

LIT/EUS 4930
From Baba Yaga to Black Widow: Eastern Europe in Western Popular Culture
Class 29253 & 29118, Spring 2023

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Course Description:

When you think about Eastern Europe, what do you imagine? Do you picture the witch Baba Yaga, infamous for her hut with its spindly chicken legs? Do you think about the long, dark winters of the Siberian tundra? Do you envision the Marvel superheroes Black Widow and the Scarlett Witch of Avengers fame? More soberingly, do you think of the Russian invasion of Ukraine? Or do you picture something else entirely? Whatever you imagine, whether you realize it or not, your conception of Eastern Europe has no doubt been shaped by how Eastern Europe has been depicted in popular culture over time. As scholars like Larry Wolff and Anita Starosta note, Eastern Europe has historically been depicted as an ‘uncivilized Other’ to Western Europe, something alternately confirmed and subverted in contemporary Western imaginings of Eastern Europe. As the global reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine demonstrates, that perception has real consequences for the lived realities of all Eastern Europeans.

In this class, we will track how different periods of Eastern Europe’s history have been imagined and depicted in western popular culture and how that depiction affects conceptions of half of a continent often pushed aside or forgotten. We will consider questions like: what stereotypes do these texts perpetuate or subvert? Which countries receive more focus, and which are more often overlooked? Why do so many Eastern Europe based properties illustrate Eastern Europe as a land of fantasy, and how does that depiction affect how we view that portion of the world? How has the region’s fraught history shaped how we show Eastern Europe in the present? In considering these questions, we will examine texts across a range of genres, including realism, fantasy, and nonfiction. We will also explore a variety of mediums, including novels, television shows, films, comics, and even musicals.

Required Texts:

The Americans (FX, available on Amazon Prime)
Anastasia (1997 film)
The Bear and the Nightingale (Katherine Arden)
Black Widow (2021 film)
Breaking Stalin’s Nose (Eugen Yelchin)
Brundibar (Tony Kushner and illustrated by Maurice Sendak)

Chernobyl (HBO show)
Enough (Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch and illustrated by Michael Martchenko)
The Great (Hulu show)
Hereville: How Mirka Got Her Sword (Barry Deutsch)
Maus I: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleed's History (Art Spiegelman)
Shadow and Bone (Netflix show)
Symphony for the City of the Dead: Dmitri Shostakovich and the Siege of Leningrad (M.T. Anderson)
Winterkill (Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch)
The Witcher (Netflix show)

You may purchase any edition of these texts.

Grade Distribution:

Memos	30%
Context Presentation	10%
Midterm Paper	25%
Final Paper	25%
Attendance and Participation	10%

Assignment Descriptions:

Memos

You will write 6 reading responses of 1-2 single-spaced pages each, 12 pt font. The memo is simply a short meditation on the assigned reading. Your memo should offer a response to the reading for the next day's class. While you do not have to have read the whole book or watch the whole who to write a memo, finishing the text/show will make writing a memo much easier. You may address a number of issues or focus more in-depth on one or two; just be as specific as you can and support your responses with examples and details from the text.

I do not expect you to have a thorough interpretation, but your memo should offer some kind of evaluation. In other words, it should be more than random or unconnected thoughts about the work. Consider the text as a text, or author's writing or plot strategies – in other words, get beyond your response to characters in the text. If you like, you may make use of outside readings (biographical sketches, scholarly articles, websites, etc.). This assignment is designed to stimulate class discussion, and to help you remember the texts and generate paper ideas.

We have 15 texts; you need to submit 6 memos. No more than one memo per text. Although you must write your first memo on the *The Bear and the Nightingale* (any day of that text), you may otherwise choose which texts to write about. You must submit your memo by midnight ahead of the day's reading you are discussing. Your memo must address the

reading or viewing of the day and, if you are submitting a memo after we have begun discussing a text, your memo must be more than a regurgitation of previous class discussion. If there is also an article assigned that day or week, you may address it as well, preferably in connection with the literary text. Addressing the article is optional.

If you like, you may also create up to three alternative memos, in the form of a meme-o or short work of fanfiction. If a meme-o: create a meme that captures/reflects the text in question, perhaps a central relationship or theme or dynamic. The meme should feature the image, adapted as necessary, along with an appropriate caption. You must also include at least one paragraph of explanation or analysis. If fanfiction: rewrite a key scene or write a new short chapter to be included in the work. Don't forget the appropriate classification tags (genre, pairings, etc.)! A paragraph of explanation should accompany the creative work.

Memos will be submitted electronically to Canvas and (again) are due by midnight (ahead) of the class day in question. I will grade each memo and average the grades with any quizzes that might be given.

Historical and Cultural Context Presentation

At the beginning of the semester, you will sign up for a text on the syllabus for which you'll give a brief presentation on the historical and cultural context of a particular text in groups of 2-3. Although Eastern European history is not the focus of this course, a number of texts may require historical and/or cultural context that you probably have not been exposed to before. Thus, to fill that gap, you will create a brief presentation (no more than ten-fifteen minutes) with which to begin discussion. While the required context will vary depending on the kind of text for which you are providing background, some topics you might consider:

- Is there historical event that inspired a particular text?
- In what country (real or imagined) does the text take place, and what should readers know about it?
- In what time period (real or imagined) does the text place, and what should readers know about it?
- What cultural context or references might readers need to know to better understand a text? (For example, does the text draw on specific folklore or mythology that readers may not be familiar with?)
- Information about the author/creator
- Excerpts from interviews with the author/creator
- A text's popular reception
- And more...

Your presentation should include a visual component (whether on Power Point or another medium) as well as a works cited page. While your references do not necessarily need to be peer reviewed, they should come from credible sources. You might also consider making a

handout for your peers on the main takeaways of your presentation, either to hand out in person or post on Canvas.

Midterm Paper

For this paper, you will write a short analysis of any representation of Eastern Europe in popular culture. You may develop the essay any way you like, as long as you have an argument and draw from supporting evidence. Part of the challenge is to identify a suitable subject and approach. No biographical criticism, although you may use some biographical data. One option might be to select one of the many book awards for adolescent literature and do an analysis of how a particular title does or does not meet the award criteria, but the topic is open.

You may write on one of the texts we're reading or watching in class. If you do, you must expand on what we discussed or take a different line of interpretation than the ones we followed in class.

This paper should be **5-6 double-spaced pages in length, 12-point Times New Roman font**. You are not required to use outside sources for this paper. However, whether or not you involve secondary sources, you **must cite all of your texts according to MLA specifications and include a list of works cited**.

Final project

When designing this course, there were a lot of books that I would have liked to put on the syllabus that we didn't have time for—every text I put on the syllabus meant a text that we wouldn't have time to read. Thus, for this assignment, you will select a novel, poetry collection, graphic novel, movie, or episode of a television show that includes a depiction of Eastern Europe (broadly theorized) to analyze that could have been on the syllabus but isn't. Although I will provide you with a list of texts from which you may choose, if you have another text in mind that you think would be a good fit for this class, with instructor permission, you may consider a text not included on this list.

Since this course is concerned with critical insights that emerge through textual relationships, **this assignment invites you to pair your selected text with one we have previously discussed in class**. Your final paper, then, should not only attend to the critical correspondences you perceive between your selected text and a previously assigned one, but also call to attention the greater theoretical questions or concerns that their pairing invites. Ideally, the insights and arguments this paper should offer your audience a clear and well-supported account of key topics related to Western depictions of Eastern Europe—as well as instructors of university courses such as this one. Finally, you should consider how your selected text would have fit in the overall syllabus for the class. If you were teaching this class, would you add it to the reading list? If so, at the expense of what text? Or would you leave it off, like I did? Why or why not?

This paper must be **5-6 double-spaced pages in length, in 12-point Times New Roman font**. You are welcome – and in fact encouraged – to draw on secondary sources. However, whether or not you involve secondary sources, you **must cite all of your texts according to MLA specifications and include a list of works cited**.

Course Policies:

1. You must complete *all assignments* to receive credit for this course.
2. *Attendance*: Attendance is mandatory and will be taken daily. You may miss up to three classes without penalty. After three unexcused absences, you will lose 3% off your final grade for each additional unexcused absence. **If you miss two full weeks of class (6 unexcused absences), you may automatically fail the course.** Arriving late to class three times will count as one absence. Absences will be excused only in accordance with UF policy. Acceptable reasons include illness, religious holidays, military obligation, and those absences covered by UF's twelve-day rule (<https://catalog.ufl.edu/ugrad/current/regulations/info/attendance.aspx>). Should you miss a class for any reason, you are responsible for informing yourself as to what was covered in class and for making up all assignments. Students are responsible for all work covered in class, all announcements, and all changes to the syllabus made in class.
3. *Paper Format & Submission*: All papers should be formatted per MLA standards (Times New Roman 12, double-spaced, one-inch margins, MLA header, and MLA citations) and submitted to the assignment on Canvas as a .doc or .docx file. Please note that failure of technology is not an excuse, so plan your time accordingly.
4. *Late Papers/Assignments*: Papers that are submitted late will lose ten percent off their final grade for each day that they are late. After three days, I will not accept late papers. Memos will not be accepted late.
5. *Paper Maintenance Responsibilities*. Keep duplicate copies of all work submitted in this course. Save all returned, graded work until the semester is over.
6. *Academic Honesty and Definition of Plagiarism*. Plagiarism violates the Student Honor Code and requires reporting to the Dean of Students. All students must abide by the Student Honor Code: <https://www.dso.ufl.edu/sccr/process/student-conduct-honor-code/>.
7. Students with *disabilities* who are requesting accommodations should first register with the Disability Resource Center (352-392-8565, <https://disability.ufl.edu/>), which will provide appropriate documentation to give the instructor.
8. For information on UF Grading policies, see: <https://catalog.ufl.edu/ugrad/current/regulations/info/grades.aspx>
9. *Grade Appeals*. Since this is an upper-division course, grade disputes should be addressed to Dr. Kenneth Kidd, the Undergraduate Coordinator. Grade appeals may result in a higher, unchanged, or lower final grade.
10. *Course Evaluations*. Toward the end of the semester, you will receive email messages asking you to go online and evaluate this course: <https://ufl.bluera.com/ufl/>

11. Students who face difficulties completing the course or who are in need of counseling or urgent help may call the on-campus Counseling and Wellness Center (352) 392-1575, or contact them online: <http://www.counseling.ufl.edu/cwc/Default.aspx>
12. *UF's policy on Harassment*: UF provides an educational and working environment that is free from sex discrimination and sexual harassment for its students, staff, and faculty: <https://regulations.ufl.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/1006.pdf>
13. *Policy on environmental sustainability*. Whenever possible, I will use paper-sparing electronic media to distribute our course materials. Consider purchasing electronic editions of assigned texts when they are available, or used copies of print texts. If you do not elect to keep your print books, consider sharing them with others after the semester ends. (For example, you could donate them to the Alachua County [Friends of the Library](#) annual book sale.)

Course Schedule:

Please note that this schedule is a guide and may change. *Always check Canvas!*

Wk	Day	Reading/Viewing Material	Due
1	M 1/9	Course Introduction and Syllabus Overview	
	W 1/11	Larry Wolff, "Introduction," <i>Inventing Eastern Europe</i> Milan Kundera, "The Tragedy of Central Europe" (Both on Canvas)	
	F 1/13	Marek Oziewicz, "Representations of Eastern Europe in Philip Pullman's <i>His Dark Materials</i> , Jonathan Stroud's <i>The Bartimaeus Trilogy</i> , and J. K. Rowling's <i>Harry Potter Series</i> " (On Canvas)	
2	M 1/16	No Class (University Holiday)	
	W 1/18	<i>The Bear and the Nightingale</i> , Ch. 1-11 Natalie Kononenko, "Introduction," <i>Slavic Folklore: A Handbook</i> (On Canvas)	
	F 1/20	<i>The Bear and the Nightingale</i> , Ch. 12-19	
3	M 1/23	<i>The Bear and the Nightingale</i> , Ch. 20-end	Memo 1 Due
	W 1/25	<i>The Witcher</i> (Episodes 1 and 2)	Context Presentation 1
	F 1/27	No Class (Instructor at Conference)	
4	M 1/30	<i>The Witcher</i> (Episode 3) Majkowski, "Geralt of Poland: <i>The Witcher 3</i> Between Epistemic Disobedience and Imperial Nostalgia" (On Canvas)	
	W 2/1	<i>Shadow and Bone</i> (Episodes 1-2)	Context Presentation 2
	F 2/3	<i>Shadow and Bone</i> (Episode 3) Gobinskaya, "'Shade and Bone': Negative Spaces of Meaning" (https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/shadow-and-bone-negative-spaces-of-meaning/viewer)	
5	M 2/6	Newgarden and Karasik, "How to Read Nancy" Excerpt from <i>Baba Yaga's Assistant</i> (On Canvas) Guest Lecture: Ayanni C.H. Cooper	
	W 2/8	<i>How Mirka Got Her Sword</i> , pg. 1-75 ("Mirka, it's <i>sixth day!</i> We should have been home <i>ages ago!</i> ")	Context Presentation 3
	F 2/10	<i>How Mirka Got Her Sword</i> , pg. 76-end	

		Dos Reis and Midkiff, "Dragons in Hereville: Comics as a Vehicle for Fairy Tales," <i>New Fair Tales: Essays and Stories</i> , pg. 371-399 (On Canvas)	
6	M 2/13	Hulu's <i>The Great</i> , Episodes 1-2 Dixon, Simon. "Chapter 1: The Problem of Power," <i>Catherine the Great</i> (On Canvas)	Context Presentation 4
	W 2/15	Hulu's <i>The Great</i> , Episodes 3-4	
	F 2/17	Hulu's <i>The Great</i> , Episodes 5-6	
7	M 2/20	<i>Anastasia</i> (full film)	Context Presentation 5
	W 2/22	<i>Anastasia</i> (continue discussion)	
	F 2/24	Eastern Europe on Stage Clips from <i>Anastasia</i> , <i>Fiddler on the Roof</i> , etc. (Linked on Canvas)	
8	M 2/27	<i>Winterkill</i> , Ch. 1-8 Timothy Snyder, "The Making of Modern Ukraine, Class 15: Ukrainization, Famine, Terror: 1920s-1930s" (Video lecture available here)	Context Presentation 6
	W 3/1	<i>Winterkill</i> , Ch. 9-18	
	F 3/3	<i>Winterkill & Enough</i> , Ch. 19-end Optional: Webinar with Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch (Available here)	
9	M 3/6	<i>Maus I</i> , Prologue-Ch. 2 Timothy Snyder, "Holocaust: The Ignored Reality" (Available here .)	Context Presentation 7
	W 3/8	<i>Maus I</i> , Ch. 3-4	
	F 3/10	<i>Maus I</i> , Ch. 5-6 & <i>Brundibar</i> (picture book)	Midterm Paper Due
10	M 3/13	No Class—Spring Break	
	W 3/15	No Class—Spring Break	
	F 3/17	No Class—Spring Break	
11	M 3/20	<i>Symphony for the City of the Dead</i> , Prologue—"Life is Getting Merrier"	Context Presentation 8
	W 3/22	<i>Symphony for the City of the Dead</i> , "Friendship" – "Flight"	
	F 3/24	<i>Symphony for the City of the Dead</i> , "Railway Car No. 7" - end	

12	M 3/27	<i>Breaking Stalin's Nose</i> , Ch. 1-11	Context Presentation 9
	W 3/29	<i>Breaking Stalin's Nose</i> , Ch. 12-22	
	F 3/31	<i>Breaking Stalin's Nose</i> , Ch. 23-end Oziewicz, "Truth-Telling, Trauma Fiction, and the Challenge of Critical Engagement: A Reading of <i>Breaking Stalin's Nose</i> and <i>A Winter's Day in 1939</i> " (On Canvas)	
13	M 4/3	<i>Chernobyl</i> (Episode 1)	Context Presentation 10
	W 4/5	<i>Chernobyl</i> (Episode 2)	
	F 4/7	<i>Chernobyl</i> (Episode 3) Inna Sukhenko and Anastasia Ulanowicz, "Narrative, Nonfiction, and the Nuclear Other: Western Representations of Chernobyl in the Works of Adam Higginbotham, Serhii Plokhly, and Kate Brown," <i>Assay: A Journal of Nonfiction Studies</i> , vol. 6, no. 2, 2022. Available here .	
14	M 4/10	<i>The Americans</i> (Episode 1)	Context Presentation 11
	W 4/12	<i>The Americans</i> (Episode 2-3)	
	F 4/14	<i>The Americans</i> (Episode 4) Jonathan Bassett and Angela Tenga, "Spies Like Us: Ideology and Futility in the FX Television Series <i>The Americans</i> ," <i>Studies in Popular Culture</i> , vol. 42, no. 2, 2020. On Canvas.	
15	M 4/17	<i>Black Widow</i> (film)	Context Presentation 12
	W 4/19	<i>Black Widow</i> discussion	
	F 4/21	Final Paper Workshop	
16	M 4/24	Final Paper Workshop	
	W 4/26	Course Wrap-Up	Final Paper Due
	F 4/28	No Class—Reading Day	