



THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA  
COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES

## HUMANITIES SEMINARS

### Tackling the Russian Soul

Spring 2020

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**Course Details:** Wednesdays from 10 AM – 12 PM on January 29, February 5, 12, and 19, 2020

#### **Course Description**

“Tackling the Russian Soul” “tackles” the nuances and intrinsically interesting features of the Russian cultural-societal-historical experience often entitled “the Russian Soul.”

Caught between East and West, Asia and Europe, and experiencing its own unique socioeconomic-political developmental experience – as conditioned by the demanding realities of its Eurasian topography and climate – Russia continues on its one-of-a-kind historical odyssey that merits our careful attention. Twenty-First Century Russia is a core global actor, just as it was in the Twentieth Century. But as Winston Churchill famously observed back in 1939, “Russia is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma.” And that Russian riddle-mystery-enigma is very much tied with the Russian Soul. This course “tackles” the Russian Soul, with the overriding intention to make Russia and its experience more accessible to all who desire to tackle it.

Our four-week, two-hour-per-session illuminates various facets of the “Russian Soul” and Russian experience, drawing upon pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet ideas and behavior. As no two observers offer the same definition of the Russian Soul – and most serious observers struggle to even develop such a definition – none is offered here, nor is one definitively set out in our seminar. But many facets of the Russian Soul will be analyzed, and it is intended that every enrolled student come away with an appreciation of the beauty, complexities, and challenges of engaging that national soul.

During our weeks together, participants will have the chance to read the classic children’s tale (and it is hardly simple or childish”) to which every Russian – Soviet and post-Soviet – has been exposed for over 75 years. Together we will consider what Russians (Soviet and post-Soviet) view as “the good and moral person,” “the immoral person,” the just society, and the goals that a good and just society should promote. Participants will engage other facets of Russian culture, including the fine arts and the performing arts, as the Russian Soul is illuminate. Our seminar, however, is also a politics course, as we tie the Russian Soul to both Soviet and post-Soviet politics and policies. Special attention is given to the Putin period (2000-present). We tackle important contemporary actors such as the Russian Orthodox Church and nonprofit groups that are springing up all over the country. We will also tackle important public policies such as the Anti-Gay Propaganda Law, while giving attention to the overriding effort to craft a new, post-Soviet, Twenty First Century “Russian national idea.”

**“Tackling the Russian Soul” arises out of the recently completed Fall 2019 HSP course, “Tackling Putin’s Russia.” However, this course is a stand-alone course; it builds upon, but does not duplicate, material set out in the Fall 2019 seminar.** For those who did not take “Tackling Putin’s Russia”: welcome! I hope you engage many interesting ideas, and experience Russian culture, such that your interest in the fascinating Russian people will only grow. For those who did take “Tackling Putin’s Russia”: welcome back! I hope you had fun engaging aspects of contemporary Russian politics, domestic and foreign; let’s engage even more, but broadening our perspective, looking back as we look ahead.

### **Preliminary Course Outline – Topics for four meetings, with readings**

- Meeting 1                    Overview – Russian Soul Themes from History and Culture
- Irina Sandomirskaia, “Return to the Motherland,” in Adele Barker and Bruce Grace, eds., *The Russia Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2001, pp. 735-42; 8 pp. from a 770- page volume.
- “The Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh,” 13<sup>th</sup> C. legend from folk tales, my typescript.
- Meeting 2                    Religion and Suffering
- “Tale of Piotr and Fevronia,” 13<sup>th</sup> C. legend from 18<sup>th</sup> C., my typescript.
- Meeting 3                    Values of Soviet Power
- Maxim Gorky, “The Old Woman Izergil,” novella, 1906; approximately 45 pp.; no copyright issue as it was published more than one century ago.
- “Moral Code of the Builder of Communism,” 1961; English translation at: <http://soviethistory.msu.edu/1961-2/moral-code-of-the-builder-of-communism/>; typescript downloaded 25 October 2019.
- Meeting 4                    Nationalism and Vladimir Putin – 21<sup>st</sup> Century
- Vladimir Putin, “Russia at the Turn of the Millennium,” *Nzavisimaya gazeta*, 30 December 1999, English translation at: <https://pages.uoregon.edu/kimball/Putin.htm>; downloaded 25 October 2019.