

# Modern Russian Literature, Art, and Philosophy

Professor Elvira Basevich, Ph.D.

As observed by Karl Ove Knausgård in a recent New York Times article, Russians still have a reputation for a “deep” and “wild” heart—a penchant for pathos, pride, and resilience that marks Russians’ collective self-consciousness, manifesting in everything from refined cultural objects to the self-understanding of ordinary Russians.<sup>1</sup> In this course, we will study the history of the Russian heart through major literary, artistic, and philosophical movements in modern Russia (18<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century), with a special focus on poetry. We will develop a keen eye for appreciating how writers poignantly express their experience of historical tragedies, from the Napoleonic invasions, war, famine, and state repression. We will learn that the depth and sensitivity of the Russian heart is matched only by its capacity for melancholy and quiet striving—a social phenomenon best captured by the untranslatable word «Тоска», about which Nabokov famously writes:

No single word in English renders all the shades of “*toska*.” At its deepest and most painful, it is a sensation of great spiritual anguish, often without any specific cause. At less morbid levels it is a dull ache of the soul, a longing with nothing to long for, a sick pining, a vague restlessness, mental throes, yearning. In particular cases it may be the desire for somebody, of something specific, nostalgia, love-sickness. At the lowest level it grades into ennui, boredom.

Note: This course assumes the interpenetration of literature, politics, and history. Each literary movement follows historical time and will teach students, chronologically, about Russian history. In 1904, the historian, Vasily Kliuchevsky, states that colonization is “the basic fact of Russian history,” adding that “the history of Russia is the history of a country that colonized itself.”

“История России есть история страны, которая колонизуется.” (В.О. Ключевский. Курс русской истории. Часть 1. Москва: Синодальная типография, 1904, стр. 24.)

## **NO REQUIRED BOOKS**

All required readings are online on Blackboard under the “Files” link.

## **COURSE OBJECTIVES**

- To provide you with a general introduction to and understanding of Russian philosophy, history, art, and literature. Our course should also help you to appreciate why cultural expression is often the conscience of a nation, a lesson relevant to our times in America.
- To help you develop your critical thinking, critical reading, and writing skills. In order to develop these skills, I scaffold assignments to teach students step-by-step how to critically read assignments and write a final research paper.
- To read, write, and think about things, people, and places you may never have heard of. This is a reading-heavy class. Be prepared to work. For those who are literate or nearly

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Ove Knausgård, ‘A literary road trip into the heart of Russia,’ *New York Times* 14 Feb 2018 <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/14/magazine/a-literary-road-trip-into-the-heart-of-russia.html>

literate in Russian, I strongly encourage you to read the original texts, but no knowledge of Russian is required to succeed in this course.

## COURSE SCHEDULE

“I can imagine: an apple, couch, bottle, table, house, spoon, dresser, tree, cat, window, button, tea kettle, chair, the view from a window, cup, and even a man and his dog, but how to depict the life of the soul?”



Viktor Pivovarov “How to Depict the Life of a Soul?” (1975)

Week 1. Jan 22

**I. What can literature teach us about morality and society?**

- Anna Christina Ribeiro, “Toward a Philosophy of Poetry”
- Martha Nussbaum, “‘Finely Aware and Richly Responsible’: Moral Attention and the Moral Task of Literature”
- Svetlana Boym, “Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia” (1994) (excerpts)
- Dale Pesmen, “Russia and Soul: An Exploration” (Intro, chps. 2, 5, 8)

Week 3. Feb 5<sup>th</sup>

**II. The Black Fountainhead: Pushkin and the Founding of Modern Russian Literature in an Agrarian and Largely Illiterate Feudal Society**

- *Eugene Onegin*, Part I & Tatyana’s Letter to Onegin
- *Boris Godunov* (excerpts) – please also watch the complete opera by Mussorgsky
- “The Bronze Horseman”

Week 4. Feb 12<sup>th</sup>

**III. «Пошлость»: Case Studies of the Petty, the Mad, and the Bored**

- Gennady Obatkin “200 Years of *poshlost’*: A Historical Sketch of the Concept” (2012)
- Gogol, “The Overcoat” (complete)
- Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (complete)
- Chekhov, “A Lady with a Dog”

Week 6. Feb 26<sup>th</sup>

**IV. French Symbolism & Urban Decay in Russia**

- Aleksander Blok in the Context of Baudelaire, Verlaine, & Stéphane Mallarmé
- Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground*
- *Optional*: listen to Scriabin’s *First Symphony*

Week 5. March 5<sup>th</sup>

**V. The Silver Age of Prerevolutionary Russia: The Acemists**

- Selected poetry by Marina Tsvetaeva, Anna Akhmatova & Osip Mandelstam
- *Optional*: listen to Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring* (1913)

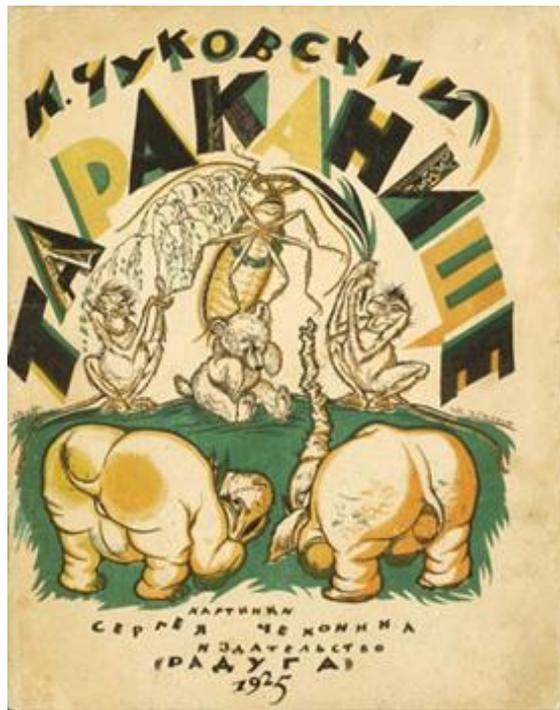
Week 6. March 12<sup>th</sup>

**VI. The Russian Revolution (1917): State Architects of ‘Socialist Realism’**

- Maxim Gorky, “Twenty-six Men and a Girl”
- Lenin on The Founding of The Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia (AKhRR)

- Lukacs, On Realism (excerpt)
- We will review various state-sponsored visual artists
- “Korney Chukovsky: The children’s author who wrote against all odds” *Russia Beyond* [https://www.rbth.com/arts/literature/2017/03/31/korney-chukovsky\\_729098](https://www.rbth.com/arts/literature/2017/03/31/korney-chukovsky_729098)
- *Excerpts* from Chukovsky’s famous children’s storybooks, featuring a giant crocodile, a cockroach, and a humanoid monster «Бармалей», each of these figures sports an enormous mustache and is veiled a metaphor for Stalin.

In “The Sense of Nonsense,” Chukovsky includes the letter he receives from the Soviet government denouncing the mustachioed creatures of his popular storybooks:



Chukovsky, *The Terrible Cockroach*, original book cover (1925)

Week 7. March 19<sup>th</sup>

## VII. The Avant Garde after the Russian Revolution: The Imagists, the Futurists & the Sexual/Anti-Racist Revolution that Never Was

- Selected poetry of Yesenin and Mayakovski
- Aleksandra Kollontai, “Make Way for Winged Eros” (1923)
- Sheila Fitzpatrick “Sex and Revolution” (1976)
- Sheila Fitzpatrick on Jews in the Russian Revolution: “I sailed away with a mighty push, never to return” in *London Review of Books*

Week 8. March 26<sup>th</sup>

## VIII. The Great Terror: Jewish Writers in the Purges

- Osip Mandelstam, “The Stalin Epigram”
- Isaac Babel, “The Red Cavalry”
- The John Dewey Commission
- *Optional:* Listen to Shostakovich’s Symphony No.10 & “From Jewish Folk Poetry” Vocal Cycle Op. 79



Marc Chagall, “Noah receives order to build the Ark” (1931)

Week 9. April 2<sup>nd</sup>

## IX. WWII: The ‘Good’ War / The Infinite Loss

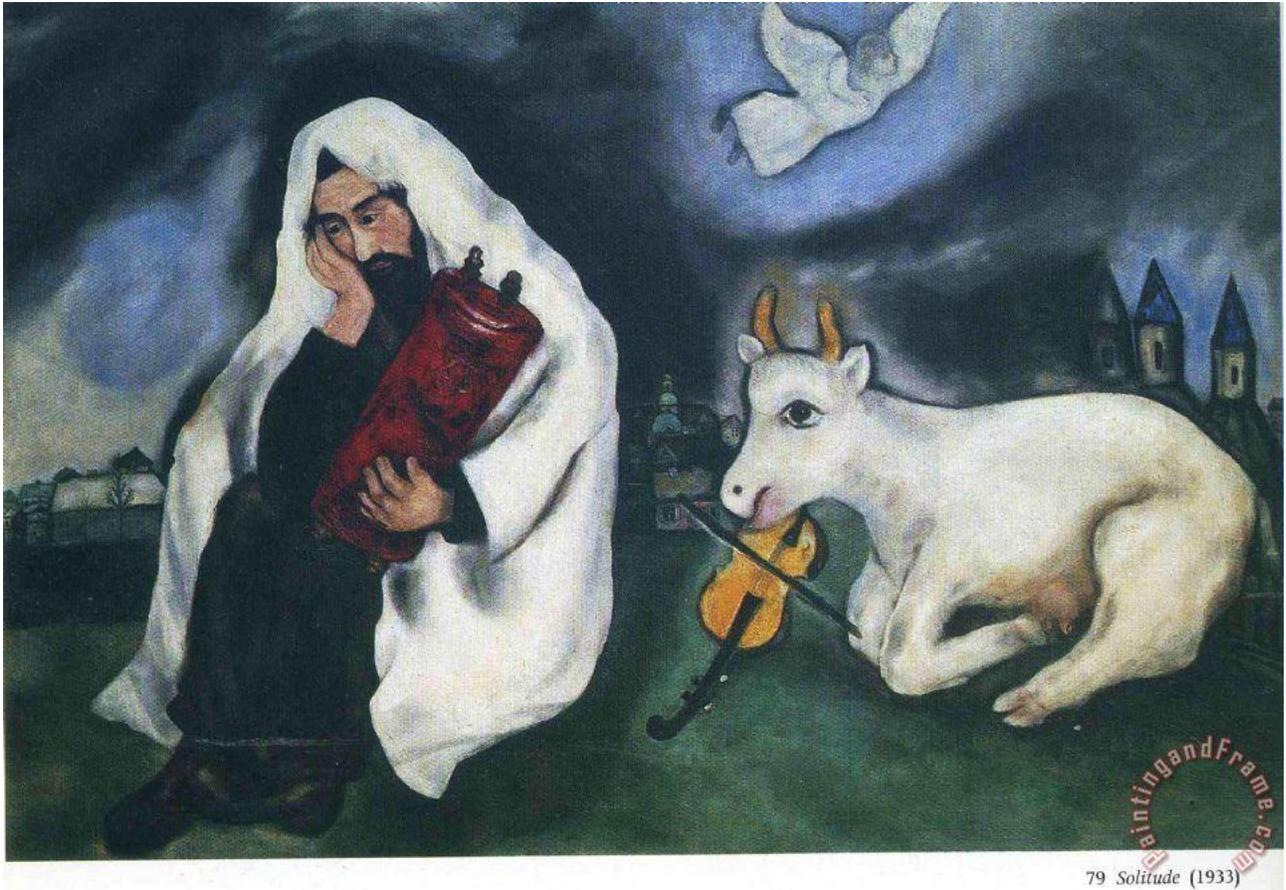
- Harrison Salisbury “The 900 Days: The Siege of Leningrad” (excerpt)
- Pasternak, Selected Poems
- *Optional:* Starr, *Red and Hot: The Fate of Jazz in the Soviet Union* (excerpt)

Week 11. April 16<sup>th</sup>

## X. Soviet Writers & Artists in Exile

- Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* (excerpt)

- Victor Serge, Selected Poems
- Marc Chagall's autobiography (excerpt)
- Joseph Brodsky, *On Grief & Reason*; selected poems



Marc Chagall, "Solitude" 1933

Week 13<sup>th</sup> May 3<sup>rd</sup>

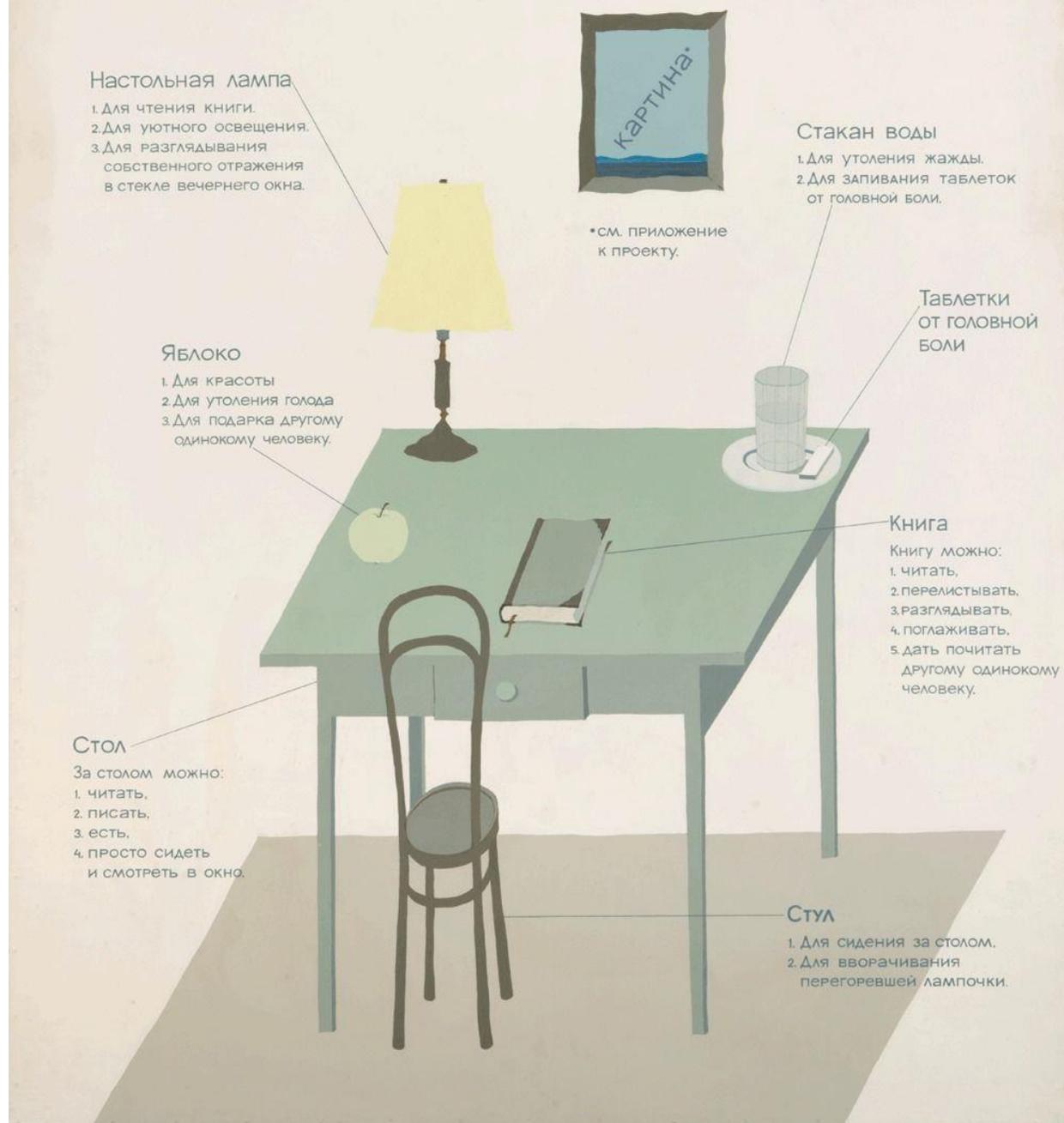
## XI. Soviet Nostalgia in an Uncertain Future

- Svetlana Boym, "From the Russian Soul to Post-Communist Nostalgia"
- Svetlana Alexievich, *Secondhand Time* (excerpt)
- Pushkin, "The Gypsies"

# ПРОЕКТ

ПРЕДМЕТОВ ПОВСЕДНЕВНОГО ОБИХОДА

ДЛЯ ОДИНОКОГО ЧЕЛОВЕКА



Viktor Pivovarov, "Project of Household Items for a Lonely Person," 2016



Viktor Pivovarov, "It was dark on the stairs – maybe that's where I dropped my key."

## FINAL GRADE EVALUATION TOOLS

1. Weekly Blackboard Responses for a total of ten responses **(40% of final grade)**  
Students must complete a one page summary and critical engagement of reading
2. Thesis statement and bibliography for research paper **(10% of final grade)**
3. First draft of research **(20% of final grade)**  
A first draft of the final paper should be 6-7 pages, with a complete bibliography and proper citation.
4. Final Paper 15-18 pages **(30% of final grade)**

## POLICIES

- **TIMELY SUBMISSION OF THE ASSIGNMENT**

The purposes of the reading responses and the scaffolding of the final paper is to make sure students complete course requirements in a timely, manageable manner. It is therefore imperative that students submit their work on time. Late papers will **not** be accepted, except in the case of a documented medical emergency.

- **GET IN TOUCH**

Feel free to talk to me about any learning issue that you might have that could impact your success in the course. Visit me during my office hours or e-mail me with any questions you might have. I am a resource to help you learn. If you are confused about the readings or about my expectations, do let me know.

- **ACCOMODATIONS**

In accordance with University policy and the ADA, I will accommodate students with documented disabilities confirmed by the Office of Disability Services and UML team athletes. If you have a

disability, please contact the Office of Disability Services as soon as possible. Their office is at University Crossing Suite 300, phone: 978-934-4574, e-mail: [Disability@uml.edu](mailto:Disability@uml.edu). This documentation is confidential. Please notify me during the first week of classes in order to make sure appropriate arrangements can be made.

- **ACADEMIC INTEGRITY**

Academic dishonesty is prohibited in all programs at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell and sanctions may be imposed on any student who commits an act of academic dishonesty. Carefully review the university policies concerning academic honesty and integrity. More information can be found here: [http://www.uml.edu/catalog/undergraduate/policies/academic\\_dishonesty.htm](http://www.uml.edu/catalog/undergraduate/policies/academic_dishonesty.htm)

In a nutshell, any use of others' writing or thinking without giving them proper credit for their words and ideas is considered plagiarism; even if you have only used a sentence without providing proper credit. Similarly, the resubmission of your own previously produced work, for which you have already received credit in other courses or in high school, is considered a case of self-plagiarism which violates academic integrity. Both plagiarism and self-plagiarism will result in failing this course and a report to the Chair of the Philosophy Department and the Office of the Provost.