905”

Session 19 (Nov. 6): Fin de Siècle Culture and Society Lecture: “Industrialization”

Readings:

- Victoria E. Bonnell, ed., *The Russian Worker*, pp. 36-71
- Christine Ruane, “European Fashion in Russia,” in *Picturing Russia*, pp. 119-123

Session 20 (Nov. 11): Peasants in the City Lecture: “An Emergent Public Sphere”

Readings:

- Riasanovsky & Steinberg: Chapter 31, “Russian Culture from the Great Reforms to the Revolutions of 1917”
- Mark D. Steinberg, “Workers in Suits: Performing the Self” in *Picturing Russia*, pp. 128-132

Session 21 (Nov. 13): Russia’s Orient Lecture: “Central Asia under Colonial Rule”

Readings:

- Riasanovsky & Steinberg: Chapter 28, “Alexander III, 1881-94, and Nicholas II to the Revolution of 1905”
- Alexander Morrison, “The Conquest of Central Asia through the Turkestan Album”
- Selected photographs of Central Asia under Russian rule

Session 22 (Nov. 18): The Beginning of the End Lecture: “1905 and the De-Sacralized Duma Monarchy”

Readings:

- Peter Stolypin, “We Need a Great Russia” in Thomas Riha (ed.), *Readings in Russian Civilization*, pp. 456-463
- Boris Savinkov, “The Assassination of Grand Duke Serguei” in *Memoirs of a Terrorist*, pp. 71-117

Session 23 (Nov. 20): War and Revolution Lecture: “Military Coup into February Revolution”

Readings:

- Riasanovsky & Steinberg: Chapter 29, “Nicholas II in the Era of Revolution and Reform, 1905-17”
- The Durnovo Memorandum (25 pages)
- “The Color Of Russian History,” *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*

Session 24 (Dec. 2): Revolution and War Lecture: “Peasant Republics, Bolshevik Putsch”

Readings:

- Riasanovsky & Steinberg: Chapter 32, “The Revolutions of 1917”
- V.V. Ramazanov, “Rasputin’s Nighttime Orgies,” in *Entertaining Tsarist Russia*, pp. 385-390
- S. Mstislavskii, *Five Days Which Transformed Russia*, pp. 135-155

Part VII: Revolution Unending

Core Questions

How did one of the vastest Eurasian land empires in history collapse so totally? Would the Revolution have happened, were it not for World War I? Is it more useful to conceptualize war and revolution separately, or part of a single phenomenon? How many revolutions were there, and how many coups? Why did the Red Army win the Russian Civil War?

Session 25 (Dec. 4): Total Collapse into Soviet Empire **Lecture:** “Civil War, Ukrainian Insurgency, Federated Centralism”

Readings:

- Riasanovsky & Steinberg: Chapter 33, “Revolutionary Russia, 1917-28”
- Brian Murphy and Felix Patrikeeff, *The Russian Civil War: Primary Sources*, pp. 19-21, 26-27, 97-103, 106-112, 124-127, 164-167

I reserve the right to amend and update this syllabus throughout the semester.