The Making and Unmaking of Communist Ideals (Learning About Society Through Historiography, Literature, and Film)

In this seminar we will explore the development of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe through historiography, literature, and film. In the first few weeks of the course we will cover the fundamentals of Marxist theory and look at its Leninist application in the Russian historical context. Next, we will explore the background and course of the two Russian revolutions of 1917 through the eyes of one of its main architects and Marxist historians, Leon Trotsky. The main part of the course is devoted to early revolutionary dilemmas, the relationship of intellectuals to the revolution both in Soviet Russia and the West, and the rise of Stalinism. Finally, we will document the process of the gradual disillusionment with Communism in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

Throughout the course we will use historiography, literature and film for conveying sociological ideas and realities. The students are advised to remember that this is a sociology course and that the emphasis, both in their presentations and their research papers, must be on the sociological, not the literary or aesthetic content of the works analyzed. The topic of the research papers will be determined in consultation with the professor. Normally, the topic can be based on the works covered in the seminar but students will be expected to go beyond what was covered in class, both in terms of bibliography and original content.

Course prerequisites. Two courses in sociology or consent of instructor.

Course requirements.

Mandatory attendance and class participation;
Mandatory attendance at all films, absolutely no exceptions;
One in-class presentation during the semester;
One short paper analyzing a feature film or documentary (5 pages)
One final 15-page paper based on class readings and films

Grading:

Class and film attendance and participation: 20%
Oral presentation in class: 20%
Short paper (5 pages): 20%
Research paper: 40%

Week One. Marxism and Communism

Week Two. The Imperial Russian Historical Context


Documentary Film: Red Empire, part one.


Week Four. The February Revolution of 1917.

Red Empire, part two.


Week Five. The October Revolution of 1917.

Film: The Reds


Week Six: Early Revolutionary Dilemmas.

Film: Bernardo Bertolucci, 1900, part one.

Fyodor Gladkov, Cement.

Week Seven: Communism and Western Intellectuals

Film: Bernardo Bertolucci, 1900, part two.

Ignazio Silone, Bread and Wine.
Week Eight: From the Rise of Stalin to Collectivization

Short paper on one of the films due in class Tuesday, April 6

Film: Red Empire, part three.

Tucker, Stalin in Power, pp.25-118; 172-222.

Week Nine: The Terror and the Great Purge Trials

Red Empire, part four.


Transcript of Bukharin’s trial in Robert Tucker, The Great Purge Trial, pp.327-397.

Week Ten: The End of the Old Bolsheviks

Film: Nikita Mikhalkov, Burnt by the Sun

Arthur Koestler, Darkness at Noon.

Week Eleven: Stalinism and Intellectuals

Czeslaw Milosz, The Captive Mind.

Week Twelve: Coming to Terms with the Legacy of Stalinism.

Red Empire, part 6.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich

Week Thirteen: Utopia and Its Discontents

Film: Dušan Makavejev, Mysteries of the Organism


Final paper due on the first day of the reading period.