



WOMEN AND RESISTANCE IN RUSSIA

from pussy riot to bolshevik sexual revolution to female medieval saints
VALENTINA IZMIRLIEVA | T/R 10:10-11:25 | RUSS GU 4453 | NO RUSSIAN REQ.

Description

With the exception of a very few female leaders, women are largely forgotten in Russian history. Nevertheless, they have had a profound impact on nearly every chapter of that history, often through modes of political, aesthetic, and cultural resistance to Russia's various power structures. This course examines the tradition of women and resistance in Russia in order to probe key questions with considerable contemporary relevance: what is the nature of resistance, and how is it distinguished from adjacent terms like civil disobedience, dissent, or revolt? How does female resistance differ from more traditional (usually masculinist) paradigms of opposition to power?

Structured in reverse chronological order, the course begins with familiar names of contemporary resistance in Putin-era Russia like Pussy Riot and Anna Politkovskaya. From there, we delve deep into the genealogy of these protests, moving back through the Soviet era, into the Russian Empire, and finally into medieval cults of female saints, which continue to serve as sources of resistance even in today's Russia. The course's historical exploration raises important methodological questions about historical and archival sources on subjects outside of and often in opposition to power. How can we know about a figure of resistance who wrote little or nothing, or whose work was intentionally destroyed? What can serve as a source in the absence of traditional historical sources? The course's final project asks students to grapple with these and other questions by curating a section in a museum exhibit about one of the eras and themes explored in the course with reference to another—and to our own political reality.

Short (Bulletin) Description

Cultural and political history of women and resistance in Russia, from the Putin era to medieval saints. Explores forms and specificity of female resistance in Russia across history. Addresses questions of historical narrative in light of missing sources. Material includes: prose by Svetlana Alexievich, Lydia Chukovskaya, Lidiya Ginzburg, Alexandra Kollontai, Masha Gessen, Anna Politkovskaya, and Pussy Riot's Nadezhda Tolokonnikova; poetry by Anna Akhmatova, Marina Tsvetaeva and Sophia Parnok; films by Kira Muratova; visual art by Natalia Goncharova and fellow "amazons" of the Russia Avant Garde, together with memoirs, saint's lives, letters, diaries, and urban legend. Final project: curating a museum exhibit.

Prerequisites

Open to undergraduate and graduate students. No Russian required for the undergraduate students. Graduate students are expected to do the readings in Russian.

Objectives

The course aims to make students conversant in the history of Russian resistance, in its various forms and historical interpretations, through the political, intellectual and cultural contribution of women. The students are thus invited to recognize (and resist through conceptual critique) the masculine bias in the canonical narratives of Russian history—as well as in the history of knowledge broadly defined. The ultimate objective of the course is to provide students with a rich understanding of women's role in social change, both in Russian and in global contexts. For that purpose, the course pays particular attention to “metahistory,” the way historical narratives are produced through erasure, suppression, silencing and purging of particular voices and perspectives, and urges students to critically question our concepts of “sources” and our methodological biases in reading and analyzing them. The final project—curating a museum piece—not only builds crucial skills for working with primary sources and communicating arguments through design, but also asks students to take personal responsibility in the production of history, bridging private experiences with larger social institutions and practices.

Course materials

The course materials include mostly primary sources (both verbal and visual, as well as multi-media), drawn from diverse genres, pragmatic zones and historical periods. The syllabus also includes selected secondary sources and suggestions for further reading. All reading materials will be made available in English for the undergraduate students. Students are expected to read and reflect on these sources in weekly responses. Their central product in the course is a research project developed in several stages that will result in a curated exhibit for collective public display.

Grading Rubric

Class readings and participation – 15%
Short preparatory research reports (2) – 30%
Midterm (draft of a curatorial project) – 15%
Final presentation – 10%
Final project – 30%

Assignments

- 1) *short weekly reading responses* (200 words)

15% percent of your grade is based on attendance, class participation, and weekly reading responses. You will be asked to post a short response, question, or intervention (1 paragraph; other media welcome) on the CourseWorks discussion board. Responses will be based on the readings for the coming week and will be **due every Sunday night at midnight**, starting in Week 2.

- 2) *research project in four stages* that results in a curated exhibit for the class virtual museum. Topics for undergraduate students should be based on the class syllabus and include two temporal centers (either two figures from different historical periods, or a figure from one period and a related resistance practice from another). Graduate students are encouraged to do independent research on figures and topics not included in the syllabus. All topics should be selected in consultation with the instructor.

a) Stage 1 (due Week 4): short research report on a resistance agent of your choice from the syllabus. This figure will be the center of your research project. You will be asked to submit in the report:

- timeline of her life and afterlife;
- brief narrative biography;
- visual component (photograph, portrait, icon, documentary footage);
- list of the most important primary and secondary sources;
- short reflection on the agent's significance (400 words).

At this point, students are grouped into “clusters” based on the focus of their chosen research topics. Members of each cluster will be involved in peer review exercises at each stage of their research. **This stage counts for 15% of your grade.**

b) Stage 2 (due Week 8): short research report on a specific artifact (fictional or documentary work, painting, monument, public performance, etc.) related to the resistance agent of your choice. You will be asked to submit in the report:

- timeline of the artifact’s history;
- brief biography of its producers;
- textual accompaniment (400 words) that specifies the artifact’s origin, functions, dissemination, and its overall cultural and political significance.

The new report should be submitted together with a revised version of your previous report. The two reports will form the backbone of your *research portfolio*. **This stage counts for 15% of your grade.**

c) Stage 3 (due Week 10) = Midterm: At the end of the tenth week, each student is asked to turn in revised versions of the first two reports together with a five-page reflection on the material chosen for the final project. A second center for the project should be introduced as a counterpoint (either a resistance agent or a resistance practice from another historical period). The reflection should begin with a draft description of the proposed museum exhibit, followed by a preliminary discussion as to which sources will be included in the museum exhibit, why these particular sources are relevant, and any difficulties or absences that the sources reveal. The midterm project will be graded with respect to both its collection of sources and its analysis of the material. **This stage counts for 15% of your grade.**

d) Stage 4 (due Week 15 = Final Project): The final product of the research project is a curated exhibit based on the research conducted in the previous stages. Students work within their clusters to design exhibits that will form a cohesive “chapter” in a virtual museum. Each cluster of students is responsible for producing both written and visual components of the proposed exhibits in both digital and hard copies. The final projects should include an introductory narrative description of the exhibit, an array of sources and artifacts that would be presented to the museum public, as well as the texts that might hang on the wall next to these artifacts. Students will present their exhibit to their colleagues in the last week of class. **You will get separate grades on the museum exhibit (30%) and your oral presentation (10%).**

Required Texts

- Svetlana Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War: An Oral History of Women in WW2*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (Random House, 2017), ISBN: 0399588728
- Lydia Chukovskaya, *Sofia Petrovna*, trans. Aline Werth (Northwestern UP, 1994), ISBN: 978-0810111509
- Lidiya Ginzburg, *Notes from the Blockade*, trans. Alan Myers (Vintage, 2017), ISBN: 978-0099583387
- Alexandra Kollontai, *Love of the Worker Bees*, trans. Cathy Porter (Academy, 1978), ISBN: 978-0897330015
- Irina Ratushinskaya, *Grey is the Color of Hope* (Scepter, 2016), ISBN: 978-1473637221
- Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, *Read & Riot: A Pussy Riot Guide to Activism* (HarperOne, 2018), ISBN: 978-0062741585

SYLLABUS

ACTIVISTS AND INTERVENTIONS

Week 1 Political Activism and Political Interventions in Putin’s Russia

- Pussy Riot, protest performances at the 2018 World Cup and at the Christ the Savior Cathedral in 2012 (videos); “Putin Prayer” song lyrics
- Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, excerpts from *Read & Riot: A Pussy Riot Guide to Activism*

Secondary reading: Masha Gessen, excerpts from *Words Will Break Cement*

Further reading: Pussy Riot! *A Punk Prayer for Freedom: Letters from Prison, Songs, Poems, and Courtroom Statements Plus Tributes to the Punk Band that Shook the World*. 2013. New York: Feminist Press. [Barnard ML3534.6.R8 P87 2013; Music ML3534.6.R8 P87 2013]; *Pussy Riot: A Punk Prayer*. Dir. Mike Lerner and Maxim Pozdorovkin (2013) HBO Documentary Films.

Week 2: Journalism and Resistance

- Anna Politkovskaya, excerpts from *A Russian Diary* and *Is Journalism Worth Dying For?*

Further reading: Marina Goldovskaya, *Bitter Taste of Freedom* [2011] (documentary film)

PART 2: BEARING WITNESS

Week 3: Perestroika, Glasnost, and the Culture of Political Speech

- Kira Muratova, *Asthenic Syndrome* [1989] (film)

Secondary reading: Irina Sandomirskaya, “A glossolalic glasnost and the re-tuning of the Soviet subject: sound performance in Kira Muratova’s *Asthenic Syndrome*,” *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema* 2 (2008) 1: 63-83.

Week 4: Dissidents and “Rights Defenders” of Late Socialism.

- Irina Ratushinskaya, *Grey Is the Color of Hope* (memoir)

Secondary reading: Nataliya Gorbanevskaya, excerpts from *A Chronicle of Current Events 1968-70*; interview “Writing for Samizdat”; Tatyana Velikanova, excerpts from *A Chronicle of Current Events 1972-79*; founding documents of the Action Group on Human Rights.

First research report due!

Week 5: Resisting the Anomies of War

- Svetlana Alexievich, excerpts from *The Unwomanly Face of War: An Oral History of Women in WW2*
- Lidiya Ginsburg, *The Blockade Diary*

Secondary reading: Svetlana Alexievich, “I Am Loath to Recall: Russian Women Soldiers in World War II,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, 23 [Rethinking Women’s Peace Studies] (1995) 3/4: 78-84; Irina Sandomirskaya, “A Politeia in Besiegement: Lidiya Ginzburg on the Siege of Leningrad as a Political Paradigm,” *Slavic Review* 69 (2010) 2: 306-326;

Further reading: Cynthia Simmons and Nina Perlina, eds., *Writing the Siege of Leningrad: Women’s Diaries, Memoirs, and Documentary Prose*, Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh Press, 2002.

Week 6: Witnesses of Stalin’s Purges

- Anna Akhmatova, “Requiem” (poem)
- Lydia Chukovskaya, *Sofia Petrovna* (novel)

PART 3: SUBJECTS OF REVOLUTION

Week 7: The “Amazons” of the Russian Avant-Garde [visual art]

- Natalia Goncharova, “Cyclist” (1913);
- Liubov Popova, “Composition with Figures” (1913), “Subject from a Dyer’s Shop” (1914), “Cubist Cityscape” (1914), “Traveling Woman” (1915), “Portrait of a Philosopher” (1915);
- Alexandra Exter, “Still Life” (1913);
- Olga Rozanova, “Pub” (1914), “The ‘Modern’ Movie Theater” (1915);
- Varvara Stepanova, “Gly gly” illustration (1918), “Rozanova dancing” (1918-19), “Rtmy Khomle” illustrations (1918), “Zigzag” illustrations (1918);
- Nadezhda Udaltsova, “The Blue Jug” (1918), “Guitar Figure” (1914-15); “New” (1914-15)

Week 8: Russian Modernism and Disruption of Gender Norms

- Marina Tsvetaeva, cycle “Girlfriend,” “Letter to the Amazon” (essay)
- Sofia Parnok, poems

Secondary reading: Diana Burgin, *Sophia Parnok: The Life and Work of Russia's Sappho*, New York: New York UP, 1994; Diana Burgin, "Mother Nature Versus the Amazons: Marina Tsvetaeva and Female Same-Sex Love," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 6 (1995) 1: 62–88l

Second research report due!

Week 9: Women of the Bolshevik Revolution: Law and Dis/Order

- Ariadna Tyrkova-Williams, excerpts from *On the Road to Freedom* (memoir)
- Alexandra Kollontai, "Winged Eros"; legal documents the 1918 Russian constitution, 1920 and 1924 family law addendums.

Secondary reading: Madeleine Johansson, "Alexandra Kollontai, the Russian Revolution and Women's Liberation," *Irish Marxist Review* 6 (2017) 17: 29-35.

Week 10: Anarchists and Political Terrorists

- Vera Figner, excerpts from *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (memoir)

Secondary reading: Hilde Hoogenboom, "Vera Figner and Revolutionary Autobiographies: The Influence of Gender on Genre," in Rosalind Marsh (ed.), *Women in Russia and Ukraine*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996; pp. 78-93.

Further reading: Pipes R. "The Vera Zasulich Trial," *Russian History*. Vol. 37 (2010) 1, 1—82.

Draft of final project due!

PIETY AND RESISTANCE

Week 11: Resistance in Private

- Anna Labzina, excerpts from *Days of a Russian Noblewoman* (memoir)
<http://az.lib.ru/l/labzina_a_e/text_1828_vospominaniya.shtml>

Week 12: Religious Dissent and the Russian Schism

- Boiarynia Morozova, letters of F. Morozova to Avvakum; vita and icons
- Surikov, *Boiarynia Morozova* (painting)

Secondary Reading: excerpts from Margaret Ziolkowsky, *Tale of Boiarynia Morozova: A Seventeenth-Century Religious Life*

Week 13: Holy Fools and New Martyrs

- Xenia of Petersburg: vita and icons; urban legends and materials of her contemporary cult
- Elizaveta Fyodorovna: materials for canonization; photographic sources; the "Regula" for the Convent of Martha and Mary

Week 14: Student Presentations on Final Curatorial Project and Round-Table Discussion

COURSE LECTURE SERIES

The course is accompanied by a lecture series. We will have five guest lecturers, who will give talks on particular topics related to the course material and engage in discussions with the class. Attendance of the lectures is mandatory. If you have a conflict, you should inform me in advance. Recordings of the talks and discussions will be made available to students who are unable to attend.

- Lilya Kaganovsky (U of Illinois) on Kira Muratova
Wednesday, February 6, 6-8pm, Barnard, Ella Weed Room (no class on R 2/7)
- Irina Denischenko (Vanderbilt U) on the “amazons” of the Russian avant garde
Tuesday, March 5, guest lecture during the class regular time
- Diana Burgin (U of Massachusetts) on Tsvetaeva and Parnok
& book signing of her new translation of Tsvetaveva, *Five Hard Pieces* (2018)
Thursday, March 14, 4-6pm 754 Schermerhorn, (no class on R 3/14)
- Irina Sandomirskaia (Södertörn U, Sweden) on Lidiya Ginzburg
Thursday, April 4, 4:10-6pm, 1201 IAB, Harriman Institute
- Masha Gessen, “Gender and Resistance in the Age of Putin” (time and place TBA)