

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:	Tues. 1-3 p.m., Wed. 11 a.m.-12 p.m., or by appointment (Levy Hall 2219 or online)
Teaching Assistants:	Deep Acharya (deep.acharya@wisc.edu) Xinran Fan (xinran.fan@wisc.edu)
TA Office Hours:	TBD
Semester:	Fall 2026
Lecture:	Mon./Wed./Fri. 9:55-10:45 a.m. (Levy Hall L1210)
Sections:	DIS 301: Wed. 11:00-11:50 a.m. (Levy Hall 1204) [FIG] DIS 302: Wed. 1:20-2:10 p.m. (Levy Hall 4202)

DIS 303: Wed. 3:30-4:20 p.m. (Humanities 2101)

DIS 304: Wed. 4:35-5:25 p.m. (Humanities 2251)

DIS 305: Thurs. 8:50-9:40 a.m. (Humanities 2221) [FIG]

DIS 306: Thurs. 9:55-10:45 a.m. (Humanities 2211)

DIS 307: Thurs. 12:05-12:55 p.m. (Humanities 2125)

DIS 308: Thurs. 1:20-2:10 p.m. (Humanities 2121)

Modality: In-person

Credits: 4 (section registration is required)

Requisites: None

Course Designations: Core GenEd – Humanities & Arts

Breadth – Either Humanities or Social Science

Level – Elementary

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

Canvas site: <https://canvas.wisc.edu/courses/521532>

Course Description

This survey of modern European history stretches across more than two centuries of political and social upheaval, from the aftermaths of the French Revolution through the ongoing war in Ukraine. This period saw dramatic changes across politics, economy, society, and culture that are crucial for understanding our contemporary world: the expansion of a global capitalist economy connecting Europe with vast colonial territories; the rise of the modern nation-state with unprecedented ambitions for surveillance and population management; the creation of movements that fought for the rights of women, workers, religious minorities, and colonized people; and the 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 and certificate students 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, exams, 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 clearly and convincingly. 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* (Signet Classics, 2008). ISBN: 9780451531032.

Rebecca West, *The Return of the Soldier* (Penguin Classics, 1998). ISBN: 9780141180656.

These books are available to buy or rent at the University Book Store (711 State Street) and are placed on reserve at College Library in Helen C. White Hall. (Reserve copies may be checked out for two hours, and checked out again after a fifteen-minute waiting period. Please be aware that if you read the books on reserve, you will not be able to access them during the reading quizzes.) You may choose to purchase the books through an external vendor such as Amazon, but be sure to obtain the editions listed above so that all classmates can refer to the same page numbers during section discussions.

A course packet that includes all readings besides the books listed above will be available to order through the Department of Information Technology. (You will be provided with an order link.) You are asked to bring hard copies of the readings to section, and may choose to purchase the course packet or download the readings from Canvas and print them on your own.

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 platform Top Hat (available for free to UW-Madison students) to facilitate an interactive classroom during lectures. At the beginning of the semester, you will be emailed a link to activate your Top Hat account and join the course. After activating your account, I recommend downloading the Top Hat app to your mobile device. Each lecture will begin with a warm-up question on Top Hat to open up a discussion about that day's material. Please be prepared to answer the Top Hat question at the start of lecture.

Top Hat questions will be graded complete/incomplete, and will serve as a record of your attendance at lecture. You will be permitted two excused absences from lecture (no need to provide a reason). If you need to miss lecture more than twice due to religious observance, illness, or family emergency, please fill out the Absence Notification form available on Canvas.

2. Reading Quizzes (15%)

Weekly reading quizzes will be held during the last ten minutes of lecture on the Wednesdays of weeks 2-6 and 8-12. Each quiz will include two to three knowledge questions (answerable in one or two sentences) and one interpretive question (answerable in a short paragraph). The purpose of the quizzes is to help you build close reading skills and prepare you to discuss the readings productively in section. You may refer to your copy of the reading during the quiz; however, answering the questions successfully requires completing the reading in advance. Quizzes may not be made up except in extenuating circumstances (e.g. an illness lasting more than one week). The lowest score (including a missed quiz) will be dropped at the end of the semester.

3. Section Participation (25%)

Weekly section discussions, where you will have the opportunity to apply concepts from lecture and work with your peers to analyze primary sources, 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 these cases, you will be asked to submit makeup work to receive credit for additional missed sections. Unexcused absences will lower your section participation grade. Please bring a print copy of the week's reading to section (except during the discussions of Conrad and West, if you choose to read the books on reserve at College Library).

Section participation will be evaluated holistically according to the rubric on p. 15. You will receive a provisional participation grade midway through the semester, and you will have the opportunity to improve this grade during the second half of the course. 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. You are welcome to meet with Prof. Bloch or your TA if you would like to discuss strategies for speaking in class.

4. Midterm Exam (10%)

An in-class midterm exam will take place on Oct. 16. 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). We will review for the midterm in lecture and section on Oct. 14-15. You may bring one single-sided page of notes (typed or handwritten) to use during the exam.

5. Primary Source Essay (20%)

The culminating writing assignment is an essay of approximately 2,000 words (6-7 double-spaced pages). You will focus your essay on one of the primary source readings (or the film) assigned for class, and can choose which source you would like to address. Each primary source will be paired with an additional secondary source (an article by a historian or other scholar) that you will be able to access through Canvas. Your essay will respond to a prompt asking you to interpret and contextualize the primary source using historical evidence found in the secondary source as well as the course lectures.

You will be asked to select your primary source by Nov. 11. An outline of your essay and a draft of the introductory paragraph are due in section for a peer workshop on Nov. 18-19. The final essay is due on Dec. 3.

6. Final Exam (20%)

A final exam will be held on Dec. 12 from 10:05 a.m.-12:05 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: 88-92.9

B: 83-87.9

BC: 78-82.9

C: 70-77.9

D: 60-69.9

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, 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. 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 Thurs. Dec. 17, the last day of the exam period. Incomplete grades can only be granted to students who are unable to complete the primary source essay and/or 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.

In my experience, plagiarism tends to result from either lack of knowledge about how to cite sources and/or trouble meeting a deadline. The course is designed to mitigate both of these factors. We will discuss how to cite your sources for the primary source essay; 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 discuss strategies for improving 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 Generative AI...

Although AI technologies make completing assignments faster, when adopted too early these tools can inhibit the original thinking and communication skills that higher education is meant to foster. Especially because History 120 is an introductory-level course, our goal is to help you hone the attention and curiosity necessary to read and write independently about complex sources at the college level. By taking the time now to develop your capabilities for critical thinking, you will become a more careful and informed user of AI technologies in the future.

For this reason, the permissible uses of AI in History 120 are limited. Please complete all readings on your own; reading carefully is essential for success in the reading quizzes, section discussions, and exams. (We will discuss close reading skills early in the semester.) In addition, AI tools should not be used to research or write the primary source essay. All the information needed to write the essay will be available in the course readings and lectures. Submitting AI-generated text for a grade is not acceptable and will be treated as an academic integrity violation.

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

- Checking your grammar and style with tools like Grammarly. At the same time, please be aware that we will not deduct points for spelling or grammatical errors (so long as your writing is understandable), and that using AI to edit your prose may detract from the development of a strong writing voice.
- Studying for the midterm and final exams. You are welcome to ask an AI tool clarifying questions about the course material, or use it to generate practice exam questions. However, beware that the responses you receive may be incorrect or incomplete. You should always check information provided by AI against reliable sources (including course lectures and readings). You are ultimately responsible for the accuracy of the work you submit.
- If you choose to use AI for the purposes above, I strongly recommend using only tools that are licensed by UW-Madison: [Google Gemini](#), [Google NotebookLM](#), and [Microsoft Copilot](#). University-licensed tools provide a higher level of data security and privacy protection and prevent your prompt data from being used to train large language models.

Technology

Please come to lecture with a device that can access the Internet in order to participate in the Top Hat warm-up questions. You may use a laptop to take notes during lecture; however,

several studies have shown that college students improve their ability to retain and process lecture material, and perform better on exams, when taking notes by hand.¹ Of course, we ask that you refrain from checking email and social media during class. If you need to take a text or call during class, please step outside the classroom and return when you are ready.

In order to facilitate collaboration and close engagement with the readings, laptops will not be permitted during discussion sections. You are asked to bring a hard copy of the week's reading to section. (An exception will be made for students with accessibility needs documented by the McBurney Center.)

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. Please note that access to a computer during class and on exams will require a letter from the McBurney Center.

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.

¹ For instance, Faria Sana, Tina Weston, and Nicholas J. Cepeda, "Laptop multitasking hinders classroom learning for both users and nearby peers," *Computers & Education* 62 (2012): 24-31; Pam Mueller and Daniel Oppenheimer, "The Pen Is Mightier Than the Keyboard: Advantages of Longhand Over Laptop Note Taking," *Psychological Science* 25, no. 6 (2014): 1159-1168.

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 Service

<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 should be completed by the beginning of lecture on Wednesdays. Guidelines and rubrics for all assignments and exams will be posted on Canvas.

Week 1: Introduction

Wed. Sept. 2: Course Introduction: What is Modern Europe?

Fri. Sept. 4: Legacies of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution

Assignment: *[for Friday lecture]*

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

Week 2: Revolution and Reaction

Mon. Sept. 7: Labor Day

Wed. Sept. 9: The Industrial Revolution

Fri. Sept. 11: Europe in 1815: The New Balance of Power

Assignment:

- E. T. A. Hoffmann, “The Sandman” (1816)
- Reading Quiz #1 in lecture on Sept. 9

Week 3: Limits of Restoration

Mon. Sept. 14: The Liberal Challenge

Wed. Sept. 16: Karl Marx and the Origins of Communism

Fri. Sept. 18: Revolutions of 1848

Assignment:

- “Testimony Gathered by Ashley’s Mines Commission” (1842)
- Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “The Communist Manifesto” (1848)
- Reading Quiz #2 in lecture on Sept. 16

Week 4: Making Nation-States

Mon. Sept. 21: Nationalism and Republicanism after 1848: Italian Unification

[Yom Kippur; lecture prerecorded]

Wed. Sept. 23: The Paradoxes of Liberal Nationalism: German Unification

Fri. Sept. 25: France from Republic to Empire to Republic

Assignment:

- Giuseppe Mazzini, “Toward a Holy Alliance of the Peoples” (1849)
- Camillo di Cavour, “Letter to King Victor Emmanuel” (1858)
- Giuseppe Mazzini, Public Declaration in London (1859)
- Reading Quiz #3 in lecture on Sept. 23

Week 5: Race and Imperialism

Mon. Sept. 28: Origins of the New Imperialism

Wed. Sept. 30: Colonial Genocide: The Congo Free State

Fri. Oct. 2: Race and Colonial Cultures

Assignment:

- Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1899)
- Reading Quiz #4 in lecture on Sept. 30

Week 6: The Age of Questions

Mon. Oct. 5: Socialism and the “Social Question”

Wed. Oct. 7: Feminism and the “Woman Question”

Fri. Oct. 9: Zionism and the “Jewish Question”

Assignment:

- Hedwig Dohm, “Women’s Right to Vote” (1876)
- “Moritz Bromme, Woodworker and Metalworker” (1903), in *The German Worker: Working-Class Autobiographies from the Age of Industrialization*
- Reading Quiz #5 in lecture on Oct. 7

Week 7: End of the Old Order

Mon. Oct. 12: The Coming of the First World War

Wed. Oct. 14: Review for Midterm Exam

Fri. Oct. 16: Midterm Exam

Week 8: The Great War

Mon. Oct. 19: The Great War: Trench Warfare and Occupations

Wed. Oct. 21: The Home Front

Fri. Oct. 23: The Bolshevik Revolution

Assignment:

- Rebecca West, *The Return of the Soldier* (1918)
- Reading Quiz #6 in lecture on Oct. 21

Week 9: Interwar Politics and Culture

Mon. Oct. 26: Making a Postwar Order

Wed. Oct. 28: Interwar Culture and the “New Woman”

Fri. Oct. 30: The Rise of Fascism

Assignment:

- Film: *The Blue Angel*, dir. Josef von Sternberg (1930)
- Reading Quiz #7 in lecture on Oct. 28

Week 10: Crises of Democracy

Mon. Nov. 2: The Depression and the Unmaking of Democracy

Wed. Nov. 4: New Internationalisms and the Spanish Civil War

Fri. Nov. 6: Origins of World War II: Nazi Empire in the East

Reading:

- George Orwell, *Home to Catalonia* (1938), chs. 8-9
- Reading Quiz #8 in lecture on Nov. 4

Week 11: Total War and Genocide

Mon. Nov. 9: Nazi Empire in the West

Wed. Nov. 11: Holocaust and Genocide

Fri. Nov. 13: The End of the War: Resistance, Liberation, and Reckonings

Assignment:

- Ruth Klüger, “Death Camp,” in *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered* (2001)
- Reading Quiz #9 in lecture on Nov. 11

Week 12: Divided Europe

Mon. Nov. 16: Origins of the Cold War

Wed. Nov. 18: Politics and Everyday Life under Communism

Fri. Nov. 20: Christian Democracy and Cold War Culture in Western Europe

Assignment:

- Czesław Miłosz, “Looking to the West” in *The Captive Mind* (1953)
- Reading Quiz #10 in lecture on Nov. 18
- Essay introduction and outline due in section

Week 13: Decolonization

Mon. Nov. 23: Decolonization and Colonial Legacies

Wed. Nov. 25: Immigration and the New Right [*lecture prerecorded*]

Fri. Nov. 27: Thanksgiving Break

**No sections Nov. 25-26*

Week 14: A New European Order

Mon. Nov. 30: “Revolutions” of 1968?

Wed. Dec. 2: The (Re)Birth of Human Rights

Fri. Dec. 4: The Fall of Communism

Assignment:

- Slavenka Drakulić, “How We Survived Communism” (1992)
- Essay due Dec. 3 at 11:59 p.m.

Week 15: Conclusion

Mon. Dec. 7: Review for Final Exam

Wed. Dec. 9: Conclusions: Challenges for Europe Today

**No sections Dec. 9-10*

**Final Exam: Sat. Dec. 12, 10:05 a.m.-12:05 p.m. (Location TBD)*

HISTORY 120 Discussion Participation Rubric

A-range (90-100)	• Regular attendance • Consistent, insightful contributions to both small group and full class discussions • Discussion contributions display thorough knowledge of the readings; engage with classmates' comments; and utilize the tools of primary source analysis introduced in class • Abides by the group agreement established by the section in the first week of class
B-range (80-89)	• Regular attendance • Participates actively in small-group discussions, with more limited contributions to full-class discussions • Discussion contributions display knowledge of the readings • Abides by the group agreement established by the section in the first week of class
C-range (70-79)	• Regular attendance • Limited contributions to both small-group and full-class discussions • Demonstrates gaps in knowledge of the readings; offers mainly facts rather than interpretation • Contributes when called upon but not actively engaged
D-range (60-69)	• Consistent unexcused absences • Demonstrates little or no knowledge of the readings
F	• Rarely or never attends section • No contributions to discussion