UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
SECTION OF SLAVONIC STUDIES

PAPER SL15: Topics in Slavonic Studies: Cultural Histories of the Present

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2021/2022 Title: Russia Since 1991

HANDBOOK

USING THE HANDBOOK
The handbook is divided into four sections:
Section 1 the exam
Section 2 lectures & seminars
Section 3 supervisions
Section 4 reading
INTRODUCTION

COURSE AIMS

The course is designed to provide you with a thorough grounding in and advanced understanding of the cultural history of Russia, Poland, and/or Ukraine after 1989-1991. In the 2021-22 academic year, the paper centres on the case of post-Soviet Russia, examining the various ways in which Russian history and memory intersect with and contribute to the study of Russian culture.

Russian history today is a highly complex and contested ideological battleground. Works of literature and film wander this terrain, navigating competing legacies of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union to help shape contemporary national identity. In 2021-22, you will explore this dynamic exchange by focussing on pivotal events of the past three decades – the fall of the Soviet Union, the war in Chechnya, the rise of Vladimir Putin, the annexation of Ukraine’s Autonomous Republic of Crimea. Analyse them through a variety of primary and secondary texts to ponder ever-evolving questions of Russia’s democratization, national security, civil society, and foreign policy.

BEFORE THE COURSE BEGINS

Familiarise yourself with the general progression of Russian history since 1991 by reading through one or more of the following:

- Belton, Catherine: Putin’s People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and then Took on the West (2020)
- Chebankova, Elena: Political Ideologies in Contemporary Russia (2020)
- Gessen, Masha: Future is History (2018)
- Ostrovsky, Arkady: The Invention of Russia: The Journey from Gorbachev’s Freedom to Putin’s War (2015)

Briefing meeting: There’ll be a meeting before the first teaching day of Michaelmas. Check with the departmental secretary for time and venue.

COURSE STRUCTURE

Lectures: sixteen lectures, eight in Michaelmas and eight in Lent. The lectures provide an overview of the course and help you structure your reading. It is important to understand that the lectures alone will not enable you to cover the course, nor will they by themselves prepare you for the exam.

Seminars: four seminars in Easter term.

Supervisions: ten supervisions: four in Michaelmas, four in Lent and two in Easter.

Reading: to study history is, primarily, to read, so reading is the most important aspect of the course. You must understand from the outset that this is primarily a reading course and that, above all, you will need to commit to reading extensively and consistently. That is why the bulk of the handbook is devoted to providing you with detailed guidance on reading.
**SECTION 1: THE EXAM**

**DESCRIPTION**
The exam paper is divided into three sections. All questions have equal weight. Under normal circumstances you have to answer three questions, one from each section.

**Section A** deals with the course's four primary sources and has one question for each source.

**Section B** has six questions. Most cover the period 1991 to 2000 but there will be one or two questions of a general nature covering the whole period of the paper.

**Section C** has six questions. Most cover the period 2000 to 2021 but, as in section B, there will be several questions of a general nature covering the whole period.

**PREPARING FOR THE EXAM**

**Section A** is predictable because you can choose in advance which primary source you want to concentrate on in the knowledge that it will always come up on the paper. You should study the sources as part of your specialist reading (section 4.2) and we will look at them in detail in supervisions (section 3) and in the Easter term seminars (section 2).

**Sections B&C** are periodized (with the occasional general question included in each), but you will be asked to respond to problems and issues within periods, not simply to periods. You should note that there is no guarantee that a particular problem or issue will always come up in sections B&C, or that problems or issues will not be conflated. This means that you cannot 'topic spot' by focussing your work on a narrow aspect of the course – mugging up a couple of problems and hoping they will see you through, for instance. You will have to do the whole course in order to be prepared for the exam. On the other hand, you will not be asked to respond to anything outside the course aims.

You should look at SL12 past papers to get a feel for the style of questions.
SECTION 2: LECTURES & SEMINARS

Check with the section’s secretary for venues and times.

MICHAELMAS
0 Pre-term Meeting: Introduction to the Course
1 The Collapse of the USSR
2 Transition to Democracy
3 Westernization of Culture
4 Transition to Capitalism
5 Chechnya and National Security
6 Return to Autocracy
7 Remembering the 1990s
8 Religion

LENT
9 Putin
10 Opposition
11 Civil Society
12 Gender and Sexuality
13 Nationalism
14 Ethnic Minorities
15 Russia’s Youth
16 Foreign Policy and Crimea Annexation

EASTER
SECTION 3: SUPERVISIONS

MICHAELMAS

1 Essay supervision
Choose a question Supervision 1 in the Michaelmas list. Preparation: you can do any question you like from the list in Supervision 1. Aim at five to six sides of A4, typed and double-spaced; research using the general and topic-related reading in the reading lists; cite quotations by footnoting; end with a full bibliography. Email me your essays 4 days before supervision.

2 Essay supervision
Choose a question from Supervision 2 of the Michaelmas list. Preparation: as for 1.

3 Essay supervision
Choose a question from Supervision 3 of the Michaelmas list. Preparation: as for 1.

4 Essay supervision
Choose a question from Supervision 4 of the Michaelmas list. Preparation: as for 1.

LENT

5 Essay supervision
Choose a question from Supervision 5 of the Lent list. Preparation: as for 1.

6 Essay supervision
Choose a question from Supervision 6 of the Lent list. Preparation: as for 1.

7 Essay supervision
Choose a question from Supervision 7 of the Lent list. Preparation: as for 1.

8 Essay supervision
Choose a question from Supervision 8 of the Lent list. Preparation: as for 1.

EASTER

9 Essay supervision
Choose a question on one of the primary sources. Preparation: as for 1.

10 Essay supervision
Choose a question on a different primary source. Preparation: as for 1.
MICHAELMAS LIST

Supervision 1

1 Was the breakdown of the Soviet state a result of domestic politics primarily?
2 ‘Boris Yeltsin was not committed to democracy.’ Discuss.
3 ‘A lack of popular support for democracy resulted in the failure of Russia’s democratization in the 1990s.’ Discuss.
4 ‘Economics derailed democratization in Russia.’ Discuss.

Supervision 2

1 Account for major sources of anti-Westernism in Russia, and is it likely to endure?
2 Assess the impact of Westernization on Russian culture in the 1990s.
3 Did market transition in the 1990s facilitate Russia’s authoritarian reversal?
4 ‘Informal practices of the 1990s outpowered the Russian state.’ Discuss.

Supervision 3

1 ‘The conflict in Chechnya reflected wider crises in Russia in the 1990s.’ Discuss.
2 ‘Did the Kremlin win the war in Chechnya but lose the peace?’ Discuss.
3 Why has authoritarian rule proved to be durable in post-Soviet Russia?
4 If Russia is not a democracy, what purpose do elections and other democratic institutions serve?

Supervision 4

1 Assess the major sources of historical memory and political legitimacy active in Russian discourse in the 1990s.
2 1990s: ‘troubled’ or ‘free’? Assess various interpretations of the period.
3 ‘Who are the enemies of Russia?’ Explain major tropes in conspiracy theories.
4 ‘Religion is used by the regime to solidify its power.’ Discuss.

LENT LIST

Supervision 5

1 Assess the central reasons for Putin’s enduring popularity.
2 Does Russia’s weakening economy threaten Putin’s regime?
3 Can the opposition play a meaningful role in Russian politics?
4 Account for the major transformations of the political opposition in Russia since 1991.
Supervision 6

1 ‘The weakness of civil society in post-Soviet Russia is due to the nature and duration of Soviet rule.’ Discuss.
2 ‘The cult of Great Patriotic War has been unwavering popular in Russia.’ Discuss.
3 What gendered strategies are used for legitimating Putin’s regime?
4 ‘Since 1991 the LGBT community faces no discrimination in Russia.’ Discuss.

Supervision 7

1 ‘Nationalism as an effective strategy for legitimacy in Russia.’ Discuss.
2 ‘Nationalism threatens the Russian state.’ Discuss.
3 ‘Social mobility for ethnic minorities has been declining steadily since 1991.’ Discuss.
4 ‘Today Russian nationality is based on political values, not ethnic origin.’ Discuss.

Supervision 8

1 To what extent is Russia’s foreign policy driven by domestic political concerns?
2 ‘Russia’s foreign policy is motivated by fears of foreign encroachment.’ Discuss.
3 Account for the ways the leadership engages with Russia’s youth.
4 ‘Cultural texts critical of the authorities, like the documentaries by Dud’ or *Leviathan* (2014) by Zvyagintsev, appeal to a very narrow audience.’ Discuss.

EASTER LIST

Supervision 9

1 Aleksievich in Second-Hand Time reveals a diversity in perceptions of the early post-Soviet periods.’ Discuss.
2 ‘Yeltsyn’s resignation speech on 31 December 1999 only revealed him to be a weak leader.’ Discuss.

Supervision 10

1 Assess the plausibility of Yavlinskii’s argument that Putin was a product of ‘the system’.
2 ‘Vladimir Putin’s article “The 75th Anniversary of the Great Victory: Shared Responsibility to History and our Future” revives a Stalinist vision of modern history.’ Discuss.
SECTION 4: READING

LOCATIONS

**Hardcopy** Many books and articles are in our MMLL library and online. Some, however, are not and very few will be in your college libraries, so you might need to use Seeley Library (in the History Faculty next to the Law building) and Marshall Library (in the Economics Faculty beside the Buttery) as well as the UL.

**Online** JSTOR ([http://www.jstor.org/](http://www.jstor.org/)) is an excellent site for journal articles. Avoid popular sites like Wikipedia – they can be inaccurate.

GENERAL WORKS

1. Belton, Catherine. *Putin’s People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and then Took on the West* (2020)
5. Gessen, Masha. *Future is History* (2018)

PRIMARY SOURCES


Biographies


SPECIALIST READING

The collapse of the USSR

Transition to democracy

5. Gel’man, Vladimir. Authoritarian Russia: Analyzing Post-Soviet Regime Changes (Ch. 3) (2015)

Westernization of Culture

2. Bartlett, Djurdja. In Russia, At Last and Forever: The First Seven Years of Russian Vogue (2015)
8. Troitsky, Artemy, ‘No limits: what was the cost of a decade of sex, drugs and excess?: http://calvertjournal.com/features/show/3838/Russian-90s-Artemy-Tiotsky-sex-drugs-excess
Transition to capitalism


Chechnya and national security

5. Eichler, Maya. *Militarizing Men: Gender, Conscription, and War in Post-Soviet Russia* (2011)
Return to autocracy


Remembering the 1990s


### Religion


Putin


Opposition


**Civil society**


14. Memorial

15. OBD-Memorial

16. Podvig Naroda

17. Bessmertnyi Polk

18. Bessmertnyi Barak
Gender and sexuality

6. Essig, Laurie. *Queer in Russia: A Story of Sex, Self, and the Other* (1999) Ch. 3-4

Nationalism

   doi:10.1080/00141840200031185
doi:10.1080/00905992.2015.1050366
   doi:10.1080/1060586X.2013.872453
doi:10.1111/1469-8219.00084
doi:10.1080/1060586X.2015.1076959
15. ———. “Transnational, Multinational, or Imperial?” *Transnational, Multinational, or Imperial?: The Paradoxes of Russia's (Post) coloniality* (2020), pp. 37-49

**Ethnic minorities**


**Russia’s youth**


Foreign policy and Crimea annexation:

Putin’s speech justifying Russia’s decision to annex Crimea and Sevastopol as federal subjects from 18 March 2014: http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603
For a different take on this, see Mikhail Zygar’s book, *All the Kremlin’s Men* (2017)

Western policy-oriented debate immediately following the crisis, see:

    www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21005