

# The Domestic Politics of Soviet Collapse

Summer 2023

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This course tries to understand how one of the most successful empires of modern times collapsed seemingly overnight. We focus on the domestic and internal sources of this profound transformation by looking at the forces and personalities inside the USSR. Our time this summer is short so we will get partial, confusing, and sometimes contradictory answers, using a small and inherently biased sample of the literature. Nevertheless, we will do our best to consider this historical event from a variety of perspectives, and perhaps even speculate about what it means for Russian politics today.

We meet in person, in Sid Smith 1078, Mondays and Wednesdays 12-2pm, starting May 8 and concluding on June 19.

## Requirements

All the readings are posted on Quercus.

Four formal components that make up your grade:

1. **Weekly Questions.** 25%. After doing the reading each week, write up 3 interesting open-ended questions that you think would be helpful for generating class discussion. The questions should be posted on Quercus. The key is to have a good question, not necessarily a good answer. This means avoiding simple yes-or-no questions, questions that barely touch upon the substance of the readings, or questions where the answer is already obvious. Your goal is to write questions that show a nuanced and complex understanding of the readings, especially by highlighting the tensions and parallels among them.
2. **In-Class Presentation** - 15%. In the last four sessions of the course, you will sign up for a session to present your final project. This will be a formal powerpoint presentation, about 10-15 minutes long, that describes the arguments you're making and the kinds of evidence you plan to use, followed by a Q&A with the rest of the course.
3. **Class Engagement.** 20%. For this class I've adopted a broader definition of course engagement as articulated by Mark Sample:

Engagement comes in many forms, not just attendance. Taken holistically, engagement includes (but is not limited to) the following:

**Preparation** (reviewing readings and material before class)

**Focus** (avoiding distractions during in-person and online activities)

**Presence** (Engaged and responsive during group activities)

**Asking questions** (in class, out of class, online, offline)

**Listening** (hearing what others say, and also what they're not saying)

**Specificity** (referring to specific ideas from readings and discussions)

**Synthesizing** (making connections between readings and discussions)

For the purposes of this class, “engagement” also includes participation (asking questions and providing comments) during other student’s presentation sessions.

4. **Final Project:** The Podcast – 40%. For your final project, put together a podcast (30-45 min in length) dealing with a theme or puzzle encountered during your readings. We will discuss expectations for the final project a bit later on. A traditional final paper (about 20 pages double-spaced) is also welcome as an alternative.

## Books

Francis Spufford (2012) *Red Plenty*

Vladislav Zubok (2021) *Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union*

David Remnick (1994) *Lenin’s Tomb: The Last Days of the Soviet Empire*

Alexei Yurchak (2006) *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*

Svetlana Alexievich (2017) *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets*

## Course Outline

1. May 8 – Intro and greetings
2. May 10 – *Red Plenty*: Part I - Introduction, Chapters 1, 2, 3 Part II - all; Part III – Intro only; Part IV – Intro, Chapter 3; Part V – Intro, Chapter 2; Part VI – Intro, Chapter 2
3. May 15 – *Collapse* Part 1
4. May 17 – *Collapse* Part 2
5. May 22 – NO CLASS
6. May 24 – *Lenin’s Tomb*
7. May 29 – *Lenin’s Tomb*
8. May 31 – *Everything Was Forever*
9. June 5 – *Secondhand Time* Part I
10. June 7 – Presentations 1
11. June 12 – Presentations 2
12. June 14 – Presentations 3

13. June 19 - Presentations 4