

## **Understanding Russia: History, Politics, Culture**

Russia continues to dominate the news cycle—but how much do you actually know about the country and its people? Venturing beyond headlines, this class will give an inside view of Russian history, politics and culture, looking into the very mind of the nation. What is behind Russia's current slide into autocracy? Which national myths, beliefs and historic developments feed Putin's anti-democratic ideology, and how tight is his grip on the minds of the Russians? Taught by an acclaimed writer and cultural critic, the course follows a multimedia format that intertwines the country's latest political and cultural developments with historical perspectives expressed in film, music and literature. Participants will emerge with understanding of Russia's current political, economic and cultural landscape, as well as possible motivators behind the actions of the Russian government.

### **Session 1. Russia Today: "A Managed Democracy"**

A brief survey of Russia's current political and economic climate, with spotlight on key internal developments: Putin's "constitutional reforms" and the phenomenon of perpetual presidency; crackdown on media and opposition; the elevation of the Russian Orthodox Church; 2014 annexation of Crimea and war with Ukraine; Western sanctions against Russia, Kremlin's counter-sanctions, and their impact on the economy and living standards. The reality behind Putin's approval ratings.

**Spotlight: 2018 "elections": lots of circus, little bread.**

### **Session 2. Across the Ages, Part 1: Russia's History and Foundational Myths, From Vikings to the Fall of the Romanov Monarchy**

Discussion of key historical developments that have shaped Russian politics, concept of power, and worldview: Russia before and after the Mongol Conquest; the dual legacy of the Golden Horde and Peter the Great's westernization reforms; the institute of serfdom and the mechanisms of suppressing dissent. The unique nature of Russian autocracy as compared to European monarchies, and the unhealthy internal dynamic of repression/liberalization cycles. The phenomenon of Russian intelligentsia. Foundational myths, and how they map to today's politics: the Myth of the Good Ruler, the Myth of the Unique Path, the Myth of Eternal War. **Spotlight: the House of Romanovs**

### **Session 3. Across the Ages, Part 2: Russia's 20<sup>th</sup> Century Debacle, From 1917 Revolutions to Dissolution of USSR**

"The objective conditions for the Revolution": how Lenin's Bolsheviks used Russia's external and internal dysfunction to seize and consolidate power. The 1917 October coup, Lenin's concept of "total destruction," Russian civil war and the rise of one-party state. The murder of the Romanovs, class war, and its impact on the national psyche. Political and economic terror as means for industrial leap; return to serfdom

during Stalin's rule. Russians in World War II: the cost of "our sacred victory." Stalin's death, and the dismantling of the Cult of Personality by Nikita Khrushchev. Political and economic stagnation under Brezhnev. Gorbachev's attempts to modernize the country and the impossibility of "freer" USSR. *Glasnost*, ("openness"), the return of truth, and the birth of Russian democracy. Myths of the Soviet Era: The Myth of Our Revolution, The Myth of Mankind's Vanguard, The Myth of Enemies Everywhere. **Spotlight: Everyday life in Soviet Union**

#### **Session 4. The Russian State: I Own You**

The state's priorities vs interest of the people. The concept of treason. Major levers the Russian state operates to manipulate the public: ideology, dissent suppression, and lack of historic memory. The bloody legacy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and post-communist ideological vacuum. Putin's "vertical of power" and his concept of Russia as a besieged fortress. Russian economic model: connections and corruption. The post-modern mythmaking machine, and the "modernized" myths of Putin's autocracy, including the concept of "spiritual staples." The Orthodox Church: from victims of totalitarianism to the state's apologists. **Spotlight: Russia's secret police, a history.**

#### **Session 5. The Russian People: the Silent, the Dissenters, the Artists**

The national psyche: Russians' key attitudes, beliefs, values, prejudices, fears. The "deal" between the state and the people: I keep my head low, you leave me alone. Alcoholism and other national pastimes. Overview of dissent in Russia: from Prince Kurbsky to Alexey Navalny. Russian artists: dissenters by necessity. "The Poet and the Tsar" dilemma: from Alexander Pushkin to Dmitry Shostakovich. The 19<sup>th</sup> century cultural explosion; 20<sup>th</sup> century "Culture as the Weapon of the Proletariat" Role of an artist in Russia. The inside view of Russian culture. **Spotlight: Alexey Navalny, Russia's opposition leader**

#### **Session 6. The Rise of Putin, Democracy Subversion and Implications for the World**

Russia's wild ride from planned economy to capitalism in post-USSR: the botched privatization, the state assets selloff, and the formation of the oligarch class. Consolidation of newly-independent media in the hands of Yeltsin-era tycoons, and their subsequent takeover by Vladimir Putin. The decline of Russian intelligentsia as moral counterweight. Russia's major domestic and international policy vectors: post-Soviet revanchism, superpower dreams and rebuilding of the autocracy. The rise of ultra-conservatism and Putin's war with the West. Declining economic situation and prospects of a regime change. Prognosis for the future. **Spotlight: TBD**

#### **Suggested Reading:**

Svetlana Alexievich, "Secondhand Time"

Mikhail Bulgakov, "Master and Margarita"  
Anastasia Edel, "Putin's Playground"  
Ilya Ilf and Evgeny Petrov, "The Twelve Chairs" (Richardson's translation)  
Victor Pelevin "The Blue Lantern"  
Richard Pipes, "A Concise History of the Russian Revolution"  
Peter Pomerantsev, "Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible"  
Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin, "The History of a Town"  
Varlaam Shalamov, "Kolyma Tales"

### **Anastasia Edel's Bio**

Anastasia Edel is a Russian-American writer and social historian. She came of age in USSR before moving to England in the mid-nineties and, eventually, to the US. She's the author of "Russia: Putin's Playground," an acclaimed political and cultural guide to modern-day Russia. Her writing has appeared, most recently, in The New York Review of Books, The New York Times, Quartz and World Literature Today. She holds Master of Fine Arts from Pacific University in Oregon, an MBA from Aston Business School in UK and a BA in English and German Studies from Kubansky State University in Russia. She lives in Piedmont, where she is staff art and culture critic for Piedmont Post. She's currently at work on a new book, "The Gone Empire." You can follow her on Twitter @AEdelWriter.