Cultures and Contexts: Russia – between East and West
Fall 2011

Dr. Janusz Salamon
NYU in Prague
janusz.salamon@univ-oxford.com

Course description:
The main subject of this course are the key ideas, beliefs, and values that shaped and continue to shape the worldviews and cultural identities of Russians. Throughout the course, students will have the opportunity to examine some of the principal textual and artistic images representative of traditions that emerged at geographic and cultural crossroads of Eastern Europe. One of the primary goals of the course is to provide students with an opportunity for improving their skills to analyze the complex dynamics of interaction between cultures, therefore the evolution of Russian cultural identity will be explored in juxtaposition to parallel developments of other Eastern European cultures. The course is intended as a case study in critical and cross-disciplinary inquiry into intellectual cultures that may differ in some respects from the traditions that the students may currently inhabit in contemporary North America. The students will be encouraged to think critically and with a historically informed sensibility about the diverse perceptions of reality in cultures different from their own, especially about various construals of such fundamental categories as “national identity”, “religion”, “morality”, “ritual”, “belief”, “gender”, “individual”, “community”. The through-line of the course highlighting the interconnectedness of all these aspects of East European identities is the emergence of individual and collective self struggling for freedom of self-determination within the context of societies which for cultural, religious, or political reasons hinder such aspirations.

Grading policy:
The course will be organized as a seminar. Students will be expected to have read the assigned literature prior to class and to participate actively in the discussion.
Class attendance / active participation: 25%
3 Short Papers (2 pages each): 3 x 10% - to be handed by the end of Week 5, 8 & 11
Short Paper 1: Sources of Russian Cultural Identity; Short Paper 2: Russia’s Cultural Space In-Between East and West; Short Paper 3: Imagining Russia’s Identity - Projecting Russia’s Future
Midterm Paper (5 pages): 15% - to be handed by the end of Week 10
The topic to be chosen by each student from the list discussed by the lecturer in Week 3. The list of topics will be organized around the main cultural themes explored in Weeks 1-6.
Final Paper (10 pages): 25% - to be handed in by the end of Week 14
The topics will be formulated in the course of individual consultations of the lecturer with students, taking into account both the content and character of the course, and each student’s academic background.

Course schedule:
Week 1: Course Overview and Introduction
Recommended Readings: Orlando Figes’s Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia is recommended to all students as a beautifully written introductory-level companion to the entire course. Students familiar with Figes’s overview of the cultural history of Russia will find the assigned readings more enjoyable and easier to study.
Week 2: Defining Vectors of Russian Destiny: Geopolitics and Religion


**Listening** to Russian Church Music (The Divine Liturgy of St John’s Chrysostom)

**Week 3:** Community-binding Power of Suffering: the “Mongol Yoke”, Ivan the Terrible, and the “Time of Trouble”


**Supplementary Readings:** Freeze, Chs. 2-3; Riasanovsky, Chs. 11-19.

**Listening** to excerpts from Borodin’s opera *Prince Igor* with a commentary ( Cf. *The Song of Igor’s Campaign*).

**Week 4:** Muscovy’s Western Neighbors: Renaissance and Reformation in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.


**Listening** to Polish Renaissance sacred music and to Old Russian Church music

**Week 5:** Ritual Space, Public Space: St. Petersburg - Peter the Great’s Window on Europe.

**Short paper due**


**Supplementary Readings:** Freeze, Chs. 4-5; Riasanovsky, Chs. 20-24.

**Watching** Aleksandr Sokurov’s film “Russian Ark” (2002)

**Week 6:** Call to Liberty: Challenging Tsarist Autocracy


**Supplementary Readings:** Freeze, Ch. 6; Riasanovsky, Chs. 26-30.

**Listening** to excerpts from Tchaikovsky’s opera *Eugene Onegin* with a commentary (based on Alexander Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*).

**Week 7:** Cultural Self-Identification of a Stateless People: Poland under Russian Rule

**Primary Readings** (Readings 20-21 in The Reader): Adam Mickiewicz and Polish Romanticism, in C. Milosz’s *The History of Polish Literature*, pp. 195-232; Chapter on Russian Poland, in *The History of Poland since 1863*, edited by R.F. Leslie, pp. 36-64; Excerpts from Frederic Chopin’s letters (Internet).

**Listening** to the selection of Chopin’s Polonaises with a commentary (based on Alexander Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*).

**Week 8:** Between Enlightened Rationalism and Romantic Nationalism: ‘Westernizers’ vs. ‘Slavophiles’. **Short paper due**

Week 9: Moral Dilemmas of the Russian Elites in the Literary Mirror of the ‘Golden Age’. Discussion of the main existential themes of the great Russian novels (by Dostoyevsky, Turgenev and Tolstoy) and short stories (by Chekhov).

Week 10: The Images of Women and Their Social Roles in the 19th Century Russian Novel. Midterm paper due
Discussion of the approaches of the leading Russian novelists to the issue of the emancipation of women. Watching Bernard Rose’s film Anna Karenina (1997).

Week 11: Listening to Subordinate Voices: Serfs and Industrial Workers in Imperial Russia.

Week 12: The Soviet Experience: Transformations of Identities in the Soviet Russia
Supplementary Readings: Freeze, Ch. 9-12; Riasanovský, Chs. 35-43.

Week 13: The Empire of Fear: Individual and Collective Responses to the Soviet Terror
Supplementary Readings: Freeze, Chs. 9-12; Riasanovský, Chs. 35-43.
Listening to excerpts of Dmitri Shostakovich’s compositions with a commentary.

Week 14: Open Future: Where is Russia Heading? Final paper due

Bibliography

N.B.: All books included in this bibliography are available at the library of the New York University in Prague

Primary Sources:


The History of Polish Literature, compiled by Czesław Milosz, University of California Press, 1983.


Secondary Sources:


