



HISTORY 120: EUROPE AND THE MODERN WORLD, 1815 TO THE PRESENT



A contemporary depiction of Giuseppe Garibaldi's entry into Naples, September 7, 1860

Course Information

Instructor: Prof. Brandon Bloch (bjbloch@wisc.edu)

Office Hours: Wed. 12-3 p.m. or by appointment (Humanities 5118 or online)

Teaching Assistant: TBD

TA Office Hours: TBD

Semester: Spring 2026

Lecture: Mon./Wed./Fri. 9:55-10:45 a.m. (Humanities 1651)

Sections: Wed. 3:30-4:20 p.m. (Humanities 2111)

Wed. 4:35-5:25 p.m. (Humanities 2631)

Thurs. 8:50-9:40 a.m. (Humanities 2631)

Thurs. 12:05-12:55 p.m. (Humanities 2241)

Modality:

In-person

Credits:

4 (section registration is required)

Requisites:

None

Course Designations: Breadth – Either Humanities or Social Science

Level – Elementary

L&S Credit – Counts as Liberal Arts and Science credit in L&S

Canvas site:

TBD

Course Description

This survey of modern European history stretches across more than two centuries of political and social transformation, from the aftermaths of the French Revolution through the current war in Ukraine. This period saw dramatic changes across politics, economy, society, and culture that are crucial for understanding the origins of the contemporary world: the explosive growth of capitalism; centralization of nation-states; rise of mass politics; recasting of gender and the family; proliferation of industrial warfare; and emergence of ideologies such as liberalism, conservatism, nationalism, socialism, communism, and fascism. Europe was deeply intertwined with the wider world throughout our period: first through colonialism and imperialism, and since the post-1945 era of decolonization, through ongoing ties with its former colonies. This course is necessarily also a world history.

The aim of the course is not, primarily, to teach you the “facts” of European history, though you will be introduced to key people, places, and events. Instead, we will focus on core themes to draw connections across time and space. Three sets of questions will guide us:

War and Revolution

Why was modern European history so violent? What are the drivers of war and revolution, and how did Europeans seek—sometimes successfully, often not—to avoid them? Was war more a cause, or a result, of Europe’s social, political, and economic transformations? Can we draw parallels between the violence practiced by European states in the colonial world and on the European continent?

The Nation-State and National Identities

How did Europe end up with 44 independent countries—more than any other continent proportional to its size? What is the relationship between the state (a political entity that exercises sovereign control over a territory) and the nation (a community that supposedly shares a common language, history, and culture)? When and why did

Europeans identify themselves as members of nations? What were, or are, the alternatives to the nation-state?

Colonialism, Imperialism, and their Aftermaths

Why did European states seek to conquer and rule vast territories in Asia and Africa? What was the impact of imperialism on European domestic politics? How did colonial entanglements shape Europeans' ideas about race, nationhood, and modernity? How did metropolitan Europeans come to terms—or fail to come to terms—with Europe's colonial past following post-1945 decolonization?

Learning Outcomes

This course is designed as an introduction to college-level history, and does not assume any prior background. (History majors are, of course, also welcome!) The premise is that history is not a static collection of facts, but an evolving process of debate and interpretation. Lectures and assignments are structured to introduce you to the skills of historical analysis: reading critically; interpreting primary sources; evaluating competing arguments; and presenting your own ideas in lucid and compelling prose. Writing assignments build in complexity over the semester, and lectures and sections will devote time to practicing the skills you will need to succeed in these assignments. The purpose of the course is as much to introduce you to central themes of modern European history as to help you become a better reader, writer, listener, communicator, and thinker.

By the end of the course, you will be able to:

- Describe major developments in the political and cultural history of Europe since 1815.
- Discuss how historical thinking includes interpretation and analysis, not simply names, dates, and facts
- Assess the significance of war and revolution, nationalism and the nation-state, and colonialism and imperialism as forces of change in modern European history
- Defend a historical argument based on primary sources in clear and compelling prose

Course Books

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (New York: Signet Classics, 2008). ISBN: 9780451531032.

This book is available for purchase at the University Book Store and is placed on reserve at College Library in Helen C. White Hall. You will also need to obtain a copy of one of the books

excerpted in Weeks 8-11 for the second essay. These books will be placed on reserve at College Library and are available for purchase online.

Course Requirements

*Further details on all assignments, including expectations, guidelines, and rubrics, will be available on Canvas.

1. Top Hat (10%)

We will use the online platform Top Hat to facilitate an interactive classroom during lectures. Your Top Hat grade will be based primarily on in-class polling and short-answer questions. In addition, you will be asked to contribute eight one-paragraph discussion posts on the course readings (approximately 150 words each). Each post is due by the beginning of section, and should address that week's readings. Reading questions will be posted in advance.

Top Hat questions and discussion posts will be graded complete/incomplete, and will serve as a record of your attendance at lecture. You will be permitted three excused absences from lecture, for any reason. Additional absences will be excused due to illness, religious observance, or personal or family emergency.

2. Section Participation (25%)

Weekly section discussions, where you will have the opportunity to apply concepts from lecture and try your hand at primary source analysis, are crucial to your learning in the course. You will have a free pass to miss one section meeting, for any reason. Additional absences will be excused due to illness, religious observance, or personal or family emergency. In some cases, you may be asked to submit makeup work to receive credit for additional missed sections.

Please keep in mind that the quality of your contributions to section discussions is as important as the quantity, and that asking a well-informed question counts as participation. We recognize that participation may come more easily to some than others. If you would like to discuss strategies for speaking in class, feel free to set up a meeting with Prof. Bloch or your TA.

Section participation will be evaluated holistically at the end of the semester; we are certainly not grading each individual comment you make in class! You will receive a provisional participation grade midway through the semester, which you will have the opportunity to improve during the second half. A high score in this area will reflect consistent preparation to discuss the readings; engagement with the tools of primary source analysis introduced in class; and respectful, constructive interaction with your peers. The thoughtfulness of your Top Hat discussion posts, as well as the first drafts of your essays (due in section on Feb. 25-26 and April 15-16), will also be considered in this portion of your grade.

3. Two Primary Source Essays (35%)

The culminating writing assignments are two essays on primary sources. The first essay (4-5 double-spaced pages) will address one of the readings from Weeks 2-5 and is due on March 3 at 11:59 p.m. For the second essay (5-6 double-spaced pages), you will choose one of the sources excerpted in Weeks 8-11 and read the full text. This essay is due on April 23 at 11:59 p.m. Prompts for both essays will be distributed in advance, and we will spend time in class discussing the qualities of a strong history essay. The first essay counts for 15% of your course grade; the second essay counts for 20%.

4. Midterm Exam (10%)

An in-class midterm exam will take place on March 9. The exam will consist of two analyses of primary sources: one source discussed in class, and one source you haven't seen before (but that you'll be able to analyze using the historical contexts and interpretive skills introduced in class). You may bring one single-sided page of notes (typed or handwritten) to use during the exam.

5. Final Exam (20%)

A final exam will be held on May 4 from 5:05-7:05 p.m. (Location TBD). The exam will include two primary source analyses and one essay. The primary source analyses will cover material since the midterm, while the essay will ask you to draw connections across different parts of the course. You may bring one single-sided page of notes (typed or handwritten) to use during the exam.

Grading:

A: 93-100	AB: 88-92	B: 83-87	BC: 78-82
C: 70-77	D: 60-69	F: Below 60	

Credit Hours:

The credit standard for this 4-credit course is met by an expectation of a total of 180 hours of student engagement with the course's learning activities (45 hours per credit, or 12 hours per week). This includes regularly scheduled meeting times, reading, writing, group work, individual consultations with the instructors, and other student work as described in the syllabus. Since lecture and section meetings count for 4 hours of direct instruction per week, you should plan to allot an average of 8 hours per week outside of class for course-related activities.

Late Work:

If you are unable to meet an assignment deadline, please let Prof. Bloch or your TA know as soon as possible and we can work out a plan for you to get caught up. We understand that life can be unpredictable, and that you may require an extension due to illness, religious observance, or personal or family emergency. In cases of unexcused late work, we reserve the right to apply a deduction to late assignments out of fairness to other members of the class. Typically, this deduction will be 3 points (out of 100) per day late.

Please note that we are not able to accept any written work for this course after Friday, May 8, the last day of the exam period. Incomplete grades can only be granted to students who are unable to complete the final exam due to "illness or other unusual and substantiated cause beyond their control." For the university policy, see: <https://registrar.wisc.edu/incompletes/>.

Academic Integrity

The exchange of ideas is at the core of academic inquiry, and you are encouraged to discuss the course material with your classmates. However, all work that you submit for a grade should reflect your own thinking and writing. Passing off another person's words or ideas as your own is not only unfair to your peers; it is also theft of the original author's work, shutting out their voice from the academic conversation.

In my experience, violations of academic integrity tend to have two causes: either a) lack of awareness about citation standards, or b) procrastination, followed by panic. The course is designed to mitigate both of these factors. We will discuss how to cite your sources for each assignment; if you're unsure about a particular case, don't hesitate to ask. If you are worried about not finishing an assignment as a deadline approaches, please email Prof. Bloch or your TA! We can always work out solutions to help improve your organization, and it's much better to accept a late penalty (or turn in less than perfect work) than to cheat. If you plagiarize, then we have to address the case as a disciplinary infraction rather than a learning opportunity. Serious academic misconduct may be reported to the Office of Student Conduct and Community Standards.

A Note on ChatGPT and AI...

AI technologies can help you generate ideas about a topic and write with greater speed and efficiency. However, these tools frequently produce false information, and can easily become a substitute for the independent thinking that college is meant to foster. Guidelines on the permissible use of AI will be provided with each assignment.

In general, AI tools may be used in the following ways in History 120:

- Brainstorming ideas for your essays. If you utilize AI in this capacity, you will be asked to append a note to your final paper explaining how you used the AI tool—including the prompts you submitted—and whether you found it helpful.
- Studying for the midterm and final exams. You are welcome to ask an AI tool clarifying questions about the course material, but please beware, the responses you receive may be incorrect or incomplete. You are ultimately responsible for the accuracy of your answers submitted on the midterm and final exams.

Please do not use AI tools for the following:

- Completing short assignments such as Top Hat posts or in-class writing exercises. These assignments are meant as low-stakes opportunities to try out ideas and ask questions about the course; AI would make them superfluous.
- Drafting the two take-home essays. You are not permitted to directly import text generated by AI into your essays, or to submit a paper that is merely a revised version of a draft written by AI. I am implementing this policy for two reasons: a) AI does not function as a “source” (for reasons we will discuss in class); and b) the purpose of History 120 is to develop your skills as an independent writer (which will allow you to

use AI more critically in the future). Submitting text generated by AI in either of the two essays will be regarded as a violation of academic integrity.

Technology

Please come to lecture with a laptop or smartphone in order to participate in the Top Hat exercises. Laptops are permitted (but not required) in section for taking notes and referencing readings. Of course, we ask that you refrain from checking email or social media during class. You are certainly permitted to do additional research on the course topics online. However, be aware that online sources are not necessarily reliable, and any outside sources used in your assignments (not expected or required) need to be cited. Information generated by AI tools such as ChatGPT should be treated with caution, and you should not turn in assignments written by artificial intelligence (see the note on Academic Integrity above). If you face challenges accessing the technology necessary to succeed in this course, please reach out to Prof. Bloch as soon as possible.

Accessibility

We are committed to ensuring that all students receive equal access to the course materials and equitable opportunities to achieve the course learning goals. If you experience or anticipate any challenges related to the format, materials, or requirements of this course, please let Prof. Bloch know. I am happy to explore a range of options for removing barriers to your learning. If you have a disability, or think you might have a disability, you may also wish to work with the McBurney Disability Resource Center (<https://mcburney.wisc.edu/>). All communications regarding accessibility will remain confidential.

A Note on Sources

The course raises sensitive issues surrounding war, violence, racism, and imperialism, among others. It is crucial that we remain respectful of one another's viewpoints in class discussions. If you disagree with a classmate (and debate and disagreement are encouraged!), then be sure to direct your comments at the idea, not the person. It is often helpful to summarize a peer's idea before disagreeing, to ensure you have really understood it. Each section will develop a "group agreement" at the beginning of the semester, outlining shared discussion norms and expectations for the classroom community. Please do not hesitate to meet with Prof. Bloch or your TA if you have concerns about any aspect of the course content.

Additional Resources

UW-Madison and the History Department make available a wide range of resources to foster your academic success and personal wellbeing. It's a good idea to familiarize (or re-familiarize) yourself with the following:

University Writing Center

<http://www.writing.wisc.edu/>

Individual consultations, workshops, and online guides on all aspects of academic writing.

History Lab

<http://go.wisc.edu/hlab>

A resource center for undergraduates in history courses staffed by experienced graduate students, who are available to assist you with writing history papers. You can sign up online for an individual consultation at any stage of the writing process.

Greater University Tutoring Services

<https://guts.wisc.edu/>

Study skills support and peer tutoring across academic subjects.

McBurney Disability Resource Center

<https://mcburney.wisc.edu/>

Contact the McBurney Center if you have or think you may have a disability to discuss a range of possible accommodations.

Mental Health Services

<https://www.uhs.wisc.edu/mental-health/>

Resources on Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence

UW-Madison is committed to fostering a safe, productive learning environment and offers a variety of resources for students impacted by sexual assault, sexual harassment, dating violence, domestic violence, and stalking. The Office of Student Assistance and Support has compiled a comprehensive guide to resources on and off campus, including both confidential resources and options for reporting: <https://osas.wisc.edu/report-an-issue/sexual-assault-dating-and-domestic-violence/>.

Course Schedule

Readings and assignments are due by the beginning of section, except where otherwise noted.

Assignment guidelines and rubrics will be posted on Canvas. All readings, except the course book, will be available on Canvas. See the “Modules” tab for week-by-week links.

Week 1: Introduction

Wed. Jan. 21: Course Introduction: What is Modern Europe?

Fri. Jan. 23: Legacies of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution

Reading: [for Friday lecture]

- National Assembly, “Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen” (1789)
- Olympe de Gouges, “Declaration of the Rights of Women” (1791)

**First section meetings on Jan. 21-22*

Week 2: Revolution and Reaction

Mon. Jan. 26: The Industrial Revolution

Wed. Jan. 28: Europe in 1815: The New Balance of Power

Fri. Jan. 30: The Liberal Challenge

Reading:

- E. T. A. Hoffmann, “The Sandman” (1816)

Assignment:

- Top Hat discussion post #1

Week 3: Limits of Restoration

Mon. Feb. 2: The Working Classes

Wed. Feb. 4: Karl Marx and the Origins of Communism

Fri. Feb. 6: Revolutions of 1848

Reading:

- Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “The Communist Manifesto” (1848)
- “Testimony Gathered by Ashley’s Mines Commission” (1842)

Assignment:

- Top Hat discussion post #2

Week 4: Making Nation-States

Mon. Feb. 9: Nationalism and Republicanism after 1848: Italian Unification

Wed. Feb. 11: The Paradoxes of Liberal Nationalism: German Unification

Fri. Feb. 13: Gender, Class, and the French Third Republic

Reading:

- Ernest Renan, “What is a Nation?” (1882)
- Begin reading *Heart of Darkness*

Assignment:

- Top Hat discussion post #3

Week 5: Race and Imperialism

Mon. Feb. 16: Origins of the New Imperialism

Wed. Feb. 18: Colonial Genocide: The Congo Free State

Fri. Feb. 20: Race and Colonial Cultures

Reading:

- Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1899), pp. 53-155
- Nicolas Afolembe, “Oral History Regarding Conditions in the Equateur District” (ca. 1885-1908)

Assignment:

- Top Hat discussion post #4

Week 6: The Age of Questions

Mon. Feb. 23: Socialism and the “Social Question”

Wed. Feb. 25: Zionism and the “Jewish Question”

Fri. Feb. 27: Feminism and the “Woman Question”

Assignment:

- Draft of Essay #1

Week 7: End of the Old Order

Mon. March 2: The Coming of the First World War

Wed. March 4: Review for Midterm Exam

Fri. March 6: The July Crisis: Debate

Assignment:

- Essay #1 due March 3 at 11:59 p.m.

Week 8: The Great War

Mon. March 9: Midterm Exam

Wed. March 11: The Great War: Trench Warfare, Occupations, and the Home Front

Fri. March 13: The Bolshevik Revolution

Reading:

- Belá Zombory-Moldován, *The Burning of the World: A Memoir of 1914*, pp. 88-115

Assignment:

- Top Hat discussion post #5

Week 9: Interwar Politics and Culture

Mon. March 16: Making a Postwar Order

Wed. March 18: Interwar Culture and the “New Woman”

Fri. March 20: The Rise of Fascism and Nazism

Reading:

- Irmgard Keun, *The Artificial Silk Girl* (1932), pp. 1-54

Assignment:

- Top Hat discussion post #6

Week 10: Crises of Democracy

Mon. March 23: The Depression and the Unmaking of Democracy

Wed. March 25: New Internationalisms and the Spanish Civil War

Fri. March 27: The Nazi Empire

Reading:

- George Orwell, *Home to Catalonia* (1938), pp. 49-91

Assignment:

- Top Hat discussion post #7

*SPRING BREAK

Week 11: Total War and Genocide

Mon. April 6: Holocaust and Genocide in East and West

Wed. April 8: The End of the War: Resistance, Liberation, and Reckonings

Fri. April 10: Origins of the Cold War

Reading:

- Charlotte Delbo, “Arrivals, Departures” (1946)
- Gisella Perl, *I Was a Doctor in Auschwitz* (1948), pp. 26-47

Assignment:

- Top Hat discussion post #8

Week 12: Divided Europe

Mon. April 13: Cold War Culture: An American Invasion?

Wed. April 15: Politics and Everyday Life under Communism

Fri. April 17: Decolonization and Colonial Legacies

Assignment:

- Draft of Essay #2

Week 13: 1968 and its Aftermaths

Mon. April 20: “Revolutions” of 1968?

Wed. April 22: Immigration and the New Right

Fri. April 24: The (Re)Birth of Human Rights

Reading:

- Pap Khouma, *I Was an Elephant Salesman: Adventures Between Dakar, Paris, and Milan* (1990), pp. 1-26, 92-138

Assignment:

- Essay #2 due April 23 at 11:59 p.m.

Week 14: A New European Order

Mon. April 27: The Fall of Communism

Wed. April 29: Review for Final Exam

Fri. May 1: Conclusions: Challenges for Europe Today

*Final Exam: Mon. May 4, 5:05-7:05 p.m. (Location TBD)