

History 295: Who Killed Kirov?
Understanding Soviet Politics through an Assassination of the 1930s
Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, 11:00-11:50
Spring 2008

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Office hours: MW 1:15-3:00,
TTh 10:00-11:00
(or by appointment)

Course description

On December 1, 1934, a troubled young Communist named Leonid Nikolaev slipped into Leningrad's Smolny Institute and assassinated Sergei Kirov—the chairman of the city's Communist party and one of the country's most prominent leaders. The case quickly became a sensation, as rumors swirled that Nikolaev was an ally of Trotskyites, or rightists, or foreign spies; Russian émigrés, on the other hand, soon charged that Kirov had been assassinated on Stalin's orders to eliminate a rival for power. Whether or not he was behind the assassination, Stalin quickly used the Kirov affair to crack down on the (supposed) opposition and consolidate his hold on power, launching an assault on dissent that culminated in the Great Purges.

In this course, we will use the Kirov case—a Russian equivalent of the JFK assassination in many ways—as a window into the inner workings of the Stalinist political system. The class will begin by looking at Russia's revolutionary movement and at early Soviet politics from the point of view of both Kirov and Stalin, two of the country's most prominent leaders. We will then seek to answer a series of questions about how the Stalinist system worked. How much power did Stalin personally wield in the 1930s, and how large a role was played by other Soviet politicians? Was there truth to the rumors that Kirov had become a more popular leader than Stalin? Was it a coincidence that a number of prominent Soviet leaders began their careers in the Caucasus, rather than in Russia itself? What role did the Trotskyite opposition, the secret police, and the political rumor mill play in Stalinist politics? And what are we to make of the fact that many Soviet leaders—including both Stalin and Kirov—were at the center of full-fledged personality cults? The course will conclude with an examination of the terror of the 1930s. Along the way, we will look at how historians have interpreted the Kirov assassination, using primary sources and scholarly accounts of the murder both to clarify the events surrounding Kirov's death and to illustrate how different schools of historians have interpreted the Stalinist terror. The result will be a case study in Soviet history, a more general examination of Stalinist politics, and a discussion of how different historians have interpreted Russia's past.

Course materials

The following texts are available for purchase at the college bookstore and are on reserve at Burling Library:

Robert Conquest, *Stalin and the Kirov Murder*
Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia*

Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution*
Amy Knight, *Who Killed Kirov? Inside the Kremlin's Greatest Mystery*
Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon*
Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar*
Victor Serge, *The Case of Comrade Tulayev*

The course readings will also include a series of journal articles and excerpts from primary sources, which will be available electronically on the class's Pioneerweb site.

Assignments and grading

This course will have three main written requirements, which will be weighted as follows in determining your grade:

Three papers of 3-5 pages each (40% total). Each of the three papers will be an analysis of some of the primary documents or secondary sources we have read in class; I will hand out an assignment sheet for each paper roughly 10 days before it is due. The first paper will be due on Friday, February 29, in class; the second will be due on Wednesday, April 16, at midnight; the third will be due in class on Friday, May 2.

Mid-term exam (20%). There will be a 50-minute mid-term exam held in class on Monday, March 10. It will have two parts: in the first, you will need to identify a series of people, places, or things from the class's first half, and in the second, you will answer an essay question.

Final exam (40%). The final exam for this course will take place on Wednesday, May 14, at 2:00 PM; like the mid-term, it will involve a combination of identification questions and essays (most likely two essays, one on the second half of the course and one on the course as a whole.)

The final requirement of the course is active **class participation**. Informed participation is a crucial part of the classroom experience: to earn a good grade, you'll need not only to complete the writing assignments described above, but to provide evidence in class that you've completed the course readings and that you've put some thought into the issues that they address. Class participation, of course, involves not only speaking in class, but listening respectfully to the opinions of your classmates; if you feel uncomfortable speaking in class, come talk with me in office hours and we'll figure out how best to proceed. Class participation also depends on regular attendance and if you miss class more than six times, I reserve the right to fail you.

Grading will be based on the following formula. I will first calculate a preliminary grade based on the written assignments, which will be weighted as I note above. Once I have determined this preliminary grade, however, I will consider raising or lowering your grade based on class participation. (That is, if the grades for your writing assignments and your exams average out to an A-, you could earn a B, B+, an A-, or an A, depending on the extent and the insightfulness of your class participation.) In many cases, I will simply use your class participation to decide which of two grades to assign you (that is, if your work is on the line between an A- and a B+, your class participation will decide your grade); in others, I may raise or lower your mark by one notch (say, from an A- to an A) depending on your performance in class discussion.) In rare

instances, I will consider lowering your mark by two half-grades because of poor attendance or participation, but I will only do so in cases where I've spoken to you ahead of time about your class participation (and given you the chance to get back on track.)

Important notes

Grinnell College makes reasonable accommodations for students with documented disabilities. Students need to provide documentation identifying any special needs to the Dean for Student Academic Support and Advising, Joyce Stern, whose office is located on the third floor of the Rosenfield Center. Students should then notify me within the first few days of class.

Students should also be aware of Grinnell's policy on academic honesty. Plagiarism, it goes without saying, will not be tolerated in this course.

Course schedule

Monday, January 21: Course introduction

Wednesday, January 23: The making of a revolutionary

Reading: Amy Knight, *Who Killed Kirov?*, ch. 1-2 (pp. 3-50)
Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution*, introduction and ch. 1 (pp. 1-39)

Friday, January 25: Revolution and civil war

Reading: Fitzpatrick, ch. 2-3 (pp. 40-92)

Monday, January 28: Kirov at war

Reading: Knight, ch. 3-4 (pp. 51-110)

Wednesday, January 30: Stalin consolidates power

Reading: Fitzpatrick, ch. 4-5 (pp. 93-147)
Knight, ch. 5 (pp. 111-141)

Friday, February 1: Stalin's background

Reading: Simon Sebag Montefiore, prologue and ch. 1-7 (pp. 1-101)

Monday, February 4: The Georgian context

Reading: Alfred Rieber, "Stalin: Man of the Borderlands," *The American Historical Review* 106:5 (2001), 1651-91. [Pioneerweb]

Wednesday, February 6: Stalinism from above and below

Reading: Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, ch. 1 (pp. 14-39) [Pioneerweb]
E. A. Rees, "Stalin as Leader, 1924-1937: From Oligarch to Dictator"
[Pioneerweb]

Friday, February 8: Stalin and Kirov in the early 1930s

Reading: Montefiore, ch. 8-11 (pp. 93-127)
Knight, ch. 6 (pp. 142-168)

Monday, February 11: The Stalinist cult of the individual

Reading: Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from Above, 1928-1941*,
ch. 7 (pp. 146-171)

Wednesday, February 13: Popular opinion and everyday life in the USSR

Reading: Lesley Rimmel, "Another Kind of Fear: The Kirov Murder and the End of Bread
Rationing in Leningrad," *Slavic Review* 56:3 (1997), 481-99 [Pioneerweb]
Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia*, pp. 1-90

Friday, February 15: The personality cult in context

Reading: Davies, pp. 147-187
Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, ch. 3 (pp. 67-87)

Monday, February 18: Stalin and his milieu

Reading: Montefiore, pp. 105-143
hand-out of excerpts from work by Russian scholars [Pioneerweb]
Francesco Benvenuti, "Kirov in Soviet Politics" [Pioneerweb]

Wednesday, February 20: The killing

Reading: Knight, ch. 7-8 (pp. 169-230)

Friday, February 22: The response to the murder

Reading: Arch Getty and Oleg Naumov, eds., *The Road to Terror*, pp. 140-157
[Pioneerweb]

Monday, February 25: On the brink of the purges

Reading: Montefiore, pp. 147-193
Oleg Khlevniuk, "Stalin as dictator" [Pioneerweb]

Wednesday, February 27: Stalinists and Trotskyites

Reading: Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed* (excerpts) [Pioneerweb or online]

Friday, February 29: The Trotskyite critique

Reading: Trotsky, "On the Kirov Assassination" [Pioneerweb]
Paper #1 is due

Monday, March 3: Kirov in Soviet propaganda

Reading: Julie Cassiday, "Kirov and Death in 'The Great Citizen': The Fatal Consequences of Linguistic Mediation"

[Note: I hope to hunt down a copy of Fridrikh Ermler's 1937-39 film *The Great Citizen*. If I succeed, I may schedule a screening outside class, or I may show clips in class.]

Wednesday, March 5: Finishing the story

Reading: Knight, ch. 9-10 (pp. 231-270)
Fitzpatrick, ch. 6 (pp. 148-172)

Friday, March 7: The death of Sergo Ordzhonikidze

Reading: Montefiore, pp. 197-219
O. V. Khlevniuk, *In Stalin's Shadow*, excerpts [Pioneerweb]

Monday, March 10: **MID-TERM EXAM**

Wednesday, March 12: The purge era in fiction

Reading: Victor Serge, *The Case of Comrade Tulayev*, pp. 1-168

Friday, March 14: Tulayev and Kirov

Reading: Serge, pp. 169-362

SPRING BREAK: MARCH 15-30

Monday, March 31: The trial of Kamenev and Zinoviev

Reading: Stenographic report: The Case of the Trotskyite-Zinovievite Terrorist Centre (excerpts) [Pioneerweb or online]
William Chase, "Stalin as Producer: The Moscow Show Trials and the Construction of Mortal Threats" [Pioneerweb]

Wednesday, April 2: Show trials and conspiracy

Reading: Stenographic report: The Case of the Trotskyite-Zinovievite Terrorist Centre (excerpts) [Pioneerweb or online]
Gabor Rittersporn, "The Omnipresent Conspiracy" [Pioneerweb]

Friday, April 4: The show trials in Soviet politics

Reading: Getty and Naumov, *The Road to Terror*, pp. 247-300 [Pioneerweb]

Monday, April 7: The show trials in literature

Reading: Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon* ("The First Hearing" and "The Second Hearing")

Wednesday, April 9: Koestler and the show trials

Reading: Koestler ("The Third Hearing" and "The Grammatical Fiction")

Friday, April 11: Rubashov and Bukharin

Readings: Nikolai Bukharin, *How it all Began*, excerpts [Pioneerweb]
documents on Bukharin [Pioneerweb]

Monday, April 14: The Kirov assassination in memoirs

Readings: Anna Larina, *This I Cannot Forget*, excerpts [Pioneerweb]
Walter Krivitsky, *In Stalin's Secret Service*, excerpts [Pioneerweb]

Wednesday, April 16: A traditional view of the purges

Reading: Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment*, excerpts [Pioneerweb]
Paper #2 is due by midnight (the end of the day)

Friday, April 18: A revisionist view of the purges

Reading: J. Arch Getty, "The Politics of Repression Revisited" [Pioneerweb]
Boris Nikolaevskii, *Letter of an Old Bolshevik* (excerpts) [Pioneerweb]

Monday, April 21: Other models of the purge

Reading: James Harris, "The Purging of Local Cliques in the Urals Region, 1936-37" [Pioneerweb]
Sarah Davies, pp. 113-144

Wednesday, April 23: The terror begins

Reading: Montefiore, pp. 219-261
 Getty and Naumov, excerpts [Pioneerweb]

Friday, April 25: The dark years of 1937-1938

Reading: Montefiore, pp. 265-297
 Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, pp. 190-217 [Pioneerweb]

Monday, April 28: Terror from below, continued

Reading: Wendy Goldman, *Terror and Democracy in the Age of Stalin*, excerpts
 [Pioneerweb]

Wednesday, April 30: The terror: how many victims?

Reading: articles by Wheatcroft and Getty [Pioneerweb]

Friday, May 2: Conquest on Kirov

Reading: Robert Conquest, *Stalin and the Kirov Murder*
 Paper #3 is due

Monday, May 5: Khrushchev and Kirov

Reading: Nikita Khrushchev, "The Secret Speech" [Pioneerweb]
 documents from the 1961 investigation

Wednesday, May 7: Investigating the Kirov murder

Reading: Matthew Lenoe, "Khrushchev Era Politics and the Investigation of the Kirov
 Murder, 1956-57," *Ars Slavica Iaponica* 24, pp. 47-72 [Pioneerweb]

Friday, May 9: Summing things up

Reading: Matthew Lenoe, "Did Stalin Kill Kirov and Does It Matter?" [Pioneerweb]