

Reaction Papers

Explanation & Guidelines

History 445

Over the course of the semester I ask you to write three relatively short papers addressing issues that we are discussing in the course. The idea is to allow you to explore particular issues of the course in somewhat greater depth, especially those that you find interesting. The way to approach this exercise is to think of a problem or a question that comes out of the reading, lectures, and discussions – or conceivably one that you feel has not been addressed but that might be of interest. Given that the reading load for the course is already substantial, I do not ask that each essay be a "research paper," but rather that you merely consult two sources beyond the readings for the course. (You may read more, of course, if you wish.) These will usually take the form of articles or book chapters, and their selection will of course depend upon the issue that you have decided to investigate. I cannot emphasize enough how important it is for students to consult with the instructor in order to identify the external sources that will be most effective in addressing the student's interest.

Using both the external sources and the required readings for the course – note that second clause: *and the required readings of the course* – you should construct your paper as in inquiry into a particular problem or question. Papers that are not framed by a specific question or problem will almost surely be weaker and less effective than those that are. In fact, you should articulate the question or problem that motivates your inquiry just under the exciting title that you will also provide at the beginning of the paper.

Use the material at your disposal to address that question or problem directly, marshaling the needed evidence. Your question can be strictly historical – i.e., having to do with what actually happened in the past – or historiographical – that is, concerned with the different interpretations that historians have provided on the issue under discussion. For example, you could ask: "What was the significance for the East Slavic peoples of the division of Christianity into eastern or western churches?" That's a historical question. Another example: "How have different historians interpreted that relationship between the Orthodox Church and the Muscovite & imperial Russian state?" This is a historiographical question, since it focuses specifically on questions of interpretation.

Russian history has traditionally been divided into Muscovite (to 1700), imperial (1700-1917), and Soviet (1917-1991) periods. You will see that the due dates for the three papers correspond roughly to these divisions. Each paper should therefore be rooted primarily in the period in question. At the same time, these periods are in many respects artificial, and many processes went across the chronological divisions that define them. You should therefore not feel categorically restricted to a particular period, since the chronological scope of your paper will depend on the question that you are asking. Again, consultation with the instructor is the best way to resolve any questions that might arise in this regard.

In order to ease our way into the semester, and because we will have more material at our disposal later in the semester than we will earlier, I ask that the later papers be slightly longer than the first one. Thus the first paper should be 3-4 pages in length, while the second and third should be 5-6 pages in length. It is important that you stay within these parameters, so that the papers may be evaluated fairly, using a common basis for comparison. Papers that are substantially longer or shorter than the guidelines indicated here may be rejected and returned to the author.

It goes without saying that I am available to advise and guide you in this task at any step of the way. Indeed, I very much encourage consultation with me, since I will be able to help you identify the best supplementary sources and the questions that existing scholarship is in the best position to answer.