

History 242: The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union
Spring 2021: Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday, 3:00-5:00 CST

Edward Cohn
Mears 316 (X3107)

cohned@grinnell.edu
Office hours: Monday and
Friday from 11-12;
Wednesday from 4-5

Course Overview

The history of the Soviet Union is a story of great contrasts. In October 1917, when the tsarist regime fell, Russia became one of the most chaotic and fast-changing revolutionary societies in all of history; by the time the USSR collapsed in December 1991, it was a stagnant, bureaucratic regime led by a corrupt and entrenched elite. The leaders of the Soviet Union claimed that they had liberated their country from centuries of tsarist oppression, but they ended up unleashing mass repression and state-sponsored violence on a massive scale. The Soviet regime could claim great successes—like the dramatic growth of literacy and the launch of the first man-made satellite in history—but it never lived up to the grand rhetoric of its leaders and became one of the world’s most repressive states.

This course will examine the history of the USSR from the October Revolution of 1917 until the regime’s sudden collapse at the end of 1991, focusing on the country’s social and political history. Ever since the Bolsheviks seized power in 1917, scholars have debated the meaning and the legacy of the October Revolution; in every period of Soviet history, the country’s leaders claimed to be following the true path of Communism, while denouncing their rivals (and sometimes their predecessors) for straying from socialism. This class will examine how the nature of Soviet communism was redefined by each successive generation and will seek to relate each part of the Soviet experience to the larger trajectory of the country’s history. Was Stalinism a departure from the revolution’s original ideology, or the inevitable result of 1917? Was the Khrushchev era an unprecedented liberalization of the regime’s policies, or an attempt to return to the country’s Leninist roots? We will not only seek to answer questions like these, but to examine the ways that everyday citizens experienced Communist rule and to understand how the revolutionary enthusiasm that at times dominated the country’s political discourse ultimately gave way to the cynicism and corruption of the USSR’s final days.

Course Readings

The following books are all on sale at the college bookstore and on course reserve at the library:

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*
Ronald Grigor Suny, ed., *The Structure of Soviet History: Essays and Documents*

Many readings for this course are primary documents or secondary texts from Ron Suny’s *The Structure of Soviet History* (listed above). On the schedule of readings below, those texts will be listed with the notation “[Suny]”. Other readings (marked “[Pioneerweb]”) will be available on the course’s Blackboard site, either as pdfs or as links to library resources.

Brief Note on the Unusual Circumstances Surrounding the Class

When I first designed this class, and when you first thought about which courses in history you might like to take, no one imagined that Grinnell College and other institutions would be holding classes online. This isn't the way that any of us would like to be holding class, but I'm confident that we can make this course a rewarding experience for everyone. Here are some important principles that will guide the class:

- Whether we're all in Grinnell or we're all scattered across the country, it's my job to help you learn. I will be as accessible as I can in the weeks ahead. I will hold regular office hours, but please feel free to contact me at any time if there are issues connected with the class (or with your Grinnell education) that you'd like to discuss. Send me an email, and we can arrange a time to talk by phone or by Webex.
- Technology and online learning will present challenges very different from those connected to regular classes. Please do not hesitate to let me know at any point if you're running into any kind of difficulty with the course, whether you're experiencing a technological problem or find that some kind of adjustment might help you given your particular learning style. I'll do everything I can to make virtual learning as effective as possible for everyone, so please don't hesitate to let me know if things aren't working or if there's anything additional I can do to help you or your classmates.
- Given that we're all new to online college courses, I may need to make changes to the syllabus to improve the learning experience for the class. If I do so, however, I will do so in a way that makes things more flexible or that takes advantage of technology in more effective ways.
- I hope we can all agree on the following guideline for online learning: if one of our pets appears on screen, we're all encouraged to (unobtrusively) ask the animal's name, but if a friend or family member does something embarrassing in the background, we'll all agree to pretend it never happened and to proceed with class.
- Finally, I will make an effort to create an asynchronous alternative to our synchronous class sessions if technology issues, the pandemic, or other challenges of the current moment lead to problems for you. Just be in touch.

Learning Goals

This course has three broad objectives: to help students understand the history of the Soviet Union, to enable them to critically read both primary documents and secondary sources, and to help them improve their analytical writing skills. But it also has several more specific goals:

Soviet History Goals

By the end of the semester, students who have completed this course will be able to:

- explain how the Communist Party seized power in Russia in 1917, why it lost power in 1991, and how it maintained its power during the years in between;
- explain the ways in which the country's political leaders both modified and preserved the legacy of the October Revolution in each of the main periods of Soviet history;
- explain the ways in which the Soviet state made use of terror and ideology to achieve its goals (and the extent to which it was a dictatorship during each period of its history);

- explain how the Soviet Union was shaped by its Russian historical and geographical context, and the ways in which it was a modern political system shaped by forces that transcended national boundaries.

Critical Reading Goals

By the end of the course, students will have refined their ability to:

- interpret a primary source (historical document) by analyzing its structure, audience, goals, and biases;
- identify and critique the argument of a secondary text (a book or article by a present-day historian), while situating that text within a larger historical debate or literature.

Analytical Writing Goals

By the end of the semester, students will have improved their ability to:

- craft a clear, specific, and nuanced thesis statement in response to a historical question;
- construct a well-organized, evidence-rich, and cohesive paper in defense of a central argument;

Keep these goals in mind throughout the semester. The content goals, for example, will be useful as you prepare for the mid-term and final exams; class discussions will be based on the analysis of primary sources and secondary sources; writing assignments will be graded based on your ability to develop a nuanced thesis and to defend that thesis in a well-organized paper.

Office Hours

I will hold office hours from 11 to 12 each Monday and Friday, and also during our regularly scheduled class time on any day when we are not meeting. (These will be drop-in hours, so there's no need for an appointment.) You'll be able to reach me by using this link (unless you prefer to meet by phone): <https://grinnellcollege.webex.com/meet/cohned>.

You can also feel free to contact me at any time to schedule an appointment. Although I have more committee meetings to attend than I'd prefer, I have a lot of time in the morning and early afternoon and would be happy to meet with you at a mutually convenient time.

Assignments and Grading

Your grade in this class will be based on the following requirements. Note that you must hand in every assignment listed below in order to pass the class, and that if your grades improve steadily over the course of the semester, I will take that into consideration in deciding your final grade.

Two short document analyses (worth 15% of your grade, or 7.5% each). You will submit two short writing assignments (each 1 to 1.5 pages long); the first (an analysis of the Petrograd Soviet's Order Number 1) will be due by February 4 at 10 PM; a revised version will be due by February 10 at 5 PM. The second (an analysis of the 1922 marriage and family code) will be due at 10 PM on February 14.

A **5-page oral history analysis** (25% of your final grade). This paper will be an analysis of the oral history interviews of the Harvard Project, due by March 7.

A 3-page paper (15% of your grade). This paper will be an analysis of the movie *The Death of Stalin*. It will be due at 5 PM on March 17.

A **final exam** (20% of your grade.) This exam will be a take-home assignment, less formal in nature than one of the other papers. It will most likely include an essay section and a section where you identify and explain key concepts from the course.

Class participation (20% of your grade). Although this class will occasionally include brief lectures on the course material, it is primarily intended as a discussion course. The final requirement for the class, then, is active and informed participation in class discussions. You should come to class having read the day's reading and thought about its contents; you should be ready to talk about the course material, to remember the main strategies we'll use for analyzing and discussing primary and secondary sources, and to help the class have a productive discussion in whatever way seems most appropriate to you at the time.

Here are some general observations about class participation:

- Class participation is the largest part of your grade for several reasons, but the most important one is this: I believe that being able to delve into an intelligent, nuanced, civil, and respectful discussion with your peers is one of the most important skills a liberal arts education can give you. Moreover, having everyone participate—in one way or another—makes the experience better for everyone.
- Remember that there are many ways to participate in class discussions. The strongest participants in discussion will often make comments that analyze the readings (rather than merely recapping them), but I expect that active participants in discussion will play different roles at different times. For example, here are some different rhetorical moves you might make in class:
 - Answer a question posed by me or a classmate
 - Ask a question for the class to consider
 - Summarize a reading or part of a reading
 - Provide evidence or an example for a point someone else has made
 - Disagree (respectfully!) with a previous comment from class
 - Agree with a previous comment from class while adding an example or evidence
 - Connect two comments made by different discussion participants
 - Connect the day's reading to an earlier reading
- In general, any form of participation that shows engagement with the material and helps the class to understand the course's subject matter is fair game. Remember, too, that class participation depends not only on speaking, but on listening—both to me and to your classmates. Be respectful, listen carefully, and be ready to respond to your classmates and not just to me.
- All else being equal, it will help you to provide evidence for your arguments when you speak in class. Ground your participation in the text: be ready to quote the readings or to point out specific passages that you find useful, significant, or relevant.
- You should therefore come to class with copies of the day's reading and with your notes on what you've read. (You are welcome to bring the readings either in hard copies or on a computer, but you should remember that it is often easier to mark significant passages in

a paper copy of the readings.) In particular, I recommend that you make note of quotations and details in the readings that you find especially compelling.

- Although I hope that all students will take part in the discussion (ideally speaking at least once per class session on average), remember that the thoughtfulness of your comments is generally more important than the quantity of your remarks.
 - I also realize that some students will always be more talkative or more reserved than others. I'm happy to talk to you at any time about ways you might become more involved, and I think it's part of my job to make sure the classroom atmosphere is conducive to a broad, inclusive discussion.
 - Students sometimes ask if talking to me in office hours can substitute for participation in class. My answer: not entirely. Talking to me in class can show engagement with the material, so if you've been quiet in class, it can help me understand how you've understood our course materials. (If you've been active in class, I'm also happy to talk to you, but coming to office hours won't improve your grade.) On the other hand, I value class participation in part because discussion helps all your classmates to understand the course material and to have a good class experience, so coming to office hours is never a perfect substitute for class discussion.
- Class participation depends on attendance. I'll therefore keep track of your attendance throughout the semester; missing class once or twice won't affect your grade, but if you have more than two unexcused absences, your participation grade will go down. If you have more than six unexcused absences, you will generally receive a participation grade of F or zero. Please contact me at least a week in advance if you will be missing class because of an athletic event or another campus activity.
- If you will be missing a class, you can make sure your absence does not affect your grade by sending me a 300-to-500 word email on the day's reading. Under normal circumstances, this email will be due within 24 hours of the class period; it should analyze the day's reading using the approach discussed in our primary and secondary source handouts or answer a question I posed by email to the class.
- Finally, I will generally give each student a brief "participation update" each time I send you feedback on a written assignment. I also encourage you to check in with me at any point if you have questions about the class or about how you can become more involved in the discussion.

Bonus (5%). Because online learning is hard on everyone and can be unpredictable, 5% of your grade will be a bonus, which will be equal to the highest grade you received on one of the categories above. (That is, if you averaged a B+ on class participation, your 3-page paper, 5-page paper, and exam and an A- on your document analyses, an additional 5% of your grade will be an A-.)

Extension Policy

Each student in the class can have one (and only one) 48-hour extension on a writing assignment over the course of the semester, with the exception of the document analyses (which will go over material we discuss in class.) To claim this extension, send me a brief email asking for an extension before the assignment's deadline; I will grant this extension automatically, so there is no need for you to explain why you need more time. Keep in mind, however, that once you've received an extension on an assignment, I will not give you an extension on another except in the

case of a documented emergency. (Note, too, that you cannot break up your one 48-hour extension into two 24-hour extensions or a 2-hour extension and a 46-hour extension.) In the absence of an extension, late assignments will be penalized one third of a letter grade per day.

The first two written assignments of the semester—the document analyses due in February—are due by email the night before class. Since we will be discussing these documents in class the next day, it is not possible to get an extension on them (since this would give you an advantage on the paper relative to your classmates.) If you cannot complete one of your short document analyses by the deadline, I will give you the chance to do an analysis of a document from later in the semester instead; however, if you choose to exercise this option, you will not have the chance to get an extension on a later paper except in the case of an emergency.

Important notes

My goal is to create as inclusive a classroom as possible and to meet the needs of all of my students. I therefore encourage students with documented disabilities, including invisible or non-apparent disabilities such as chronic illness, learning disabilities, and psychiatric disabilities, to discuss reasonable accommodations with me. You will also need to have a conversation about and provide documentation of your disability to the Coordinator for Student Disability Resources, Jae Hirschman.

I will also, of course, excuse absences related to religious observance and will be flexible with deadlines that conflict with any religious holidays. Please let me know early in the semester if you expect to miss class because of a religious observance.

SCHEDULE OF READINGS AND ASSIGNMENTS

Week 1: The Revolution

Monday, February 1: Introduction to the Course

Reading: Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution*, intro and ch. 1

Tuesday, February 2: Prelude to Revolution

Reading: Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy*, ch. 1 [Pioneerweb]
Semen Kanatchikov, *A Radical Worker in Tsarist Russia*, excerpts [Pioneerweb]

Thursday, February 4: Red October

Reading: Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution*, ch. 2
Boris Kolonitskii, "Anti-Bourgeois Propaganda and Anti-Burzhui Consciousness in 1917" [Suny]
Alexander Rabinowitch, "How the Bolsheviks Won"
[www.jacobinmag.com/2017/11/bolsheviks-russian-revolution-october-lenin]

assignment: **email me a 1-to-1.5-page analysis of Order Number 1 by 10 PM**

Friday, February 5: The Revolution in Documents

Reading: primary documents from the Suny reader, pp. 33-48
Order Number 1 [Suny]
Kerenskii's statement in the Soviet of Workers' Deputies [Suny]
Tsereteli's speech on returning from Soviet exile [Suny]
The April Theses [Suny]
Tsereteli and Lenin's exchange [Suny]
report from Kovno Guberniia [Suny]
Lenin's letter to the Central Committee [Suny]

Week 2: From the Revolution to Stalin

Monday, February 8: Civil War!

Reading: Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution*, ch. 3
"Lenin's Decree on Peace" [Suny]
"Decree on the Land" [Suny]
"Decree on Suppression of Hostile Newspapers" [Suny]
"Declaration of the Rights of the Peoples of Russia" [Suny]

Tuesday, February 9: The Militarization of the Soviet State

Reading: "Iulii Martov's Letter to A.N. Stein" [Suny]
"Lenin's Letter to V. V. Kuraev, E. B. Bosh, and A. E. Minkin" [Suny]
Lev Trotskii, "Report on the Red Army" [Suny]

Wednesday, February 10: **email me a revised version of your Order Number 1 analysis by 5:00 PM**

Thursday, February 11: Faction-Fighting and the Rise of the Dictatorship

Reading: Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution*, ch. 4
Aleksandra Kollontai, "The Workers' Opposition" [Suny]
Resolutions of the Tenth Congress of the Russian Communist Party [Suny]
V. I. Lenin, "Letter to the Congress" (first part) [Suny]

Friday, February 12: Russian Society during NEP

Reading: Sheila Fitzpatrick, "The Problem of Class Identity in NEP Society" [Pioneerweb]
Alan Ball, "Private Trade and Traders during NEP" [Pioneerweb]

Week 3: NEP and Stalin

Sunday, February 14: **email me a 1-to-1.5-page analysis of the code of laws on marriage and the family (by 10:00 PM)**

Monday, February 15: The Contradictions of NEP

Reading: Eric Naiman, “The Case of Chubarov Alley” [Pioneerweb]
 The Code of Laws on Marriage and Divorce, the Family and Guardianship [Suny]

Tuesday, February 16: An Overview of Stalinism

Reading: Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution*, ch. 5
 Lynne Viola, *Peasant Rebels under Stalin*, excerpts [Pioneerweb]
 Stalin, “Dizzy with Success” [Suny]

Thursday, February 18: The Stalin Dictatorship

Reading: Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Stalin: In the Court of the Red Tsar*, pp. 1-57,
 93-101 [Pioneerweb]
 Oleg Khlevniuk, “Stalin as Dictator: The Personalisation of Power” [Pioneerweb]

Friday, February 19: Stalin’s Personality Cult

Reading: Jan Plamper, *The Stalin Cult*, excerpts [Pioneerweb]
 Sarah Davies, “Stalin and the Making of the Leader Cult” [Pioneerweb]
 Sarah Davies, “The Leader Cult in Official Discourse” [Pioneerweb]

Week 4: *Life under Stalin*

Monday, February 22: Everyday Life and the Communist Party

Reading: Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, excerpts

Tuesday, February 23: A New Society?

Reading: Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, excerpts

Thursday, February 25: Nationalism in the USSR

Reading: Terry Martin, “An Affirmative Action Empire” [Suny]
 Terry Martin, “Modernization or Neotraditionalism? Ascribed Nationality and
 Soviet Primordialism” [Pioneerweb]

Friday, February 26: The Purges

Reading: Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment*, pp. 282–289 [Pioneerweb]
 Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, pp. 190-217
 James Harris, “The Purging of Local Cliques in the Urals Region, 1936-7”
 [Pioneerweb]

Week 5

Monday, March 1: Voices of the Purges

Reading: Eugenia Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, excerpts [Pioneerweb]
 Nikolai Bukharin, "Letter to Stalin" [Suny]

Tuesday, March 2: The War and After

Reading: Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment*, pp. 336-361 [Pioneerweb]
 Suny reader, pp. 289-297, 336-342:
 Suny's chapter intro, pp. 289-293 [Suny]; The Nazi Soviet Pact [Suny]
 Popular reactions to the beginning of the war [Suny]
 Vladislav Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin
 to Gorbachev*, chapters 1-2

Thursday, March 4: Stalinism after the war

Reading: Vera Dunham, "The Big Deal" [Suny]
 Cynthia Hooper, "A Darker 'Big Deal'" [Pioneerweb]
 Yoram Gorlizki and Oleg Khlevniuk, "Stalin's Last Struggle" [Suny]
 Miriam Dobson, "1953: 'The Most Painful Year'" [Pioneerweb]

Friday, March 5: The Death of Stalin

Film: *The Death of Stalin*
Readings: short articles on the film (optional; will be useful for paper)

Sunday, March 7: **five-page paper is due by 5:00 PM**

Week 6: From the Purges to Stalin's Death

Monday, March 8: Khrushchev's Rise to Power and the Beginnings of De-Stalinization

Reading: Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment*, pp. 413–446 [Pioneerweb]
 "Nikita Khrushchev's 'Secret Speech' to the Twentieth Congress of the
 Communist Party of the Soviet Union" [Suny]

Tuesday, March 9: Reform, Reaction, and Khrushchev's Hare-Brained Schemes

Reading: Zubok, chapter 6; Khrushchev's remarks on modern art [Pioneerweb]
 look at the website *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History* (see Pioneerweb for
 instructions)

Thursday, March 11: A Novella of The Thaw

Reading: *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

Friday, March 12: The Space Race

Reading: Amy Nelson, "Cold War Celebrity and the Courageous Canine Scout"
[Pioneerweb]
Slava Gerovitch, "The Human Inside a Propaganda Machine: The Public Image
and Professional Identity of Soviet Cosmonauts" [Pioneerweb]

Week 7: *The Last Years of the USSR*

Monday, March 15: The Brezhnev Era

Reading: Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment*, pp. 447–475 [Pioneerweb]
John Bushnell, "The 'New Soviet Man' Turns Pessimist" [Suny]
James R. Millar, "The Little Deal: Brezhnev's Contribution to Acquisitive
Socialism" [Suny]

Tuesday, March 16: Life under Brezhnev

Film: *The Irony of Fate* (Eldar Riazanov, dir.) (available online)

Wednesday, March 17: **three-page *Death of Stalin* paper is due at 5:00 PM**

Thursday, March 18: The Final Years of the USSR

Reading: Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment*, pp. 479-514 [Pioneerweb]
Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted*, excerpts [Pioneerweb]
excerpt from Mikhail Gorbachev's memoirs [Suny]

Friday, March 19: The End of the USSR

Reading: Alexander Dallin, "Causes of the Collapse of the USSR" [Suny]
Nina Andreeva, "I Cannot Give Up My Principles" [Suny]
"The Rehabilitation of Bukharin" [Suny]
"Boris Yeltsin Resigns from the Communist Party" [Suny]

Wednesday, March 24: final exam is due