

**RICHARD TEMPEST**

**RUSSIA AND BLACK AMERICA**

**SPRING 2024**

**TU 1.30–3.00 PM**

**FEBRUARY 27 – APRIL 16**

This course explores the Russian-sourced cultural transfers that influenced the Black American experience; and examines the impact of that experience on people and events in Russia. Who were the Black artists, activists, and adventurers who traveled there, and what did they discover? A New York bellhop becomes a millionaire in tsarist Moscow; a Detroit car worker spends four decades as a captive of the communist state; an American-Ukrainian child actor grows up to join the Soviet navy and become a cult poet; and a young woman writer chronicles her secret life in Moscow as the USSR enters its terminal decline

**WEEK ONE. RUSSIA'S BLACK AMERICAN *OTHER***

A history of Black America-to-Russia, and Russia-to-Black America cultural transfers. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s link to Leo Tolstoy. For Russians of a certain generation, jazz was the sound of freedom and the soundtrack of the post-Stalinist Thaw (1956-64). The term "Black Russian" as applied to the poet Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837), millionaire Frederick Bruce Thomas (1872-1928), and child movie star and cult poet James Patterson (b. 1933). The same title is claimed by Russian rap artist and Putin fanboy Timati, who never learned that blackface is vulgar fakery. Timati's video "Welcome to St. Tropez" (2008), a panegyric to hip hop culture, oligarchic privilege, and cultural misappropriation. Is it also tongue-in-cheek / postmodern / subversive? And who decides if it is?

**WEEK TWO. ALEXANDER PUSHKIN: A LIFE IN LITERATURE**

Pushkin, Russia's national genius, was descended from an African hostage whom Peter the Great adopted as his godson. Pushkin's literary explorations of his Black heritage. Different readings of the poet in Russia, the United States, and Africa. So let us ask ourselves the question, who is a genius? and why was Pushkin universally recognized as such in the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and the post-communist Russian Federation? The novel *Great Black Russian* (1989) by African American writer John Oliver Killens as fictionalized biography, culturally transferred and experimentally formatted.

**WEEK THREE. FREDERICK BRUCE THOMAS'S CROSS-CONTINENTAL JOURNEY**

The Russian Revolution as the hinge event of the short, catastrophic twentieth century. Thomas's trek from the Mississippi Delta, that "most Southern place on earth," to late-tsarist Moscow. His rise from penniless immigrant to wealthy entrepreneur. The emblematic nature of Thomas's presence in the Russian cultural, political and economic space: a comparison with Josephine Baker in France.

#### **WEEK FOUR. “TWO OLD WOMEN LEANED OVER MY CRIB, DIFFERENT-SKINNED YET SOMEHOW ALIKE...”**

The film musical *Circus* (1936) enjoys the status of a Soviet classic. It tells the story of a White American circus artiste and her Black baby who flee to the USSR from a lynch mob. This Hollywood-inspired piece of light ideological entertainment was released just as Stalin’s Great Terror shifted into high gear; and holds hints of the gulag even as clowns cavorts and acrobats leap. The movie’s biracial child star, Jim Patterson, grew up to become a Soviet naval officer and later a published Russian poet with a devoted following. The case of Black Ukrainian Igor Khiryak, who as a Soviet Army conscript took part in the cleanup operations following the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. More recently he has had a successful career as a military reenactor and is now on Instagram.

#### **WEEK FIVE. RICHARD WRIGHT’S UNDERGROUND DIALOGUE WITH DOSTOEVSKY**

African American man of letters Richard Wright (1908-1960) and his connection to, and rejection of, Soviet communism. Wright’s novel *Native Son* (1940) compared with Fyodor Dostoevsky’s novel *Crime and Punishment* (1864): multiple murders in Chicago and St. Petersburg endowed with philosophical and political meanings. HBO’s movie version of *Native Son* (2019) updates Wright’s novel for the twenty-first century: a tribute to Wright’s original vision, or something very different?

#### **WEEK SIX. A WORKING-CLASS BLACK MAN SPEAKS TO HISTORY**

W.E.B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson, Angela Davis, and Muhammad Ali travel to the USSR and say their piece, memorably and controversially. African American Robert Robinson (1906-1994), a Ford Motor Company worker held captive by the Soviet authorities, was there when they visited, but he never got to meet them. His autobiography *Black on Red* (1988) is an unusual example of a memoir authored by a working-class survivor of history. Robinson’s account of the four decades he spent as a captive of the Soviet Union before making his incredible escape is a fascinating tale of courage and endurance. It is also a revealing commentary on the discontinuities of race and class the Soviet Union and the United States.

#### **WEEK SEVEN. A YOUNG FEMALE GRADUATE MOVES TO MOSCOW AND LISTENS TO THE NIGHTINGALES**

Writer Andrea Lee (b. 1953), the daughter of a Black Baptist preacher from Philadelphia, was an aspiring writer who traveled to Moscow in the late 1970s with her first husband, a graduate student on a research fellowship. Lee’s prize-winning memoir *Russian Journal* (1981) became a bestseller and launched her literary career. This beautifully written book shows the late Soviet Union, already emitting signs of its terminal decline, as seen through the eyes of an observant and thoughtful visitor. Lee is curious and empathetic perceptive about the individuals and places she encounters: i.e., she is an exemplary travel writer.

#### **WEEK EIGHT. WHY YES WE CAN PASSED RUSSIA BY**

Former President Barak Obama is *the* emblematic Black American presence in contemporary Russian culture. Russian receptions of Obama, inside and outside the hierarchies of power and across the various socio-economic strata. Why Obama’s charismatic *cool* failed to impress

audiences in the former Soviet Union. The BLM movement as seen from Moscow. How African Americans constituencies are targeted by Russian state actors. University of Illinois graduate Terrell J. Starr is known as Black America's Russian Translator. Much-traveled in the former Soviet republics, and fluent in Russian and Georgian, he has been writing, broadcasting, and blogging since 2014. Starr's war reporting from Ukraine is an example of courageous, informative journalism and has won him hundreds of thousands of followers on social media.

## **SUGGESTED READINGS AND VIEWINGS (RECOMMENDED ITEMS ARE IN BOLD)**

### **BOOKS AND ARTICLES**

**Vladimir Alexandrov, *The Black Russian* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2013)**

Kate A. Baldwin, *Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain: Reading Encounters Between Black and Red, 1922-1963* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002)

Maria R. Bloshteyn, "Rage and Revolt: Dostoevsky and Three African-American Writers," in *Comparative Literature Studies* (38), no. 4 (2000): 277-309

Truman Capote, *The Muses Are Heard* (New York: Random House, 1956)

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 1993)

Julia Ioffe, "The History of Russian Involvement in America's Race Wars," *The Atlantic*, no. 11, 2017

**John Oliver Killens, *Great Black Russian: A Novel on the Life and Times of Alexander Pushkin* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1989)**

**Andrea Lee, *Russian Journal* (New York: Random House, 2006)**

Catharine T. Nepomnyashchy, ed., *Under the Sky of My Africa. Alexander Pushkin and Blackness* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2006)

**Robert Robinson, *Black on Red: My 44 Years Inside the Soviet Union* (Atlanta: Acropolis Books, 1988). (UIUC Library Scan available)**

**Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005)**

### **FILMS AND VIDEOS**

***The Circus* (1936)**

*Native Son* (2019)

**"Welcome to St. Tropez" (2008)**

*White Nights* (1985)