INTRODUCTION

Welcome to History 6860, which is a research seminar in Modern European History. This seminar is done under the theme of “resources,” which draws on several themes that have been growing in importance and popularity in the field of European History.

After the “Cultural Turn” of the 1990s, which moved the field away from the labor/social/economic histories of the 1960s-1980s, there has been a re-pivoting back away from culture and towards the material. This has encompassed a resurgent environment, urban, and material culture history. But it has also reawakened an interest in historical materialism, the theory of history proposed by Karl Marx. For example, during the 1930s and 40s, Marxists struggled to explain the phenomenon of Nazism and Fascism. It had to fit into their doctrinaire framework, and could only have done so if Nazism/Fascism were really just facades or extensions of capitalism.

This explanation satisfied no one however, and lost most of its cache during the Cold War. In fact, it is in search for a non-materialist, non-Marxist, and non-doctrinaire explanation for the massive tragedies of the 20th century—not just the holocaust, but racism, sexism, colonialism, etc.—that a new generation of scholars gravitated to postmodern thinkers like Foucault. His concept of “governmentality,” “the microphysics of power,” and “Biopower,” located inequality, dehumanization and totalitarianism in the Enlightenment-era medical and scientific schemes for control and improvement of the human subject (including the brutal repression of sexuality in all forms). And so he interpreted Nazism (and possibly Soviet communism) not as an extension of an economic system, but as a system of knowledge and control in which we are all implicated.

In a way, this conflict between “spirit” and “matter” has been going on since at least Decartes, if not much earlier—Renaissance conflicts between Church and Science, or even early Christian theological debates on the nature of the flesh and the soul. Or possibly even ancient Greece—think of the discrepancy between Aristotle and Plato. In modern terms, it has acted like a pendulum, swinging for a generation or two towards “spirit” – in this we’d categorize Hegel, Nietzsche, but also Foucault and Joan Scott. At other times, it swings towards “matter” – here, Marx, but also Bill Cronon, David Harvey and Henri Lefebvre.
Why does the pendulum swing? That is one question to consider here, as we work our way through the theme of “resources” in 20th century Eurasian history. One thought to begin with, as we’ll see, is that so often this pendulum turns on the fulcrum of Nazi Germany. Götz Aly, a German self-trained independent academic lost for many years in the margins of academia, has started an important debate on the nature of Nazism and the Third Reich—it may not have been an “extension” of capitalism and imperialism in a doctrinaire, Marxist sort of way, but it was essentially based on plunder and material gain. In other words, notions of culture and race are important but leave out the most important underlying causes of it all—they are the means, not the ends. The ends? Nazis wanted the same thing we all do. A nice house and a car, a full fridge and some good entertainment. They just stole, killed, and destroyed everyone else to get that, making them so very different from (or basically the same as?) “us.”

Adam Tooze, in many ways the opposite of Aly in terms of his standing in academia, a classically trained economic historian, the “big man on campus” at Yale University, has countered Aly with a massive and important work of his own on the economic history of Nazism. We will see what the stakes are of this debate. Recently, Snyder, the other “big name on campus” at Yale, has weighed in with what essentially amounts to an environmental explanation for the “expanded Holocaust” in which he lumps the Ukrainian famines, e.g. Sound odd? Hold on—many have already conjectured the at the heart of the instability in the middle east, including the disintegration of Syria and the rise of ISIS, is... climate change. Still not convinced? The US Department of Defense—and Bernie Sanders—have both identified climate change as the number one security threat to the USA, not terrorists or Vladimir Putin.

Partially, however, the reason for this “return to materiality and economics” is a result of a new field of historical research that has developed since 1990—the investigation of communist societies. And since communism started this whole thing, and was a result of a materialist conception of history and society, it stands to reason that investigations of communist societies would gravitate away from the cultural and towards the material. This is the case with works like Rubin and Brown, and possibly Kott.

SEMINAR STRUCTURE

This is a research seminar. This means that although we will be doing mostly secondary readings along this them, you will be encouraged to produce a final paper based on primary source research. Furthermore, it is up to you whether you want to pick something related to your MA/PhD research project, or try exploring something new, related to the themes and readings of this class. If you choose the latter route, you will have the historiographical and theoretical framework well mapped out for you already, and access to ample citations from which to draw your sources.
This paper must be 15-20 pages long, and it is due at the end of the semester. However, you are also required to hand in a prospectus for the paper (or a rough draft, if you’ve gotten so far) midway through the semester. You will also be asked to present on the paper at the end of the semester.

Each week we have readings. Mostly these are a single book. You are expected to write a reflection paper—not a summary, but a reaction to the argument of the book, the methods and structure of the work, what you gained from the work and what questions you have, and any other thoughts you have. This is your time to think out loud, make connections that you aren’t entirely sure of, conjecture, bloviate, rip to shreds, praise to the heavens, etc.

I will ask you to bring these comments to seminar, but also upload them to the drop box for each week so that I can make comments on them.

In general, I expect everyone to come prepared, with their readings physically with them. The reading list for the class and the schedule of seminars is below.

**Reading list:**


**Schedule of seminars**

**Week 1 (Jan 11)**
Introduction

**Week 2 (Jan 18)**
NO CLASS  MLK DAY

**PART I: VARIETIES OF LEFT WING THOUGHT**

**Week 3 (Jan 25)**
Readings from/about Marx:

Introduction to *The Portable Karl Marx* by Eugene Kameka

Selections from Marx, *The German Ideology* (From *The Portable Karl Marx*)

Introduction to Marx’s *Capital* by Ernest Mandel

Marx, *Capital* (e-book available through Waldo)

Chapter One, “Commodities”

Part 8, “So-called primitive accumulation”

**Week 4 (Feb 1)**
Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman*

**PART II: RESOURCES**

**Week 5 (Feb 8)**
Tooze: *Wages of Destruction*
Week 6 (Feb 15)
Aly, Hitler’s Beneficiaries

Week 7 (Feb 22)
Snyder Black Earth

Week 8 (Feb 29)
Wiesen, Creating the Nazi Marketplace

PAPER PROSPECTUS/OUTLINE DUE

SPRING BREAK

PART III -- the Postwar
Week 9 (March 14)
Kate Brown, Plutopia

Week 10 (March 21)
Le Normand, Designing Tito’s Capital

Week 11 (March 28)
Rubin, Synthetic Socialism

Week 12 (April 4)
Rubin, Amnesiopolis

Week 13 (April 11)
Kott, Communism Day to Day

Week 14 (April 18)
Final presentations