

History 201: The Historian's Craft

Film and Censorship in the Soviet Union

Spring 2026

Tuesdays 11am – 12:55pm

Humanities 5255



Still from *Solaris*, dir. Andrei Tarkovsky (1975).

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Research Mentor:

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Course Description

Long considered simply propaganda, Soviet film is, in fact, a rich source of both artistic value and historical understanding. Soviet filmmakers navigated the challenges of state censorship, material shortages, and creative isolation while striving to create engaging entertainment within an authoritarian regime. This course will look at the nearly seventy-year history of the Soviet Union through the lens of the films produced during its tenure and the laws and discourse surrounding the censorship and release of said films. We will consider these films as historical records in their own right; they reflect the ideas and currents of their time, offering a more nuanced understanding of life under the regime than traditional narratives suggest. We will examine how Soviet life was presented through film and discuss the impact of censorship and how events occurring both within and outside the Soviet Union impacted the tone, style, and content of the films produced by Soviet directors.

Format

This course meets once a week. Students should expect to watch films and complete readings on their own in preparation for each week's meeting. Each meeting will be comprised of a short lecture, discussion, and skill-building activities. Students will be required to post a short, weekly response to Canvas.

Course Objectives

- Identify key concepts and themes in the history of the Soviet Union
- Be able to analyze and identify primary and secondary sources
- Conduct original research using the methods of professional historians
- Communicate research findings through written work, discussion, and oral presentations
- Engage critically with film as a primary source and analyze it from a historical perspective

Credit Statement

The credit standard for this course is met by an expectation of a total of 135 hours of student engagement with the course learning activities (at least 45 hours per credit), which include regularly scheduled instructor/student meeting times, reading, writing, and independent research.

Accommodations and Resources

McBurney Disability Resource Center

"The University of Wisconsin – Madison supports the right of all enrolled students to a full and equal educational opportunity. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Wisconsin State Statute (36.12), and UW-Madison policy (Faculty Document 1071) require that students with disabilities be reasonably accommodated in instruction and campus life. Reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities is a shared faculty and student responsibility. Students are expected to inform faculty [me] of their need for instructional accommodations by the end of the third week of the semester, or as soon as possible after a disability has been incurred or recognized. Faculty [I], will work either directly with the student [you] or in coordination with the McBurney Center to identify and provide reasonable instructional accommodations. Disability information, including instructional accommodations as part of a student's educational record, is confidential and protected under FERPA." <http://mcburney.wisc.edu/facstaffother/faculty/syllabus.php>

Institutional statement on diversity

"Diversity is a source of strength, creativity, and innovation for UW-Madison. We value the contributions of each person and respect the profound ways their identity, culture, background, experience, status, abilities, and opinion enrich the university community. We commit ourselves to the pursuit of excellence in teaching, research, outreach, and diversity as inextricably linked goals. The University of Wisconsin-Madison fulfills its public mission by creating a welcoming and inclusive community for people from every background – people who as students, faculty, and staff serve Wisconsin and the world."
<https://diversity.wisc.edu/>

Academic Integrity and AI Policy

By virtue of enrollment, you agree to uphold the high academic standards of the University of Wisconsin-Madison; academic misconduct is behavior that negatively impacts the integrity of the institution. Cheating,

fabrication, plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, and helping others commit these previously listed acts are examples of misconduct which may result in disciplinary action. Examples of disciplinary action include, but is not limited to, failure on the assignment/course, written reprimand, disciplinary probation, suspension, or expulsion.

For detailed information, please see <https://conduct.students.wisc.edu/academic-misconduct/>

Students should not use AI for any part of this course (including brainstorming, outlining and drafting). **Any assignment may be subject to a verbal examination.**

Research Mentors

The history department is designing a new program wherein each 201 will have two assigned research mentors. These are graduate students who specialize in researching and writing. They will have their own independent office hours. You are required to meet with one of them twice this semester. Once to get feedback on your annotated bibliography and once for feedback on your rough draft. These meetings will be part of your participation grade.

Readings/Films

All readings will be uploaded to Canvas. Films will be available as links on Canvas.

Assignments

Written Assignments

Students will complete six written assignments: a research proposal (600 words), a research paper outline (1 page), one primary source analysis (3 pages), an annotated bibliography, a rough draft (8-10 pages), and a final draft (8-10 pages) of an original research paper. Assignments should be uploaded on time. Extensions will be considered for disability accommodation and in the event of personal hardship.

Oral Presentations

Students will give two presentations over the course of the semester. The first will be a brief summary of the student's research proposal and the second will be a presentation of the student's completed research at the end of the semester.

Participation and weekly responses

Students will be expected to attend all discussions and to post a weekly response on canvas. These responses will be more casual reactions to the films that will ask students to take on the role of filmgoer. Participation will be graded on active engagement during discussion.

Final grades will be calculated accordingly:

- Participation – 20%
- Proposal – 5%
- Outline – 5%
- Primary Source Analysis – 10%
- Annotated Bibliography – 10%
- Rough Draft – 10%
- Peer Review – 5%

Oral Presentations – 5% each
Final Paper – 25%

Schedule

Week One (1/20)

Discussion: syllabus, introductions, what is censorship?
Activity: important film term worksheet

Week Two (1/27)

- **Discussion:** “Revolution and Civil War”, film as history maker
- **Film:** *Battleship Potemkin* (directed by Sergei Eisenstein, 1925)
- **Reading:** Eduard M. Dune, *Notes of a Red Guard*, ed. and trans. Diane P. Koenker and S. A. Smith (1993), pp. 27-50; Jason Heller, “Who is Sergei Eisenstein, and What Was Soviet Montage Theory?,” (2021).
- **Activity:** types of sources and how to use them

Week Three (2/3)

- **Discussion:** “Living the Revolution and its Aftermath”
- **Film:** *Bed and Sofa* (directed by Abram Room, 1927)
- **Reading:** V. I. Lenin, “The New Economic Policy” (1921); Svetlana Boym, “Welcome to the Communal Apartment,” in *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (1994), 139-144; Alexandra Kollontai, *Love of Worker Bees* (1924); Anirudh Deshpande, “Films as Historical Sources or Alternative History” (2004).
- **Activity:** what is historiography?

Week Four (2/10) **Make appointment with me for next week to discuss paper topic!**

- **Discussion:** “Stalin and the Rewriting of the Revolution”
- **Film:** *Lenin in October* (directed by Mikhail Romm and Dmitri Vasilyev, 1937)
- **Reading:** Lev Kopelev, “The Education of a True Believer” (1933); Karl Schloegel, *Moscow 1937* (2012), p. TBA; *The Testament of Lenin* (1923)
- **Activity:** asking historical questions

Week Five (2/17)

- **Discussion:** sharing project ideas!
- **Film:** No film this week!
- **Reading:** None!
- **Activity:** visit to Memorial Library
- **Due: Primary Source Analysis Paper -> February 20th, 11:59 pm**

Week Six (2/24)

- **Discussion:** “The Great Patriotic War”
- **Film:** *The Vow* (directed by Mikheil Chiaureli, 1946)
- **Reading:** Svetlana Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War* (1983); Skim Correspondence between the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR and the Presidents of the USA and the Prime Ministers of Great Britain during the Great Patriotic War of 1941 – 1945
- **Activity:** writing thesis statements; analyzing scenes and posters

Week Seven (3/3)

- **Discussion:** "Another rewriting: destalinization and portraying the recent Soviet past"
- **Film:** *The Cranes are Flying* (directed by Mikhail Kalatozov, 1957)
- **Reading:** Nikita Khrushchev, "On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences" (1956)
- **Activity:** Research Proposal Presentations!
- **Due: Research Proposal -> March 6th 11:59 pm**

Week Eight (3/10)

- **Discussion:** "Stagnation? Re-Stalinization?"
- **Film:** *Viy* (directed by Konstantin Yershov and Georgi Kropachyov, 1967) -or- *Solaris* (directed by Andrei Tarkovsky, 1972) -or- *Office Romance* (directed by Eldar Ryazanov, 1977)
- **Reading:** Vladimír Voinovich, "A Circle of Friends," 1979.
- **Activity:** thinking about genre film, structuring an essay, bibliography activity
- **Due: Annotated Bibliography -> March 13th 11:59pm**

Week Nine (3/17)

- **Discussion:** "USSR Watching USA, USA Watching USSR"
- **Film:** *A Man from the Boulevard des Capucines* (directed by Alla Surikova, 1987) -and- linked compilation of Ivan Drago scenes from *Rocky IV* (directed by Sylvester Stallone, 1985) – **feel free to watch the whole movie but not required!**
- **Reading:** Joaquín Saravia, "Good vs. Evil: The Construction of Soviet 'Otherness' in Rocky IV," (2020)
- **Activity:** using sources to prove your argument
- **Due: Due: Outline -> March 20th, 11:59pm**

Week Ten (3/24)

- **Discussion:** "Russo-centrism and the Soviet peripheries"
- **Film:** *Color of the Pomegranates* (directed by Sergei Parajanov, 1969) -and- *Wind* (directed by Robert Sahakyants, 1988)
- **Reading:** Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*, (2005), p 145-186.
- **Activity:** how to give and receive feedback

Week Eleven (3/31)

!!!Spring Break!!!! ☺

Week Twelve (4/7)

- **Discussion:** "Perestroika, Glasnost, Collapse"
- **Film:** *Little Vera* (directed by Vasili Pachul, 1988)
- **Reading:** Agata Pyzik, "Dark art for dark times" in *Poor but Sexy: Culture Clashes in Europe East and West* (2014), 62-65; Mikhail Gorbachev, "Speech to the Supreme Soviet," October 2, 1988; Boris Yeltsin, "Address to the Russian People," August 19th, 1991
- **Due: Research Paper Rough Draft -> April 10th, 11:59 pm**

Week Thirteen (4/14)

- **Discussion:** "Movies for Kids – pure propaganda?"

- **Film:** *Hedgehog in the Fog* (directed by Yuri Norstein, 1975) -and- *Vinnie Pookh* (directed by Fyodor Khitruk, 1969)
- **Activity:** peer review worksheet

Week Fourteen (4/21)

-Final Presentations-

Week Fifteen (4/28)

-Final Presentations-

Final Paper due May 8th at 11:59pm