

History 407/507 (seminar): **USSR at War, 1939-1945**

Time: Thursday, 2:00-4:50 p.m.

Place: 475 McKenzie Hall

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The Soviet Union bore the brunt of the German onslaught and broke the back of German power. For years the western version of the war played down this uncomfortable fact, while exaggerating the success of democratic war-making.

Richard Overy

Seminar description: This is a seminar aiming at giving students a comprehensive understanding of an impact of total war on various strata of human society. Although the course's readings focus on the USSR and its wartime experiences, significant attention is given to a broader international political context of the Second World War, the role of totalitarian ideologies as driving forces behind this colossal conflict, and the ongoing controversies surrounding diverse interpretations of various aspects of the war's prosecution and legacy.

One of the most revered objects of national pride for as many as $\frac{3}{4}$ of Russia's population, WW II, has a bifurcated or two-dimensional character of being simultaneously a war of liberation and a war that helped perpetuate Stalin's dictatorship and his suppression of liberty. Some historians argue that unlike the war commemoration in the West, emphasizing democratic values of anti-fascism and human freedom, defense of Western civilization and the legacy of Enlightenment and French Revolution, the Soviet version of commemoration focused primarily on the reborn national might of Russia, the regained grandeur of the Soviet state and the crucial role that Stalin and Communist Party played in leading Russia to victory. The memory of war, in other words, was hijacked by the Soviet establishment and used as the new source of regime's legitimacy in place of the fading memory of Revolution and Civil War. The war memory in Russia has not been invoked to ensure ideals of democracy, freedom and active civic position. By uniting the values of socialism and nationalism on one hand and interpreting Nazism as the highest stage of capitalism on the other, the Soviet commemoration of the war downplayed the role of radical racism as the driving force of Nazism, diminished the tragedy of the Holocaust, and treated a wide variety of Soviet nationalities, with their unique wartime experiences, as one monolithic undifferentiated "unity of the Soviet People." The spirit of freedom, citizen activism and shared responsibility that inspired the *frontoviks* (front soldiers) and partisans during the war was almost entirely eradicated from society's memory because it contradicted the type of memory that the state sanctioned and generated. Patriotism—often a euphemism for nationalism—became the only context in which heroism of the Soviet people could be praised. For decades, the

wartime memory in the Soviet Union transmitted authoritarian values and a cult of the great power.

The Soviet model of writing the Great Patriotic War's history was indeed statist. It often intentionally overlooked the less palatable events and tended to reduce the remarkable diversity of war experiences in the East to one heroic struggle of the Soviet people under the competent leadership of the Communist Party. The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 ushered a new era of historical research by allowing specialist to tap into formerly inaccessible archival collections of war-related documents. Many surviving war veterans were also compelled to tell their "real" stories. New evidence predictably led to new challenging interpretations of the Great Patriotic War, which resulted in some of the ongoing controversies. Did the Second World War begin for the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, with Hitler's perfidious assault across the Soviet western border, or in September of 1939, when the Red Army invaded and occupied Eastern Poland? How could the confident Red Army, with its 25,000 tanks, be so soundly beaten by Hitler's Wehrmacht that invaded Russia with only 3,500 tanks? Was the Red Army really so unprepared for war and its weapons systems so obsolete compared to those of the Wehrmacht in the summer of 1941 as the Soviet historiography claimed for decades? How could it happen that some of the best Nazi Luftwaffe aces and Panzer corps commanders were trained in Soviet Russia? For what kind of war was Stalin preparing since 1929? How could Russia, reduced geographically and producing 3 to 4 times less coal and steel than Germany, build 3 to 4 times more armaments and war materiel and ultimately outgun its opponent? Why did the outgunned Germans continued to kill 4 Soviet soldiers to one of their own even as late as 1944-45? What prompted Western democracies to ally themselves with a mass murderer Stalin against a mass murderer Hitler? In 1941, Germany wielded the most advanced army in the world. What accounted for the rapid de-modernization of Hitler's army in the East? What did people eat in the besieged Leningrad? Why do some Red Army veterans remember Stalin's best general, Georgii Zhukov, as a "butcher" who spilt more soldiers' blood than any other military leader in world history? Why were the Russian villagers often more afraid of their own partisans than they were of the German soldiers?

Contemporary Western and Russian scholarship provides a fresh look at the war effort in the East. The main objective of this seminar is to familiarize students with the various aspects of life in the wartime Soviet Union, ranging from strategic planning and operational realities of war on the Eastern Front to soldiers' eye-witness accounts of combat, and from experiences of home front workers turning out tanks under the open sky to Shostakovich composing his Seventh Symphony to the accompaniment of the German bombing of Leningrad. The students will also gain insight into the plight of national minorities—Poles, Jews, Western Ukrainians, Russian Germans—squeezed between the rock and the hard place in the occupation zones or forcibly relocated to Siberia or Kazakhstan. Since contemporary historiography of World War II poses more questions as it seeks to provide answers, there will be plenty of opportunity for individual research and in-class discussions.

Readings will be selected to adequately highlight the listed aspects of the Soviet war effort, and the students will be asked midway through the course to select possible topics for their research papers, identify their sources, write paper proposals and, upon

their approval, conduct their independent investigation and produce papers by the end of the term.

Requirements: Although the students' overall grade will ultimately depend on the originality and quality of their papers (approximately 20 pages long) and their completion of all research related assignments, one's failure to attend lectures and participate in discussions may result in a lower grade.

Historiography Assignment—10 %

Final Paper Proposal—10%

Research Paper—80%

Research Avenues and Agenda:

The students are welcome to look for their possible paper topics within any of the broadly defined fields listed in the syllabus as the foci for our weekly discussions. However, there is a number of other research avenues that the students might want to pursue:

- Ramifications of the Nazi-Soviet Nonaggression Pact for the Baltic peoples, the Finns, and the Bessarabians.
- The wartime deportations of suspect ethnic minorities (Chechens, Ingushs, Crimean Tatars, Kalmyks, etc.).
- Holocaust in the East: Nazi "eliminationist" policies towards the Jews of Poland and Soviet Union.
- The Home Front: mechanisms of mobilization and political control.
- The Home Front: mobilizing economy and human resources.
- The Home Front: Soviet wartime culture and morale.
- The uneasy transition to peace and the party's search for new legitimacy.
- The Postwar settlement and the onset of the Cold War.
- The controversial history of the partisan movement: origins, purpose, significance.
- Security, military discipline, and counter-intelligence: the NKVD and SMERSH.
- Red Army commanders and their leadership: Marshals Zhukov, Konev, Rokossovsky, or any other prominent military figure.
- The war and the GULAG: the role of punitive battalions.
- Soviet women in combat: female pilots, snipers, etc.

The selection of a promising and workable topic is envisioned as a three-step process:

1. A **historiography assignment** (see a more detailed description on Blackboard), in which the students will be asked to choose three potential avenues of research, briefly formulate their topics (2-3 paragraphs), go to the library, familiarize themselves with the existing historiography on the topics of interest to them, and then write and submit their proposed topics together with an annotated bibliography of potential sources for each topic. A good place to begin working on this assignment would be to peruse the select historiography on the "USSR at