

SPRING 2015

ENGLISH 350 / JEWISH STUDIES 350

RUSSIAN JEWISH EXPERIENCE IN LITERATURE AND FILM

MWF 11:15am-12:05pm
112 Memorial

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Office hours: M/W 12:15-1:15pm
30 West Delaware Ave. Room 102



From *The Commissar* (1967)

In this course we will study late 19th and 20th century works of Russian and Yiddish literature and film. These works will introduce us to the history, culture and everyday life of Jews in late imperial Russia, the Soviet Union, North America and Israel.

Our topics include: 1) How Russian Jews responded to key events and trends in Soviet history—the 1917 Revolution, building of socialism, genocide of Jews during World War II and postwar antisemitism; 2) How Jewish culture developed in the context of Russian and Soviet culture; 3) How post-Soviet Jewish culture in contemporary Israel and North America has drawn on, and in turn, modified the heritage of the Russian-Jewish experience. All readings and films will be in English, or with English subtitles.

BOOKS TO PURCHASE:

These books will be on two-hour reserve at Morris Library. All other readings on the syllabus will be posted on Sakai.

1. Vladimir Jabotinsky, *The Five: A Novel of Jewish Life in Turn-of-the-Century Odessa* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005)
2. Isaac Babel, *Isaac Babel's Selected Writings* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010)
3. Vasily Grossman, *The Road: Stories, Journalism, and Essays* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2010)

STUDENT RESPONSIBILITIES AND GRADING:

1. Reading responses (15%):

On Mondays we will begin class with ten minutes of free writing about the assigned readings for that day. The reading responses will be submitted at the end of the class, and graded Pass/Fail. If you miss class due to an illness or emergency, you may submit the response to me by email. Your reading responses should be legible, clearly written, and do the following:

- 1) Give a basic summary of the reading (plot, characters, themes);
- 2) Provide your own interpretation and response to the readings.

2. Film responses (15%):

We will watch six films over the course of the semester. Films will be shown on Wednesdays from 4:00-6:00pm in the Morris Library Media Center. If you cannot attend the film screenings you must watch the films at another time in the library. You are asked to write a 1-2 page (double-spaced) critical response to each film. The film responses will be graded Pass/Fail and due in class on the Friday of that same week. Film responses should be written clearly, free of grammar or spelling errors, and do the following.

- 1) Briefly summarize the film (plot, characters, themes);
- 2) Explain the historical context of the film (or, the subject matter that the film is trying to represent);
- 3) Offer your own evaluation of the film's strengths and weaknesses.

3. In-class midterm exam, Friday March 20 (30%):

The exam will present four excerpts. You will pick two, and write a short essay (4-5 paragraphs) about each one. You will be asked to address the following questions:

- 1) Who is the author?
- 2) What is the historical context in which the text was written?
- 3) How does the language of the text represent themes, events or individual figures drawn from the Russian-Jewish experience?

4. Take-home final, due on Sakai, Wednesday May 27 (30%):

For the final exam you will be asked to write a five- to six-page, double-spaced essay in which you compare three different works of your choice that we read in the course. The final exam will be marked down one grade step per day for each day that it is overdue. We will discuss the final in more detail throughout the semester.

5. Attendance and participation (10%):

Attendance at lectures and films is required. If you cannot attend the film screenings on Wednesday afternoons, you will need to watch the films on your own in the Library Media center. Our class time will include both lectures and class discussions. It is therefore very important that you come to class having done the readings for that day. If you have a legitimate circumstance that prevents you from attending the in-class midterm or submitting the final exam on time, such as an illness or family emergency, have it documented and let me know as soon as possible in advance, but before the day of the midterm.

SCHEDULE OF READINGS, DISCUSSION TOPICS AND FILMS

- Readings should be completed by the date they are listed on the syllabus
- Bring all readings to class
- Assigned readings that are posted on SAKAI will be available the week before they are assigned

Week 1. 19th Century Origins: Yiddish Writers in the Russian Empire

- M 2/9 Introduction
- W 2/11 I. L. Peretz, “The Golem,” “The Shabbes Goy,” “The Poor Boy” (SAKAI)
- F 2/13 Sholem Aleichem, “Today’s Children, from *Tevye the Dairyman* (SAKAI)

Week 2. S. An-sky: Hasidic Folklore as Modern Jewish Art

- M 2/16 S. Ansky, *The Dybbuk: Between Two Worlds* (SAKAI)
- W 2/18 FILM: *The Dybbuk* (5:00pm, Library Media Center)
- F 2/20 S. Ansky, “The Jewish Ethnographic Program,” pp. 103–126 (SAKAI)

Week 3. Vladimir Jabotinsky: Russian-Jewish Life at the Turn of the Century

- M 2/23 Begin Jabotinsky, *The Five*
- W 2/25 Continue Jabotinsky
- F 2/27 Finish Jabotinsky

Week 4. Isaac Babel and the Russian Revolution

- M 3/2 Babel, pp. 3-9, 44-55
- W 3/4 Babel, pp. 95-96, 110-116, 174-176
- F 3/6 “[Moscow State Yiddish Theater](#),” the *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* <www.yivoencyclopedia.org>

Week 5. Building the Socialist Future, Remembering the Jewish Past, Part 1

- M 3/9 Babel, pp. 305-311, 343-360 (“Karl-Yankl,” “At Grandmother’s,” “The Story of My Dovecot,” “My First Love”)
- W 3/11 Ilya Ilf, “The Prodigal Son Returns Home” (SAKAI)
- F 3/13 Mary Leder, *My Life in Stalinist Russia: An American Woman Looks Back* excerpts (SAKAI)

Week 6. Building the Socialist Future, Remembering the Jewish Past, Part 2

- M 3/16 Harriet Murav, “Peretz Markish in the 1930s: Socialist Construction and the Return of the Luftmensch” (SAKAI)
- W 3/18 FILM: *The Return of Nathan Bekker* (4:00pm, Library Media Center)
- F 3/20 IN CLASS MIDTERM

Week 7. Red Zion: Birobidzhan, The Jewish Autonomous Region

- M 3/23 [*Stalin’s Forgotten Zion: An Illustrated History, 1928-1996*](#) (read through the online exhibit)
- In class: Guest lecture by Robert Weinberg on Birobidzhan
- W 3/25 FILM: *Seekers of Happiness* (4:00pm, Library Media Center)
- F 3/27 Elissa Bemporad, “Jewish Ordinary Life in the Midst of Extraordinary Purges, 1934–1939” (SAKAI)

*****March 30-April 3: Spring Break*****

Week 8. Vasily Grossman: The Holocaust in the Soviet Union, 1941-1944

- M 4/6 Grossman, *The Road*, pp. 84-115 (“The Old Teacher”)
- W 4/8 FILM: *Ladies’ Tailor* (4:00pm, Library Media Center)
- F 4/10 Grossman, “Ukraine without Jews” (SAKAI)

Week 9. The Grey Years, 1945-1953

- M 4/13 Der Nister, "Regrowth" (SAKAI)
- W 4/15 Grossman, *The Road*, pp. 163-174, 261-68 ("The Sistine Madonna" and "Three Letters")
- F 4/17 *Stalin's Secret Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee*, excerpts (SAKAI)

Week 10. The 1960s: Return of the Shtetl

- M 4/20 Grossman, *The Road*, pp. 15-32 ("In the Town of Berdichev")
- W 4/22 FILM: *The Commissar* (4:00pm, Library Media Center)
- F 4/24 Boris Slutsky, poems (SAKAI)

Week 11. Jewish Communists, Jewish Dissidents

- M 4/27 Alexander Galich, poems and songs (SAKAI)
- W 4/29 Joseph Brodsky, "A Room and A Half," excerpts (SAKAI)
In class: Guest lecture by Julia Hulings on Joseph Brodsky
- F 5/1 Gennady Estraikh, "Aron Vergelis" (SAKAI)

Week 12. Voices of Soviet Jewish Women, 1960s-1990s

- M 5/4 Shira Gorshman, "Bubbe Malke" (SAKAI)
- W 5/6 Ludmila Ulitskaya, "Genele the Purse Lady" (SAKAI)
- F 5/8 Dina Rubina, "Apples from Shlitzbutter's Garden" (SAKAI)

Week 13. Post-Soviet Jews in Israel

M 5/11 “[Migration since World War I](#)” online, *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* <www.yivoencyclopedia.org> Read the sections from the 1970s to after 1989 (the “Great Emigration”)

In class: Guest lecture by Eynat Gutman on Israeli film

W 5/13 FILM: *Yana’s Friends* (4:00pm, Library Media Center)

F 5/15 Dina Rubina, *Here Comes the Messiah!* excerpts (SAKAI)

Week 14. Post-Soviet Jews in North America

M 5/18 Nadia Kalman, *The Cosmopolitans*, excerpt (SAKAI)

NPR “Fresh Air” [Interview with Gary Shteyngart](#), January 2014, online at <http://www.npr.org> (listen to the podcast or read the transcript)

TAKE HOME FINAL WILL BE DUE WEDNESDAY MAY 27.