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HIST 408G and Sustainability

HIST 408G, “The Environmental History of Eurasia,” considers the changing relationship between humans and the natural world in Eurasia, with a focus on the last two centuries of Russian imperial and Soviet rule. This course is a seminar restricted to history majors who are seniors. It will be taught for the first time in fall 2013.

In May 2013, I attended a workshop sponsored by the Chesapeake Project. Upon conclusion of the workshop, I integrated issues of sustainability into the syllabus in a number of areas.

- 1) Following the fourth week of the course, the students will complete a five-page response paper. I’ll distribute the questions for this assignment in advance, but it will ask them to consider William Cronon’s seminal work of environmental history, *Changes in the Land*. This work considers a number of “big ideas” key to sustainability, such as issues of food security, the interconnectedness of various systems and the tragedy of the commons. I’ll ask them to think critically about how historians might write about these issues. We’ll discuss the interpretive issues that historians face, as well as the types of evidence that they rely upon.
- 2) During the course, students will consider the Soviet Union’s legacy of environmental degradation, particularly how this destruction fits into longer term patterns in Eurasian history. As part of this conversation, we will examine the concept of “sustainability.” We’ll discuss various meanings of the term and its applicability to periods or episodes in Soviet history. We’ll also examine whether “sustainability” might mean something different in a non-capitalist society.
- 3) Over the course of the semester, we’ll also consider the relationship between empire and the environment through the lens of sustainability. Examining issues such as the Russian fur trade, irrigation projects or borderland colonization, we’ll assess how empire figures into conversations about sustainability.