

The Domestic Politics of Soviet Collapse

Fall 2022

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This course tries to understand the collapse of one of the most successful empires of modern times. We focus on the domestic and internal sources of this profound transformation by looking at the forces and personalities inside the USSR. Our time 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 and maybe even speculate about what it means for Russian politics today.

Requirements

All the readings will be posted on Quercus.

Three 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, no questions that barely touch upon the substance of the readings, and no questions where the answer is already obvious. Your goal is to write questions that show a nuanced and complex understanding of the readings, and (especially) highlight the tensions and problems within them.
2. **In-Class Presentation** - 15%. In the last four weeks 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 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, you will 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 written final paper (about 20 pages double-spaced) remains an option.

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. September 13 - Intro and greetings
2. September 20 - *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. September 27 - *Collapse* Part 1
4. October 4 - *Collapse* Part 2
5. October 11 - *Lenin’s Tomb*
6. October 18 - *Lenin’s Tomb*
7. October 25 - *Everything Was Forever*

8. November 1 - *Secondhand Time*
9. November 15 - Presentations 1
10. November 22 - Presentations 2
11. November 29 - Presentations 3
12. December 6 - Presentations 4