

## The Course

Does today's Russia represent a return to Cold War days when the world sometimes seemed on the brink of nuclear destruction? Is the regime of Vladimir Putin a 21st century reincarnation of tsarist Russia, as some claim? Our class looks at the development of Russia from the 1917 revolutions to the present, in the context of a long-term view of that country's history. Throughout we will discuss the relations of Russia and the West: similarities and differences.

During our first meeting, we look briefly at the vast geographical expanse that is Russia, then survey the development of the Russian state through Peter the Great, incorporating many non-Russian-speaking areas into the growing empire. Our attention then focuses on a significant turning point, the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 (at almost the same time as the end of slavery in the United States). We next discuss the attempts to restructure Russian society following the emancipation of the serfs and the culture of late Tsarist Russia, the world of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky.

In our second meeting, we turn in more depth to the impact of the First World War, which led to two revolutions in 1917, the first overthrowing the tsar, the second establishing Lenin and the Communists in power. The excitement of witnessing what to many looked like the beginning of a new and more socially just era drew Americans such as John Reed and Louise Bryant to Moscow to write about what they saw as the dawn of a golden age. Supporters of the new Soviet Union invariably referred to it as based on Marxist-Leninist theory, so we will look more closely at the changes Lenin made to more orthodox Marxist ideas and the means he used to gain and retain power.

Our third session picks up with the death of Lenin in 1924 and the rise to power of Stalin, defeating Trotsky and his supporters, and establishing what was called "Socialism in One Country." In power, Stalin presided over a rapid and forced industrialization under his Five Year plans, accompanied by repeated waves of purges with millions of people sent to the gulags. Following the turbulence of the 1930s, the Soviet Union faced invasion by Nazi Germany in 1941 and in four bloody years of warfare managed to hold off and then defeat the invaders. We conclude our third session with the victory in 1945 that established the Soviet Union as a superpower and was followed by a half century of Cold War confrontation with the United States.

By the 1980s, however, a relatively stagnant economy led to a reform movement that ultimately undid the Soviet Union. Session four focuses on the rise and reforms of Mikhail Gorbachev during the 1980s, leading to economic and political turbulence, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the emergence of the Russian Federation under Boris Yeltsin, together with separation and

violence in former Soviet regions such as Georgia and Ukraine. Today, Russia under Vladimir Putin remains the largest country in the world with a powerful nuclear arsenal and a government that, despite privatization, continues many characteristics of the tsars and Communists, and seeks to maintain its position as a leading world power.

Our sessions will be divided into two halves with a break in the middle.

Class Schedule by Session:

1: Russia from the Beginnings to the 1917 Revolutions – an Overview

- 1A: The Emergence and Development of Russia – From the Beginnings to the Emancipation of the Serfs (1861)
- 1B: The Unsuccessful Quest for a New Viable Social Structure – From Emancipation to Revolution: 1861–1917

2. The Revolutions – Lenin

- 2A: War, Collapse, and Revolutions – The Two Revolutions of 1917 (February/March and October/November) (\*see note below)
- 2B: Lenin, Leninism, and the Establishment of the Soviet Union – 1917–1924

3. The Rise, Decline, and Legacy of Stalin

- 3A: The Rise of Stalin, the Purges of the 1930s, Forced Industrialization and the Gulags, and the victory over Nazi Germany in the Second World War
- 3B: The Cold War and Evolution of the Soviet Union – From the last days of Stalin through the Khrushchev and Brezhnev years, 1945–1982

4. The Dissolution of the Soviet Union and Its Consequences: 1991–Present

- 4A: The Gorbachev Reforms and the 1991 Coup Attempt lead to the Dissolution of the Soviet Union
- 4B: The Russian Federation and the Legacy of the Soviet Union – Breakaway Ethnic Groups and War – Yeltsin and Putin – Turbulence and Stability

\*In February 1918, Russia switched from the old Julian to the Gregorian calendar. This meant moving the calendar ahead by 13 days. Because in 1917, Russia was still on the Julian calendar, the Communists took power on 25 October of that year (Julian calendar). Skipping 13 days to catch up to the Gregorian calendar the next year changed the anniversary to 7 November. This

is why one sometimes sees references to both October Revolution and November Revolution of 1917. The same duality relates to the first revolution when the tsar was overthrown in February (Julian) or March (Gregorian).

Recommended reading:

Geoffrey Hosking, *Russia and the Russians: A History*, second edition (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011).

Barbara Evans Clements, *A History of Women in Russia: From Earliest Times to the Present* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2012).

Nicholas V. Riasanovsky and Mark D. Steinberg, *A History of Russia*, 9th edition (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).