

The Two-Book Review

For this course I have asked you to write a 10-15-page review of two books of your choice. The purpose of this exercise is to allow you to investigate a topic that interests you in greater depth, depending on your own interests & proclivities. The exercise is also designed to promote your ability to identify and present the kinds of complex arguments that typically characterize good works of historical scholarship, and to evaluate two arguments in relation to one another. Building on but also extending the task of the first book review for this course, you will analyze the books in question critically and bring them into conversation with one another. These are by no means easy tasks, and indeed this exercise will compel you to develop and draw on high-level skills of analysis, critical thought, and comparison. You should therefore recognize that successful execution of this task will require time, energy, and focus. I have full confidence that every student can perform this task well, and I stand ready to guide you through the process.

The first task is to identify two books that make for a logical combination. The choice of books is critical, since poorly selected books will make your task much more difficult. Some books that may be perfectly good for certain purposes may not lend themselves so easily to this particular exercise. It is for these reasons that I require each student to discuss and receive approval for their choices with me. For example, monographs—books authored by a single person—are preferable to volumes of essays written by many authors. This is because such volumes are rarely able to present a single, coherent argument, whereas monographs usually aspire to do so. It is also important to have two books whose subject matter or arguments make for a logical combination. Books on the same general topic are your best bet, but I can also help you to identify convergences among books that might not otherwise be apparent. My goal is to allow you to pursue your interests, but also to guide you to the books that I believe will allow for the best reviews.

The purpose of the review is to relate the central findings of the two books in question and to critique their methodology and conclusions. The review should recap these central findings – the “arguments” – as clearly and fairly as possible, and should then discuss whether those findings are credible, convincingly argued, supported with sufficient evidence, and consistent with what you now know about Muscovy & Russia. What is the main thing that the authors wish to convey in their books? Is there a single argument or perhaps a set of several assertions that perform this function for each work? How do the authors position themselves with respect to other scholars who have gone before? What evidence do the authors marshal to make their claims? How convincing is this evidence for those purposes? How much evidence can we realistically expect authors to produce on early Russian history? Here you need to be careful in crafting your critique, since any aspect of a book that displeases you needs to be critiqued in distinctly intellectual terms and cannot amount simply to the idea that you didn't “like” it. You may find that you thought the book was excellent and really merits no criticism as such. In that case, dwell on the things that make the book convincing, its effective use of argument and evidence, and perhaps its implications for Russian history. It is entirely legitimate to use materials from our course in the book review, to the extent that these are relevant to the points that you make. I would go so far as to say that a review that completely ignores the other evidence that you have at your disposal will probably not be very good. A solid review, then, will make use of the sources that you have at your disposal – *explicitly*.

You will see that at its core, the exercise proposed here is very similar to the single book review that we did earlier. But there is nonetheless a crucial difference—namely, that here you are reviewing two books rather than one. How should you handle this extra challenge? First of all, your title and introduction need to encompass the issues that emerge in both books, not just one of them. So you should think about the concepts and categories that you can use to address both books. Next, it probably makes sense to devote some time to each book individually. Here you would want to recount the main ideas & arguments of

each book on its own terms. Make sure that you have a good transition as you move from discussing the first book to the second. Think about the order that is most logical for discussing the two books if you decide to address each in turn. Chronology might be one principle—the book that addresses an earlier period might be analyzed first—but there may be other ways of organizing the discussion. Either way, there should be some evident logic to how you proceed. At some point, you should engage in analysis of both books simultaneously—in some ways this is really where the action is. This could involve identifying points of convergence and divergence between the two works. It could entail a comparison of their arguments, methods, and /or sources. You might use the books' materials to identify issues and questions that were perhaps not central to the authors but emerge when you consider the two books together. The principle goal in this part of the paper is to bring the books into dialogue with one another. How do the findings of one book help to illuminate those of the other? What greater insights do we gain when we consider the two books together as opposed to analyzing each in isolation. How you do this in each case will depend on the books themselves and on your own efforts. As in all matters, though, I am ready to help you. That is a crucial part of my job.

The paper should be 10-15 pages in length with double-space, one-inch margins, 12-point font, no breaks between paragraphs, a title, some citation from the book under review, some reference to other sources, logically organized paragraphs, top-notch & awe-inspiring topic sentences, and so forth. You should have title—a good and relevant one—at the top of the first page. Immediately under the title, cite the two books in full, recalling that titles are underlined or *italicized*. That should include author (first name and last name—e.g., Paul Bushkovitch), full book title, city, publisher, and year. You need not have more. The text should start thereafter (with a bit of blank space between the books and the start of the review). Now that the books are cited in full, you need not do so again. You should refer to the works in the body of the paper by the author's name or occasionally the short title (never the full one). If it is clear which book you are talking about, then page citations can take the form of just parenthetical reference, like this (75). If you are discussing the two books together, you can use an author and page (Bushkovitch, 75). If you bring in other works (which is desirable), you should cite those in full in a footnote. Once you have cited a work in full once, you should adopt a short citation thereafter. Note also the following general guidelines. Block quotations are only rarely desirable, so avoid them. The passive voice should also be avoided wherever possible. Work compulsively on topic sentences to make them good. Avoid contractions as well.

As in almost all cases, the best way to approach this exercise is to learn by example. Earlier, I directed you to look at book reviews in journals such as *Journal of Modern History*, *American Historical Review*, *Slavic Review*, *Russian Review*, etc. Most of the reviews in those journals are relatively short. For this exercise in particular, a great resource is the journal *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, since the reviews there are somewhat longer and almost always involve more than one book. Moreover, most of the reviews published in *Kritika* since 2010 will have gone through my editorial hands. To be sure, not every author does precisely as we editors request, and each has his or her own style. But these texts will give you some sense of what I am looking for, since my two colleagues and I signed off on all of them. Pay close attention to how those reviews are structured and presented. Try to emulate the examples that you find most effective.

As always, feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns.