HIST 408G Environmental History of Eurasia

Prof. Sarah Cameron  
Office: 2141 Taliaferro Hall  
Office hours: M 1:30 pm-3:30 pm & by appointment  
scameron@umd.edu

The “taiga,” or coniferous forest, near the city of Tomsk in Western Siberia.


This senior seminar will consider the environmental history of the world’s largest landmass, “Eurasia.” This immense region is home to large deposits of oil, gas, coal and iron. It holds approximately a quarter of the planet’s forest reserves and a quarter of the earth’s fresh water. It is home to a considerable diversity of plant and animal species. 

Soviet rule over this territory, however, left deep scars of environmental degradation. Arguably, reactions to this destruction, including conservation movements, were among the forces that led to the Soviet Union’s demise in 1991.

In the course, students will examine the changing relationship between humans and the natural world in this region, with a focus on the last two centuries of Russian imperial and Soviet rule. We will evaluate major “environmental” interpretations of Russian history, including the idea that Russia’s cold climate or
predominately agrarian nature stunted its growth. We will also examine how the Soviet Union’s legacy of environmental destruction fits into longer-term patterns in Eurasian history. Where appropriate, we will compare the experiences of Eurasia with that of other regions.

NB: There are many different definitions of “Eurasia.” This course will focus primarily on the territories of the Russian empire and Soviet Union, although we will consider broader definitions of “Eurasia” as necessary.

Environmental history is an interdisciplinary field. Course materials will include secondary works by historians, geographers, and historians of science, as well as primary sources, including films, travelers’ accounts and novels.

The following three questions will guide this course:

1. What is environmental history?
2. How might this approach alter our understanding of a particular region’s history?
3. What new topics or ideas does the study of Eurasia bring to the field of environmental history?

This course is a capstone seminar for senior history majors. It will culminate in a fifteen- to twenty-page research paper on some aspect of Eurasian environmental history.

In May 2013, I attended a workshop sponsored by the Chesapeake Project, a campus-wide initiative to promote the teaching of ideas related to sustainability. We'll be talking more about the concept of sustainability, as well as its applicability to various periods in Eurasian history over the course of the semester.

Required Texts:

(available at the University Book Center and on reserve at McKeldin Library)

Materials uploaded to CANVAS (indicated on the syllabus with an asterisk)
Grading:

Participation and attendance: 25%
Response Paper: 15%
Short presentation: 10 %
Final Paper Prospectus: 10 %
Final Paper Rough Draft: 20 %
Final Paper: 20%

If your final grade for the course is borderline (ie, in between two different grades), your class participation grade will be the deciding factor.

Major Deadlines and Other Details:

1. Short Response Paper (Due October 9, by 5 pm). Five pages. You will receive the assignment for this response paper in class on October 2\textsuperscript{nd}. It will ask you to draw upon the first four weeks of class discussion and reading.
2. Class Presentation. Each student will give a brief (ten minute) presentation on one of the week’s readings. A sign-up sheet will be available in week two.
3. Final paper prospectus (Due October 23, at the beginning of class). Two to three pages. Includes an overview of your proposed topic, your major research questions and a sample bibliography. I strongly encourage you to come to my office hours and discuss your proposed topic in advance of submitting your paper prospectus.
4. Rough draft of your final paper (Due Wednesday November 27 by 5 pm). Fifteen to twenty pages. As part of the rough draft process, you will exchange drafts with a partner and provide your partner with feedback. Your active and constructive participation in this peer review process is part of your grade for both your rough draft and your final paper. Further details on this process will be provided later in the semester.
5. Final paper (Due Monday, December 16 by 5 pm). Fifteen to twenty pages.

Late work: The policy for late work in this class is as follows: Late work will be penalized one full grade (for example, from an “A” to a “B”) for each day that it is late. If an assignment is more than three days late, I will no longer accept it.

Class Absences: Please be advised that any absence from class will bring down your class participation grade (25 % of your total grade). If you miss a class due to a medical illness or a family emergency, I will try to be flexible. You must discuss the situation with me prior to the class meeting.

University policies excuse the absences of students for religious observances and for participation in activities at the request of University authorities. Students are responsible for notifying the instructor of projected absences within the first two weeks of the semester.

Important: Please bring the course materials with you to class. This includes printing that week’s CANVAS uploads. I encourage you to print double-sided and to reuse and recycle all course materials.
**Media Policy:** Please note that laptops and other electronic devices (including cell phones) are **not permitted** in class. If you would like to take notes during the seminar, please do so by hand.

**Academic Dishonesty:** Please familiarize yourself with the University’s Code of Academic Integrity. A summary can be found here: [http://www.testudo.umd.edu/soc/dishonesty.html](http://www.testudo.umd.edu/soc/dishonesty.html) Academic dishonesty includes cheating, fabrication, the facilitation of academic dishonesty and plagiarism. These are serious offenses that may result in suspension or expulsion from the University.

**Students with Disabilities:** Students with disabilities must first register with the University’s Disability Support Service Office (DSS), 4-7682 or dissup@umd.edu. They should present the instructor with a letter from DSS by the end of the drop/add period.

**Syllabus:** Please be advised that the syllabus is subject to change at the discretion of the instructor.

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**The Russian Empire in 1913**

As it was during the reign of Nicholas II

September 4: First Class Meeting

September 11: What is Environmental History?
William Cronon, Changes in the Land, pages TBA

September 18: Eurasia and the Environment
Richard Pipes, Russia Under the Old Regime (NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1974), 1-26.*


Samuel Collins, The Present State of Russia (London, 1671), 74-86*

http://myweb.uiowa.edu/mapoe/Publications/Collins.pdf


September 25: Exploiting the Natural World, Encounters with New Peoples


October 2: What is Environmental History? Part II


Finish remainder of Changes in the Land

October 9: No class meeting. Response paper due on October 9 by 5 pm via email.

Begin exploring potential subjects for your final paper. Use the “helpful literature” list as an initial guide. You should come to the library orientation session (held in the second half of class on October 16) with your questions about doing research, such as “How can I find sources about X?” or “How can I order this book?,” already prepared.

October 16: Empire
Movie: *Derzu Uzala* (1975, Akira Kurosawa) (141 mins)

First part available here: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R1MmSiMofOY&width=1](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R1MmSiMofOY&width=1)

Second part available here: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ucXmCDHt-B4&width=1](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ucXmCDHt-B4&width=1)

(If English-language subtitles do not immediately appear, you can add them in using the “cc” icon on the lower right-hand corner)


*Library orientation session*

**October 23: The Arctic**

Valerian Albanov, *In the Land of White Death* (1912, 2000), all

*Prospectus Due*

**October 30: The Importance of Place. Local and Regional History**

Catherine Evtuhov, *Portrait of a Russian Province* (Pittsburgh, 2011), 1-44*

*Individual meetings with the instructor in the second half of class. Sign-up sheet available on 10/23*

**November 6: Agriculture, Food Supply and Famine**


**November 13: Technology and the State**


Watch the following documentary about the Aral Sea disaster:

November 20: Comparisons. The United States and the Soviet Union.


November 27: No class meeting.

**Rough Draft of Final Paper due Wednesday, November 27 by 5 pm, via e-mail. Exchange of drafts with your partner.**

December 4: Chernobyl and Conservation Movements


Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, pages TBA

Prior to class, examine the following photos from an exhibit, “Inside the Chernobyl Zone, 25 Years Later”

[http://www.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,2067393,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,2067393,00.html)

December 11: Post-Soviet Legacies.

TBA

Final paper due Monday, December 16 by 5 pm

**Helpful Literature:**


Jane Costlow, *Heart-Pine Russia: Walking and Writing the Nineteenth Century Forest* (Ithaca, 2012)

Jane Costlow and Amy Nelson, eds. *Other Animals: Beyond the Human in Russian Culture and History* (Pittsburgh, 2010).


Christopher Ely, *This Meager Nature: Landscape and National Identity in Imperial Russia* (DeKalb, IL, 2002).


Laura Henry, *From Red to Green: Environmental Activism in Post-Soviet Russia* (Ithaca, 2003)

Paul Josephson et al, eds. *An Environmental History of Russia* (New York, 2013)


David Moon, *The Plough that Broke the Steppes: Agriculture and Environment on Russia’s Grasslands, 1700-1914* (New York, 2013)


Alison Smith, *Recipes for Russia: Food and Nationhood under the Tsars* (DeKalb, 2008)
