Russian 591: Soviet Fiction of the 1920s

T 3:30-6:00 Prof. Eliot Borenstein

331 Cabell Hall 103 Cabell

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 Office Hours: MWF 2-3

 T : 10-11

 In this course, we will examine selected works of Russian fiction that date from the formative period of Soviet literature and ideology, the 1920s. The 1920s represent a unique moment in Russian, if not world, history: after years of radical ferment, Russia finally had the opportunity to put into practice the social theories that had captured the attention of a significant portion of the intelligentsia. The first decade after the revolution held out the possibility that the gap between theory and practice might at last be breached.

 This seminar treats the attempts of several Russian authors to explore the relationship between revolutionary theory and everyday life in works of prose fiction. One can argue that literature is no closer to "real life" than any social theory, and yet fiction can be used as a model of reality, a laboratory in which ideas can be tested under controlled conditions. Whether or not the authors themselves saw their work this way, the critics and the government certainly did: writers were alternately condemned or praised for the words and actions of their characters.

 The works to be read in this class were selected because they all pay attention to a particular aspect of the problem of theory and practice: sexuality and the family.The bolsheviks inherited a long tradition of radical critiques of the family, the most extreme of which called for the abolition of the family as a unit.Closely related to communist anti-family rhetoric was the doctrine known as "revolutionary sublimation" or "revolutionary asceticism": the re-direction of sexual urges into "socially usefully" pursuits.

 The hostility of radical theoreticians towards sexuality and the family, and by extension, towards biology itself, becomes a two-way street.If bolshevik theory is anti-family and anti-sexual, then sexuality and the family in turn become a sign of opposition to theory.

 Though we will return throughout the course to the issues of theory vs. practice and sexuality and the "natural" vs. communism, class discussion will not be limited to any particular aspects of the works in question. Part of each class session will be devoted to close analysis of selected passages from the texts; thematic concerns will be supplemented and enriched by discussion of issues of language, artistic style, narration, structure, and point of view. Primary readings will be supplemented by selected works of literary theory, cultural criticism, and Russian philosophy.

Participation: This class will be run as a seminar. Ideally, the instructor will serve as a moderator or facilitator rather than a lecturer. It is expected that everyone will take an active part in class discussion, and will come to class prepared with questions and observations about the works we will be reading.

 Each student will make one presentation during the course of the semester. Roughly once a week the participants of this seminar will be reading and discussing a work of literary theory or cultural criticism that is relevant to either the story under discussion or the course as a whole. Preparing a presentation involves a small amount of research or extra reading in order to inform the seminar about the author of the theoretical work. If possible, the presenter should try to relate the article to the texts we are discussing in class. Most important, the presenter should prepare questions and ideas to stimulate discussion.

 It goes without saying that the participants in the seminar are responsible for all the articles we will be reading, and not just the ones they are presenting.

Reading: It is expected that the primary texts will be read in the original Russian. Translations are on reserve and may be used as a reference, especially for difficult passages, but should not take the place of the original. Texts have been ordered in Russian only, though the English translation of Chevengur will be ordered if possible, due to the novel's difficulty.

Writing: There will be three short response papers (2-3 pages) and one research paper (20 pages) assigned during the course of the semester. The response papers are an exercise to stimulate thought and discussion, and are not expected to be masterpieces of erudition. It is up to each student to decide which of the works s/he wants to respond to, but I do not recommend saving these papers until the last three works. The response papers should be turned in no later than one week after we have finished discussing a given work, and are welcome earlier.

 The research paper can deal with any of the issues or works we are discussing in the seminar, as well as other works by these authors, or by other writers who were active in the 1920s. The research paper could grow out of a response paper, or could be only tangentially related to the ideas we have discussed in class. Students should consult with me before finalizing their topic.

 Drafts are welcome and encouraged, but not required.

 The research paper is due on the last week of class.

Primary Texts:

 Evgeny Zamiatin, My.

 Isaak Babel', Konarmiia.

 Iurii Olesha, Zavist'.

 Andrei Platonov, Chevengur.

 Boris Pilniak, "Krasnoe derevo"

Secondary Texts:

 Nikolai Berdiaev "Marx vs. Man" (143-147, 156-166)

 Aleksandr Bogdanov, "Matter as Thing-in-Itself" (390-404)

 Katerina Clark, excerpts from The Soviet Novel (15-24, 93-106)

 Nikolai Fedorov "The Question of Brotherhood" (11-54)

 Rene Girard. Chapter One of Deceit, Desire and the Novel (1-52)

Luce Irigaray. "Commodities Among Themselves" from This Sex Which Is Not One

Vladimir Ilich Lenin, "Materialism and Empirio-Criticism" (405-436)

Camille Paglia, "Sex and Violence, or Nature and Art" from Sexual Personae (1-39)

 Edward Said, excerpts from The World, the Text and the Critic (16-24, 111-125)

 Lionel Tiger, excerpts from Men in Groups (169-198)

 Evgeny Zamiatin, "On Literature, Revolution, Entropy and Other Matters"

Schedule

(subject to change)

September 2: Introduction

September 7: Zamiatin, Entries 1-10

September 14: Zamiatin, Entries 11-25; Clark

September 21: Finish Zamiatin; Zamiatin "On Literature"

September 28: Babel': "Perekhod cherez Zbruch" through "Berestechko"; Tiger

October 5: Finish Babel'; Said

October 12: READING HOLIDAY

October 19: Olesha, Part One; Girard

October 26: Olesha, Part Two; Irigaray

November 2: Platonov, 24-95

November 9: Platonov, 95-174; Fedorov

November 16: Platonov, 174-243; Bogdanov

November 23: Platonov, 243-318; Lenin

November 30: Finish Platonov; Berdiaev

December 7: Pilniak, "Krasnoe derevo"; Paglia

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