International History

Academic year 2019-2020

The Soviet Union and Russia from Détente to the Syrian War, 1975-2015

HI127 - Spring - 3 ECTS

Course Description

The Soviet Union and Russia from Détente to the Syrian War, 1975-2015:
The course explores the motives and interests behind the international conduct of the Soviet Union and its legal successor the Russian Federation. The framework falls into four distinct periods: the peak of the Soviet superpower and its overextension during the 1970s; the period of reforms and unexpected collapse; the efforts of the Russian Federation to retain its great power status in partnership with the United States in the 1990s and the early 2000s; and a growing confrontation of Moscow with the US-led international order. The discussion will combine chronological and thematic approach, with a focus on “path dependency,” construction of a great power ideology, and adaptation to international economy.

PROFESSOR

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Office hours

ASSISTANT

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Syllabus

Analysis of Russia’s international conduct has been affected, in sequence, by Cold War fears, the enthusiasm for Gorbachev’s reformism, the “transition to democracy” after the Soviet collapse, and the new apprehensions of Russia’s authoritarian and illiberal trends. The annexation of Crimea in 1914 and the international conflict over Ukraine made many foreign observers concur on the “path dependency” of Russia’s foreign policy: persistent factors that prevent this country from becoming a “normal” member of European and world community. The course challenges this consensus. It scrutinizes four periods of Soviet-Russian international behaviour, and explores key junctures of history when Moscow’s modus vivendi changed remarkably and beyond expectations. The course takes advantage of massive new documentation that allowed researches to understand the other side’s perspective: Moscow’s policy decisions, economic dilemmas, political fears and cultural problems. In the focus of class discussion will be also ideas of power and security, international legitimacy and recognition, and the pressures of the increasingly global and competitive international economy. The background in Soviet and post-Soviet history is helpful, but not necessary.
Assessment

- 20% class participation: students must attend every session, prepare the reading assignments, and participate in class discussions.
- 30% one page written reviews of two secondary and one primary source selected by student from the syllabus or per discussion with the instructor.
- 50% final paper: around 12 pages.

Friday, May 8. Introduction.
Reading:

Thursday, May 14. The Soviet Détente Deciphered
Reading:
Vladislav Zubok, A Failed Empire. The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev (2007), chap. 7

Friday, May 15. The Imperial Overstretch
Reading:

Primary sources:
Anatoly Chernyaev, The Diary of 1972 and 1978 (skim through this lengthy document written by a senior Soviet foreign policy expert, and compare how his expectations and moods changed; use key dates and words to search),
https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB379/1972%20as%20of%20May%2024,%201972%20as%20of%20May%2024,%201972%20as%20of%20May%2024,%201972%20as%20of%20May%2024,pdf

Thursday, May 21. Perestroika, Crisis, and the End of the Cold War
Reading:

Primary sources:
Anatoly Chernyaev, The Diary of 1987 and of 1989 (skim through and like in previous case, make comparison with expectations and assessments just in three years’ time),
Friday, May 22. The Soviet Collapse and Its Consequences
Reading:

Primary sources:

“NATO Expansion. What Gorbachev heard,” the selection of documents at the National Security Archive

Thursday, May 28. Russia’s transition and Western expansion.
Reading:

Primary Sources:
“The Clinton-Yeltsin Relationship in their own words,” the White House memcons published and commented by the National Security Archive at:

Friday, May 29. Russia’s road to Crimea and Syria
Reading
Bobo Lo, “Going Legit. The Foreign Policy of Vladimir Putin,” 2018 at:
[https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications-going-legit-foreign-policy-vladimir-putin](https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications-going-legit-foreign-policy-vladimir-putin)
Eugene Rumer, “Russia, the Indispensable Nation in the Middle East,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 31, 2019 at:
Primary Sources: