

A Course on Russian History – Introduction & Geography
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Content of the Course

- This course will deal mainly with the Russian Federation, which is the name that Russia assumed after the dissolution of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991.
- It is a successor to the course "The Peoples of Russia," which was first taught in the mid-1990s and took a similar approach to this course but dealt with issues that were relevant at that time.
- The Russian Federation contains many ethnic groups and languages, including Russian, but also the languages of the Caucasus, Siberia, and Central Asia
- In some regions, the use and teaching of local languages is a point of contention – The federal government has deemphasized the role of these languages in the curriculum but local educators and politicians fight for their inclusion.
- An extreme and tragic example of this phenomenon occurred in [Udmurtia](#) on Sept. 10, 2019, when [a man committed suicide in an act of protest against government language policies](#).
- We will talk quite a bit about the geographically and ethnically non-Russian regions of the Russian Federation in Siberia, Central Asia, and the Caucasus Mountains
- We will inevitably discuss [Chechnya](#), in the southern region of the Russian Federation, where two wars have been fought since 1991, and there is ongoing activity against the government by terrorists with various motives
- We will talk about former regions of the Russian empire and later the Soviet Union
- For example, we will consider Ukraine, a former Soviet Republic and before that a region of the Russian empire.
- Many of the disputes between Russia and Ukraine that are featured prominently in the news are rooted in historical events that go back hundreds of years.
- The fighting between the two countries today, which began in 2014 after a revolution and change of government in Ukraine, is over two regions, Lugansk and Donetsk, that were historically a part of Russia but ended up in Ukraine after 1991.
- Separatists, supported by Russia, have established independent republics in these regions.
- The same is true of the Crimea, a peninsula in the Black Sea that is historically Russian, became a part of Ukraine during the late Soviet period, remained in that country after 1991, and was reclaimed by Russia in 2014.
- These disputes now impact the United States, which since 2014 has been a staunch backer of Ukraine, providing first non-lethal (under President Obama) and now lethal (under President Trump) military aid.
- The United States has placed sanctions on individuals, companies, and government entities within Russia.

- Meanwhile, President Trump and former Vice-President Biden have both been accused of having personal ties with major players in the Russia-Ukraine dispute.
- Another Soviet republic that we may discuss more than originally intended is Belarus, a region which, like Ukraine, is very close to Russia ethnically and linguistically.
- Recent protests there over what is widely perceived as a rigged presidential election may lead to a Maidan-like change of government.
- Finally, the course will touch on Eastern European countries that were in the Soviet Sphere of influence after World War II, such as Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, etc.
- Here Poland is the most prominent example; Among the events that are disputed to this day are the occupation of Moscow by the Poles in the late 16th century and the eventual incorporation of Poland into the Russian empire
- More recent disputes that are still constantly in the news include Poland's role in the beginning of the Great Patriotic War, the massacre by Soviet troops of several thousand Polish military officers during the time of the pact between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, and the death in 2010 of the Polish president, Lech Kaczyński, along with many other high-ranking government officials, when their plane crashed on the way to an event commemorating that massacre.
- Note: the Great Patriotic War is that portion of World War II that took place on Soviet soil, or soil occupied by the Soviet Union, beginning on June 22, 1941, when the Germans attacked the USSR.
- In the Russian Federation at present it is the single most discussed and commemorated event in Russian history.

The Importance of History in Russia

- In Russia, a great deal of popular culture and much of contemporary political discourse actively involves history
- A political talk show whose nominal subject is current relations with Ukraine might end up discussing the Treaty of Pereyaslav of 1654 or the Budapest Memorandum of 1994.
- Discussants make their positions on current political arguments clear by expressing an opinion on related or analogous historical events.
- To some extent this has been true in the United States as well, but the phenomenon until recently was much more prevalent in Russia
- Recently, however, the role of history in current American politics and political discourse has equaled, and possibly even exceeded, its role in Russia
- Thus, Americans arguing about race relations in the country might find themselves discussing the legacy of Hans Christian Heg (1829-1863), whom most of them had never heard of prior to June 23, 2020

The main historical events and periods that we will discuss:

- Medieval Russia, which involves the common origins of today's Russians and Ukrainians

- Imperial Russia, including the formation and maintenance of a large centralized state that expanded throughout Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Siberia, and the Caucasus mountains, and became a major player in world affairs
- The Revolutions of 1917 and the ensuing civil war, and the formation of the Soviet Union
- Stalin's genocides (as the historian Norman M. Naimark calls them), which resulted in millions of deaths
- The Great Patriotic War, which, as noted above, is that portion of World War II that took place on Soviet territory between June 22, 1941 and May 9, 1945.
- The thaw and subsequent freeze after Stalin's death
- The period of stagnation (застой in Russian)
- The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the early post-Soviet years 1992-1999
- The Russian Federation 2000-2020

Several important historical events that are not always discussed, and in some cases are avoided:

- The Mongol/Tatar invasion 1240-1480
- The emergence of Ukraine as a separate entity
- The Crimean Peninsula
- The establishment, existence for hundreds of years of the custom of serfdom, and its eventual abolition during the age of reform (1861-1881)
- The incorporation into the Russian empire of Jews, Caucasians, Central Asians, and indigenous Siberians, into the Russian empire and the subsequent fate of these peoples
- The Russo-Japanese war and Russia's role in the first world war.
- The emigration, after 1917 and subsequently, of millions of Russians to western Europe and point beyond
- The great famine of 1921-1922
- The Stalin period of what are now referred to in Russian officialese as "repressions," but by one historian, Norman M. Naimark, as Stalin's "genocides," including government-engineered famine, mass incarceration, forced migration of peoples, and mass murder in some cases
- The decline and dissolution of the Soviet Union
- The Yeltsin, Putin, and (briefly) Medvedev eras
- For most of these topics will discuss the various controversies surrounding them

Russian Geography

- Finally, we must know Russian geography as it pertains to history and culture:
- Russia is by far the largest country in the world, consisting at present time of 11 time zones
- There are four basic geographic zones: tundra, forest, steppe (plains), and desert
- Large parts of Russia are not suited to agriculture
- However, Russia also has some of the richest soil on the planet and was a net exporter of some agricultural products, at times a breadbasket to Europe, prior to the October 1917 revolution.

- European Russia has no natural barriers in the east and west, with the exception of the Ural mountains which are not difficult to traverse
- Russia has expanded, interacted with, been invaded by, and incorporated peoples on its frontiers east and west
- With the acquisition of vast territories, Russia has many of the world's longest rivers and largest mountain ranges, as well as the world's deepest, and largest by volume, freshwater lake, Lake Baikal.
- For excellent online maps of Russia, see the [Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection](#) at UT-Austin