

CDIPS Final Project

2022-23 Cohort

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Contemporary Russian Fiction: a modified syllabus.

CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN FICTION

The course meets three times a week for 50 minutes. No prior knowledge of Russian is required.

It is an upper-level undergraduate course. Since some of our students are more experienced in Russian studies, we design our course in such a way that each student's cultural competency can become their strength and not prevent them from learning.

NAME@email.sc.edu

**Come by to discuss Russia, course materials, or life
every Tuesday / Thursday 1:30 – 2:30pm
(or some other times by appt.), HUMCB 414**

“[W]orld literature ... is not something you are given in full or get by proxy. Not a pre-packaged canon that differs from the traditional one only in its inclusion of a handful of unfamiliar names.

Rather, world literature is a way you learn to think, a mode in which you learn to read, and a collective agreement you make to lose something in translation in order to gain something in transformation.”

Vilashini Cooppan

On the first day of class, when introducing the syllabus, the first thing we do is read this quote. We ask students what they think it means and what they think they would gain from this class.

Course Description:

This course is a survey of the works of writers that have captured the historically significant moments of Russian life in a profound way while representing different geographical, ethnic, religious, and gender identities. The course examines texts from the 1990s to the present--three decades of tremendous change in Russia. During the process of reclaiming a newly obtained yet quickly lost freedom of speech, contemporary Russian authors have created a body of works that reveal the spirit of traditional Russian literature even as they experiment with ideas, form, and language. We will explore themes such as nationalism, the concept of the “Titular nation,” Russian imperialism, nostalgia, consumerism, and war as students gain insight into the contemporary Russian cultural context. This course aims to challenge the monolithic perceptions often associated with Russian literature and offer a panoramic view of the myriad voices echoing throughout the country. By engaging with works from a wide spectrum of authors, we will endeavor to appreciate the nuanced stories of minority communities, the narratives of the marginalized, and the perspectives of those working to shift societal norms within a historically hegemonic culture. Through this exploration, we aim to foster an inclusive learning environment that respects and appreciates the cultural complexities and diversity inherent in contemporary Russian fiction.

The description of the course captures the uniqueness of the post-Soviet period while maintaining that Russian writers do respond to classical Russian literature and culture, be it in the form of openly opposing its paradigms – including such sensitive and prominent topics as nationalism and imperialism - or in entering a conversation with the classics. The description

also emphasizes the diversity of the term “Russian culture,” stressing the multitude of “Russian” identities. The course is not necessarily intended for students with prior Russian knowledge, so on the first day of class, when introducing the syllabus to the students, we explain the difference between “Российский” and “русский;” the content of the course is built in such a way, that when we say “Russian,” we mean the former unless specified otherwise. We strive that our syllabus “engage[s] learners with materials that demonstrate the ethnic, economic, and intersectional diversity of the Russian-speaking world” (Garza 55).

Requirements:

- One midterm exam (15%)

Following the ideas of Universal Design for Learning, our exams consist of various questions, including multiple-choice, mini-essays to analyze texts, short questions, etc. We always allocate an entire day of class for a review before an exam. Each exam weighs intentionally less than active participation. After the exam, we provide students with constructive feedback. If there’s a question that the entire class failed to answer correctly, we remove it from the gradable questions and talk about it – what wasn’t clear, why the question turned out to be too hard – with the students.

- Final exam (15%)
- Paper proposal (on Blackboard). You will post your proposals and comment on at least one of your peers’ posts. Be constructive and nice to one another 😊

For students to be successful in their research, we provide an overview of available online and on-site resources to make sure that everyone is familiar with how to access and use them. While we do stick to the format of the final project to be a research paper, there’s still enough freedom within the course assignments to exercise one’s creative skills. The final paper needs to integrate at least one text from the course, but students can place it within any topic they like. The main objectives of this assignment are to help students develop their research skills, that is learn and practice finding reliable academic sources, and secondly to be able to come up with an interesting original thesis statement. At the end of the semester, we allocate one day to discuss how they can approach the paper and talk about topics they are interested in. Moreover, we set 15-minute meetings with each student – on Zoom or in-person – to see their progress, answer more questions, and help them sharpen their idea.

When proposals are posted, students are expected to comment constructively on at least one other proposal. It is also stated in the assignment that the responses are supposed to be short yet substantive. “I totally agree with you,” “Great job!” “Your ideas are very similar to mine,” etc. – are an important part of the response but are not sufficient to be considered substantive. To make them such, they should comment on the points from the posts that they agree with, explain why, develop provided ideas, or ask deep questions. We also stress that it is also absolutely OK to disagree, as long as they do that politely and they can support their position. For written assignments, we also use a Grading Rubric which we thoroughly discuss with students in class so they know exactly what they are going to be graded on.

- One 5-6-page final paper on a research topic of your choice, to be linked in the paper to texts under discussion in the course (25%)
- One discussion leading (10%). You will sign up for a day when you will prepare questions and comments about the assigned text; then, in class, you will lead a 20-minute small group discussion.

Discussion leading will provide students with a chance to raise questions that align most with their interests and will help engage them more with the readings as well as with their peers. It is also essential that the students are prepared to lead such discussions; the very first discussion takes place on the last day of the second week so that they feel more comfortable coming up with their questions after having seen their instructor lead discussions. One of the goals is to make sure that the discussion is productive and engaging: “One important issue to keep in mind is to avoid asking yes/no questions but instead to give them questions that require careful analysis and active discussion among group members” (Barst 154). We are also applying ideas from another useful article that discusses cooperative learning and the benefits of classroom discussions and states that the “first requirement, that is indeed essential to all teaching, is to establish order. Applying general rules to the interaction and to how a discussion should progress provides the foundation for a discussion” (Radstake and Leeman 430).

- Three blog posts, 300-400 words each / creative mini-projects (10% total).

Blog posts can be done in the form of a traditional post or as a creative project. Should students choose the latter option, they can write a poem, do visual art, write a creative piece, etc. The only requirement is that they do substantial work that demonstrates their engagement with the course material. They can, if they desire to, respond to their peers’ projects, but those comments are not graded.

- Participation: regular, informed in-class participation (20%)

Please note that attendance and punctuality are strictly required and affect your grade: more than three unexcused absences or late arrivals will bring your final grade down. If you are absent from or late to class for a legitimate reason (for example, illness, religious holiday, or emergency), please let me know to avoid penalties.

The following sections are standardized and required at our university; thus, we are leaving them unaltered.

Cell Phones and Electronic Devices:

Please ensure that your cell phone, smartphone, and all other similar electronic devices (earpieces, earphones, mp3 players, etc.) **are turned off and put away before class begins.**

- Handling/Use of electronic devices during a quiz or exam will result in a grade of zero for that evaluation.
- Handling/Use of electronic devices at other times during class will negatively affect the class participation grade.

Students who violate the policies on electronic devices will be subject to disciplinary action.

Honor Code:

You are expected to practice the highest possible standards of academic integrity. Any deviation from this expectation will result in substantial grade penalties ranging from a score of 0 in the assignment/evaluation to a final course grade of F. The Office of Academic Integrity may also impose further sanctions. Violations of the honor code include using another student’s work; **use of translation software, websites, or tools other than simple dictionaries**; obtaining unauthorized help from friends, family or tutors; using notes or phones during quizzes and tests; improper citation of sources; and any other form of academic misrepresentation. Please refer to

your *Student Handbook* for information regarding the USC code of ethics and also see the web site of the Office of Academic Integrity: <https://www.sa.sc.edu/academicintegrity/>.

Disabilities:

If you have any condition (physical/learning disability), which will make it difficult for you to perform class work as delineated in this syllabus, or if you require special accommodations, please let me know. If you wish to request academic accommodations due to a disability, you need to contact the Office of Student Disability Services:

http://sc.edu/about/offices_and_divisions/student_disability_resource_center/index.php.

It's important to keep in mind that the following selection is heavily determined by what's available in translation. While there are many great books that are being translated from Russian into English every year, there are, unfortunately, still plenty of great authors whose names are not known in the West and whose works aren't available to an English-speaking reader.

COURSE SCHEDULE

M: Introduction to the course. Background information.

W: The ambiguity of the Empire and its Collapse. Svetlana Alexievich – “Belarusian writing in Russian,” excerpts from *Secondhand Time*: “Intro,” “Russia After Stalin,” section 1, pp. 20-33 (on BB).

F: Svetlana Alexievich, excerpts from *Secondhand Time*: sections 2-5 (on BB).

We include this text at the beginning of the course to introduce students to the idea that the collapse of the Soviet Union is a much more ambiguous event than most people in the West tend to think of it. First of all, Alexievich is a Belarusian author writing in Russian, which helps us problematize the notion of “Russian” literature and culture. The book is a collection of well-arranged interviews with the people who lived through the fall of the Soviet Union. Some remember those days as the happiest, most hopeful time, while for others, the end of the Soviet era meant the collapse of everything they'd believed in. For an average student in the US, this part of history is one-sided. For many people from the socialist bloc, however, it's not as clear cut. We ask students to write a short essay from the perspective of one of the people interviewed in the book, or they can come up with a totally fictional character. The main objective is to imagine how a person who was shocked/angered/hurt/terrified when they woke up in a new country/world would feel. Why would they feel that way? What are the things they might miss about their old life? Again, the person we imagine is not a villain or even a Soviet higher-up. It's a regular human being whose life has been turned upside down by History; what's as important is that the people in the book represent various regions of the country.

If time permits, we imagine how a person with the opposite worldview would respond to our first character; we imagine a conversation these two people could have if they met. There are some examples in Alexievich's book of friendships like that, in which two people hold completely different worldviews but manage to stay friends for decades. Thus, for this assignment, we have a good template and real-life examples, and the students are asked to write something similar but internalize it enough to be able to create parts that are uniquely their own. Interestingly, some examples of these people's possible disagreements are somewhat mutated versions of current Western political arguments (the role of government, social support, freedom, etc.) This can either be an in-class or take-home assignment.

In this way, the first week of the course lays out the complexity of not only the event of the Fall of the Empire but also of what followed next, helping students see that contemporary Russia is

an intricate entity composed of very different people with different backgrounds, views, identities, something we often struggle to realize when looking at foreign cultures.

M: In-class screening: *My Perestroika* (2010)
W: Ludmila Ulitskaya, *The Funeral Party*, pp. 1-100.
F: Ludmila Ulitskaya, *The Funeral Party*, finish the novel (**small group discussion**)
Ulitskaya's text represents a different perspective on the fall of the Soviet Union, that is, from the view of an immigrant who'd left Russia before the end of communism. This short novel also addresses such themes as émigré literature, and the Russian Jewish population in Russia and abroad, thus expanding our students' understanding of Russianness.

M: Alla Gorbunova, *It's the End of the World, My Love*
W: Alla Gorbunova, *It's the End of the World, My Love* (**small group discussion**)
F: *Brother* (1997); *The Hero of the New Time: Toxic Masculinity and the 90s*.
We intentionally assign this film right after Gorbunova's book. The former is a woman's perspective on Russia in the 90s written by a young woman author. At the same time, the movie is an apotheosis of masculinity (whether toxic or not is one of the topics for an in-class discussion). In our vision, this film is not only a great example of the sentiments prevalent in the 90s, but it will also be an excellent resource to refer to later in the course when we discuss the current events, Russian politics under Putin, and the war in Ukraine. Both *It's the End of the World, My Love* and *Brother* depict "непарадный Петербург," but do so from drastically different positions.

M: Mikhail Shishkin, "The Half-Belt Overcoat," "In a Boat Scratched on a Wall."
W: The 90s. Wrap-up Discussion. **Blogpost #1 due by 11:59pm**
F: Orlando Figes, "Burying the Bones," Tatiana Tolstaya, "Official Nationality" (both on BB).

We include Shishkin because his short stories are much more accessible to a reader unfamiliar with Russian literature than his novels. In this way, we do not overwhelm those students who aren't ready for Shishkin's more complicated works, but we do introduce one of the major voices writing in Russian so that maybe some of the students will get interested in his works. There are several goals for including these particular texts. First, "The Half-Belt Overcoat" depicts the narrator's memories of his Soviet childhood and how certain episodes and elements of Soviet life got imprinted on the narrator's psyche. Moreover, "In a Boat Scratched on a Wall" is a text about language and what it's like to be a writer, working in one language while being a citizen of a different country. Again, with these texts, we aim to expand our students' understanding of Russianness and to problematize even further the complex relationship those born in the Soviet Union have with the past (i.e., fond memories of their childhood vs. the psychological violence of the regime, etc.). We also include a piece of scholarship on Russian identity written by a British historian to present a Western approach/reading of the situation. Lastly, we include Tatiana Tolstaya – a controversial figure in contemporary Russian literature – which provides us with a chance to demonstrate and problematize the nationalistic views of an intelligentsia representative.

M: Russian Periphery: *Arrhythmia* (2017)
W: Maxim Osipov, Introduction by Alexievich, "The Gypsy," "On the Banks of Spree."
F: In-class video: Alexei Ivanov, interview with Yuri Dud'
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ppu9wh2AABE&feature=youtu.be>

Next, we shift our attention to narratives from the periphery. This section includes three different types of “text”: a film set in Yaroslavl’ where along with the love story arch, we see a confrontation between the rules made up by higher-ups in Moscow and real-life professionals in other parts of Russia. Then, we discuss Osipov’s short stories set in smaller towns. We conclude this week by watching an interview with Ivanov, whose books aren’t yet translated into English but who masterfully pictures life in Siberia in his texts. Those students who study Russian might get interested in his work. Moreover, watching a recent interview by Yuri Dud’ is a good way to introduce students to the Russian-speaking opposition YouTube.

We are also purposefully assigning different types of media so that “there are multiple ways of representing knowledge for students” (Capp 802). We employ film in this class because “the engagement and discussion of social issues highlighted in movies and television shows ... have the power to raise consciousness leading to transformative learning” (Tisdell 64).

M: LGBTQ+ in Russia. Historical background (credit to Karen Shainian’s YouTube channel).

W: Oksana Vasyakina, *Wound*, pp. 1-110.

F: Oksana Vasyakina, *Wound*, finish the novel.

This week’s material introduces an openly lesbian author. In her autofiction, Vasiakina covers a range of topics, including mother-daughter relationships, her romantic relationships, the death of a mother, etc. The narrative takes the reader not only through the narrator’s life but also across Russia itself, showing the periphery in a unique way.

M: The Caucasus and Islam in Russia. *Closeness* (2017)

W: Alisa Ganieva, *Bride and Groom*, pp. 1-80 + Interview with Ganieva.

F: Alisa Ganieva, *Bride and Groom*, pp. 80-160

M: Alisa Ganieva, *Bride and Groom*, finish the novel (**small group discussion**)

W: Review day

F: **Midterm exam**

The following weeks take us to the Caucasus. We discuss the historical role of the region and its current status. By this time, students have some knowledge about the Chechen wars from the discussion of *Brother* earlier in the course.

Closeness explores the tension between a Jewish minority and other locals of Nalchik. Thus, again, demonstrates how intertwined ethnic groups are in Russia and how “Российский” does not necessarily mean “русский” and that the Slavic people are only one of the many ethnic groups.

Bride and Groom will help the students see how, in the words of Ganieva herself, “Islam, which has been quite superficial in my native region, is becoming more and more overwhelming. It has this taint of a subcultural, fashionable youth movement. Younger people are now more conservative than their parents and grandparents.” We will also discuss gender as “It has some similarities with the state of gender across Russia as a whole.” This segment and the next segment are both exciting and challenging because they require a complex discussion of religion through literary texts. We are encouraged by Lori Branch’s approach to talking about religion in a literature class: “I’m claiming that an effective way, perhaps even the only way, forward out of our long-standing status quo is for all of us to take up the charge of better talking and teaching about religion, secularism, postsecularity, and literature: explicit teaching, not casual and implicit, or one-sidedly critical, in survey classes, in units and subunits of syllabi, even in whole courses. We as a discipline need to take up religion in our literature classrooms in ways that dovetail with our operative methodologies, even as they catalyze and alter them, and that neither reboot the secularization thesis (whether in performative or wistful forms) nor reify the

secular/religious binary and, more important, that prove helpful to our students and to our society.” (Branch 380).

Break!

M: Russia, Orthodoxy, Mysticism, spirituality, and the concept of the Holy Fool: *The Island* (2006)

W: Eugene Vodolazkin, *Laurus*, pp. 1-94

F: Eugene Vodolazkin, *Laurus*, pp. 95-181 (**small group discussion**)

M: Eugene Vodolazkin, *Laurus*, finish the novel (**small group discussion**)

W: *The Student* (2016). **Blogpost #2 is due by 11:59pm**

Here, we begin our Russian Orthodoxy segment. During it, we discuss the controversial role of the Russian Orthodox Church that it plays today while also discussing its rich tradition and representation in Russian culture. The three works included in this part of the course intend to demonstrate different approaches to Orthodoxy and problematize its role in today’s Russian society (as seen in *The Student*) and its relationship with the State.

F: Discussion Day. Self-evaluation. Course Evaluation so far.

Self-evaluation will be encouraged throughout the course, and this day will be dedicated to spending some time on in-class self-reflection in whatever forms the students prefer. Students will be offered the chance to share their reflections or turn them in, but it will not be a requirement. We will also dedicate some time to course evaluation. Students will be provided with sample questions about the course/materials/instructional style/activities. Evaluations will be submitted anonymously. They are meant to help us improve the rest of the course as well as provide us with suggestions for the next time this course is taught. They also are meant to encourage students to partake in the decision-making process.

M: Today. Putin. Ukraine. Two interviews with Maria Stepanova and select poems.
<https://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/2023/march/conversation-maria-stepanova-kevin-m-f-platt-mark-lipovetsky>
<https://www.ft.com/content/c2797437-5d3f-466a-bc63-2a1725aa57a5>

W: Literature as propaganda. Z-poetry.

With Literature as propaganda, we will mostly talk about the concept of z-poetry as such more than read those verses themselves. Since they don’t hold much value in their aesthetics but do carry much ideological meaning as a concept, it is important for our students to learn that such a phenomenon, unfortunately, exists.

F: Linor Goralik, excerpts from *Found Life*. Introduction to ROAR-Review.

M: Literature as resistance. ROAR-review.

W: ROAR-review.

F: **Proposal discussions. Blogpost #3 is due by 11:59pm**

M: Daria Serenko, *Woman in Labor*

<https://www.theatlantic.com/books/archive/2023/01/poem-daria-serenko-woman-labor/672805/>

Then, we move to Linor Goralik, who has been one of the most active antiwar writer activists. Coming from a rather diverse background herself – Ukrainian-born Russian Israeli – Goralik founded ROAR Review – “Russian Oppositional Arts Review” – “online project, launched on April 24, 2022, and published bi-monthly [whose goal is] to introduce its readers to the artifacts of the contemporary Russian-language culture—from poetry to music scores, from articles to fiction, from web design objects to art reproductions, graffiti, and short videos—opposing the loyalist and servile official culture, which in extremes merges with the blatant propaganda serving the current criminal political regime in Russia.” Thus, our students will get a chance to familiarize themselves with works that might never get published elsewhere and see opposition art in a wide variety of forms and genres. Moreover, in her work, Goralik always strives to go beyond gender norms and often uses masculine pronouns thus underlining, according to her, the prevalence of sexism in both Russia and Israel.

For the two days dedicated to ROAR, students are expected to come having read/analyzed at least one piece from each of the available issues. Those students who feel comfortable are invited to read/demonstrate the works they found particularly powerful. They are also encouraged to come up with a creative project themselves if they feel like doing so.

W: Extra-credit presentations

Those students who want to improve their grades can come up with a topic for a presentation. Any topic is good as long as it’s within the theme of Russian studies. For example, Russian majors who studied abroad might share their experiences. However, to ensure that no one’s cultural competency hinders them from succeeding in class, students who are just beginning their Russian studies journey can present on something they discovered and learned, however insignificant it might seem to more experienced learners. For example, they can talk about the Russian alphabet and how hard it is to pronounce “ЪИ.”

F: Wrap-up. Conclusions. Thoughts?

M: Review Day

One of the major objectives of this course is to develop critical thinking skills in our students. Besides discussions, we use various techniques that help them succeed. For example, on the days we discuss a film, we have prepared handouts with excerpts from critical reviews. Each student gets a copy, and they have several minutes to read through those quotes. The quotes present them with different ways of reading the film. This a) helps students to begin thinking about the movie in the direction they feel comfortable, a good starting point for a discussion, and b) shows students that it’s okay if different people understand the film differently and accentuate different parts of the narrative (plot or visual).

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