

POL/IR 280 Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics

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Office: 307 School of Sociology

Course Description

This course provides an introduction to Soviet, post-Soviet, and Russian politics and the way we in the West study and think about them. The substantive focus is on the political process and its policy outcomes. We will explore how the Soviet system evolved and how it addressed the complex issues that confronted it. We will consider the disintegration of the traditional Soviet system and the emergence of an independent Russian Federation. We will use a case study approach as we examine important issues on the contemporary policy agenda of the Russian Federation and other former Soviet states.

Various aspects of Soviet and post-Soviet polity and society are surveyed during the semester, including the belief systems which underlie them, evolving political cultures, the changing economic systems, the question of nationalities, Russian federalism and evolving center-periphery relations, and the struggle for a new post-Soviet Russian national identity. We will analyze both the achievements and dilemmas that characterized the Soviet system. Our semester-long examination of the USSR, Russian Federation, and other former Soviet states will enable us to distinguish these systems' differentiations and similarities with other polities.

While our focus is on the contemporary period of the 1980's to the early twenty first century, we will reflect on the full seventy-four year Soviet experience, briefly tracing the development of the Soviet system and the political elite through the periods of revolution, power consolidation and societal transformation, industrialization, and system maintenance. Our evaluation of the post-Stalin period will move us from the Khrushchev and Brezhnev regimes to those of Gorbachev and Yeltsin, as we assess the directions in which the polity was moving from the 1950's to the 1990's. The 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union brought fundamental, "root and branch" changes, and we will give those changes considerable attention. A good deal of time will be devoted to the efforts to consolidate power, redirect federal government policies, and further transform the emergent Russian market economy. Post-Soviet political elite governs Russia and we will examine that elite as we assess the country's evolving policy agenda. Our focus is on the Russian Federation: it is the largest and most powerful of the fifteen successor states, it is the legal inheritor of much of the Soviet Union's treaties and property, and it is the most important to American and world politics. Where appropriate, we will also consider the politics of other former Soviet states.

The majority of the materials we will be using are Western. Soviet/post-Soviet and Russian sources will be consulted as appropriate. Students are encouraged to use whatever foreign language skills they possess to explore Russian and other non-English sources.

This is both an exciting and challenging time to be studying Russian and post-Soviet political life. Exciting, because the politics of the new Russia and the other former Soviet states are dynamic and we can feel the impact of developments arising throughout the region of the former USSR. Yet challenging, because we must understand not only a traditional Soviet system now collapsed, but also contemporary systems that are evolving, and future systems toward which developments are rushing. Your intellectual flexibility - in understanding the past, monitoring the present, and anticipating the future - becomes essential as we study numerous moving political objects.

A central premise of this course is that familiarity with the Soviet and post-Soviet polity and experience, the values that inspired them and the elite responsible for them, is essential to international relations study and to a twenty first century liberal arts education. It is hoped that each course participant will gain the requisite knowledge of the traditional Soviet and the emergent post-Soviet states to approach intelligently the contentious issues affecting those countries and the international arena overall.

Course Format

This course is not designed to be a series of lectures followed by a final exam. Rather, it is intended to be highly interactive and student led. Student obligations for the course include: doing the readings and writing two short reflection papers.

The readings are critical to the course and will provide an appropriate basis for our meetings. This course assumes no prior background on your part, so for some of you this course is the first formal exposure to Soviet and post-Soviet politics. This fact only reinforces the importance of the readings, especially those early in the term. Focus on the concepts and theoretical concerns touched upon in the readings as you develop your own intellectual compass for understanding contemporary post-Soviet politics.

Writing standards are important in this course. Your ability to communicate clearly and concisely will directly affect your grade.

Attendance

Attendance at all class meetings is required. I anticipate lively and informed class discussions, with all course participants sharing thoughts. There will be occasional in-class exercises and breakout discussion sessions. Students are allowed two unexcused absences during the semester.

Examinations

There are two standard examinations throughout the semester. One will be scheduled near the midterm period, and the other as the final examination.

The course grade shall be determined on the basis of the following graded components, all of which must be completed to earn credit in the course:

Midterm take-home exam, 30%; required.

Final take-home exam, 30%; required.

Participation and reflection papers, 40%; required.

Books and Materials (provided to students):

McAuley, Mary, Soviet Politics 1917-1991, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Course pack.

As your awareness of the Russian Federation and other independent states grows, I recommend you diversify your sources of information and include Russian and other post-Soviet state sources. Translations of articles from hundreds of Russian and post-Soviet state newspapers and journals are published weekly in the Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press. An English language translation of Moscow News is also available. These and other English language sources are to be found in the Central Library. Among American news sources, The New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, and Christian Science Monitor provide especially extensive coverage of developments in these countries. New York Times website (www.nytimes.com) contains major headline news stories and other valuable supplementary information. The website version of The New York Times does not include all of the articles available in the hard copy.

Topical Course Outline, Tentative Class Schedule

Introduction and Overview

No Readings Assigned

The Historical Past: Themes and Tendencies

McAuley, 1992, Introduction

The Historical Past: Themes and Tendencies

Course pack, Discussion

The Evolution of the Soviet System

McAuley, 1992, Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4

The Evolution of the Soviet System

McAuley, 1992, Chapters 5, 6, 7, 8, Conclusion

From Socialism to Post-Socialism

Course pack

Peculiarities of Democratization

Course pack, Discussion

The Post-Soviet Political System: The Presidency and the Executive

Course pack

The Post-Soviet Political System: The Presidency and the Executive

Course pack, Discussion

The Legislature, Political Parties and Interest Groups

Course pack

Deadline for the first take-home exam

The Legislature, Political Parties and Interest Groups

Course pack

Elections and Voting Behavior

Course pack

Elections and Voting Behavior

Course pack, Discussion

Wrap up Overview of Political System

Course pack

Economy, Society, and Political Culture

Course pack

Economy, Society, and Political Culture

Course pack

Nationalities and the Federal System

Course pack

Nationalities and the Federal System

Course pack

Developments in Other Post-Soviet Countries

Course pack

Developments in Other Post-Soviet Countries

Course pack

Looking to the Future

Discussion

The information contained in the course syllabus may be subject to change with reasonable advance notice, as deemed appropriate by the instructor.