

The Imperial Map: Geographic Information in the Age of Empire

HISTORY 1947

HARVARD UNIVERSITY, FALL 2020

WHAT A remote-learning friendly conference course open to undergraduates and graduates.

WHY If you need maps in your life (and some Russian history too), this course is for you.

WHEN 9:00-10:15am Tu/Thur

WHO Dr. Kelly O'Neill, Lecturer (History Dept) & Director of the Imperia Project (Davis Center)
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IN A NUTSHELL

Maps and empires have entangled histories. In this course we will examine the evolution of geographic information technology and the way imperial states and subjects used maps, atlases, travel guides, and other tools to manage information flows and generate political and cultural capital. We will learn to speak the language of maps: particularly maps of the Russian Empire. Through units devoted to Siberia, Crimea, the Caucasus, and European Russia, we will reconstruct the history of an empire through maps held (mostly) right here at Harvard.

WHAT WILL I LEARN?

I'm glad you asked! After our work together, you will be able to:

- **Recognize** geospatial information, assess its significance, and use it to better understand history. In other words, you will know how to learn from maps what you can't learn from texts.
- **Understand** how historical actors - particularly those who inhabited the Russian Empire - used geospatial information to create and wield power;
- **Explain** why announcing that "Russia was really, really big" is not the same as understanding the spatial history of the empire.
- **Entertain** friends with stories of map thieves, pink lakes, poisonous serpents, drowning towns, and trendy 19th century coffee shops.

MODULES

1. Introduction: The Language of Maps
2. Paint & Parchment (or, What You Need to Rule an Empire)
3. The Golden Age of the Gazetteer
4. Crimea: Microcosm of Empire
5. Romanov Geo-intelligence

Final Project: Gameboards: Lost Empire

I'VE NEVER STUDIED RUSSIA (OR RUSSIAN). CAN I TAKE THIS CLASS?

Yes! I do not expect you to have studied Russia, Russian, or maps. I do expect you to have an appetite for retraining your eyes and working in new ways.

Road Map to the Course

*Complete assignment details and reading lists are available on Canvas: Canvas should be treated as the formal syllabus. The work assigned in each module assumes that you will spend roughly 10 hours per week on History 1947 (including course meetings).

Module 1: The Language of Maps (Weeks 1 & 2; 10%)

Readings: An episode of *This American Life*, a short essay by Marion Newbiggin on the difficulties of reading maps, and a selection of articles about mapping in early modern Russia.

Assignments:

Icebreaker	Create a short autobiographical audio (and listen to peer bios).	Sept 3
Follow the Hashtag	Explore map-related content on the social media channel of your choice.	Sept 3
The Long Look	Immerse yourself in a gorgeous but befuddling 17 th century atlas called the <i>Chorographic Sketchbook</i> . Decide which questions need answering.	Sept 8
Paint the Sketchbook	Describe the elements of the map that interest you most. Share your audio annotations.	Sept 10
River Dive	Compare a modern river map to what you find in the <i>Sketchbook</i> .	Sept 11

Module 2: Paint & Parchment (Weeks 3 & 4; 15%)

Readings: An 18th century account of the peoples and places of Siberia (and Russia more generally), and a selection of articles about mapping and the culture of 18th century Russia.

Assignments:

Data Mining	Analyze a database of the contents of the <i>Sketchbook</i> . Compare the patterns in the data to the visual context of the map sheets.	Sept 15
Sketchbook 2.0	It is 1762. Catherine II believes that anything Peter I did, she can do better. She wants a better atlas of Siberia. New information is at hand. There are new cartographic techniques in play. Your job is to advise the empress on the commissioning of the atlas. What changes must be made? And what must be preserved? Generate 10 recommendations for the new atlas. Vote for the most important recommendations.	Sept 16 Sept 17

- Generate a new title for the atlas, a table of contents, and a twitter-length (and twitter-worthy) summary of its purpose. Sept 21
- Work in groups to flesh out the recommendations and create a proposal worthy of the empress's attention. Sept 24
- You will need to advocate for a proportion of the budget and for the priorities identified by your group.

Module 3: The Golden Age of Gazetteers (Weeks 5 & 6; 15%)

Readings: Discussions of the meaning of “place” by geographers and digital humanists, a series of universal gazetteers published in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and a classic travel account of the Caucasus.

Assignments:

Reverse Engineer a Gazetteer	Each group will take on a gazetteer (from a list I provide) and unpack the first 50 entries (or 10 per student, however it works out). Data must take the form of a spreadsheet.	9/29
Finding the Needle in the Haystack	We will break into groups. Each group will apply a different method to Morse's 1822 gazetteer. The goal is to extract Russia-related content and build it into a shared spreadsheet.	10/1
Empire as Constellation	What did Russia look like, according to Morse's gazetteer? In fact, what if Morse's gazetteer were all we knew of Russia in the early 19 th century? Write a short description based on our gazetteer. We will finish with a peer review exercise.	10/3
Engineer a Gazetteer	We will read Julius von Klaproth's Travels in the Caucasus and Georgia (1806-1808). We will work in groups to identify and extract location information from a narrative text.	10/6
	Add spatial relations	10/8
	Add coordinates	10/10
The Elusive Caucasus	Compose a blog post reflecting on the pleasures and pains of locating historical places.	10/10

Module 4: Conquest, Defeat, & a Mapful of Silence (Weeks 7, 8, 9; 20%)

Readings: Book selections on the Ottoman slave trade, the Russian steppe campaigns, and commerce on the Black Sea; essays on reading “silences.”

Assignments:

Unpack the Map	The core text for this module is the 1816 <i>Topographical Map of Crimea</i> . You have two specific tasks. First, make a list of every kind of information included on the map. Second, pay attention to the things you do not understand. In fact, pay attention to the elements that prompt questions of any kind. Write your questions right on the map. (Well, on the digital image, anyway)	10/13
The Steppe & the Sea: Read	You will be assigned to read part or all (depending on length) of one of 4 books. When you are finished, record the 5 observations (or insights or arguments) you found most important.	10/15
Digest	Spend an hour with peers who read same book. Winnow down the pooled list of observations to 5. Brainstorm a list of the voices or perspectives represented in the text you read.	10/15
Reconfigure	Work with peers who read other books. Your collective task is to construct a narrative (or argument) about the significance of Russian rule in Crimea.	10/17
Fill in the Blanks: Investigation	The Mukhin map contains a wealth of information, but it alludes to much more. Your task is to choose 2 "blanks" and fill them. Blanks fall into two categories: either they are attested - however cryptically or vaguely (a scribbled note, a reference to a ruined village, the name of an engraver) - or they are left off the map entirely. Fill a blank from the first category.	10/23
Design work	Now choose a perspective that is absent from the map but crucial to understanding Crimean history. Propose a strategy for incorporating your choice into Mukhin's map. You will present your ideas and participate in “sandbox sessions” where you will get familiar with the process of transforming historical maps into spatial data. Your task is to transform your historical research into a map layer that visualizes the argument you want to make.	10/31

Module 5: Romanov GIS (Weeks 10, 11, 12; 20%)

Readings: A set of articles about the importance of regions, statistics, geographical societies, and road and rail systems; a contemporary account of the 1892 cholera epidemic in Russia.

Assignments:

Empire as Micro- Manager	This week, you will spend your time studying a single sheet from the topographical survey produced in the second half of the 19th century. Your job is to write an analysis of the topo sheet. If you find it helpful to put yourself in the mindset of a historical actor, you might imagine yourself a relatively low-ranking official tasked with funneling well-crafted reports up the chain of command. The analysis must contain 4 sections: 1) what the map reveals about the area it describes, 2) what the map obscures, 3) how the information on the map could be used to answer otherwise almost-impossible-to-answer spatial questions, and 4) the conclusions an imperial official might draw about the area - about its significance and its potential - from studying the map.	11/6
Mapping an Epidemic: Cholera in 1892	In weeks 11 & 12, we will read a famous study of the Russian cholera epidemic of 1892. The epidemic claimed 200,000 lives in Russia and was part of a global pandemic. Our task is to design and build an interactive edition of Clemow's 1893 study that explores not just where the epidemic took place, but how space and geographic information shaped the event. We will pay attention to blank spaces, neglected perspectives, change over time, and change across space.	11/23

Gameboards: The Lost Empire (final project, 25%)

When journalist Harrison Salisbury first visited the Soviet Union in 1944, he tucked a copy of “the last, best” guidebook into his gasmask bag. It had been published in 1914 by the famous Karl Baedeker. 30 years and dozens of visits later, Salisbury still described the 1914 volume as “more accurate, more complete and more revealing than any” description of Russia published since. If you want to know how the empire looked, sounded, tasted, and smelled on the eve of collapse, this is the book. Baedeker’s *Russia: A Handbook for Travelers* is a portal to a lost empire. It is also an ideal source for the practice of spatial history. It is filled with location descriptions, travel information, historical sketches, and - you guessed it - maps.

Your task is to design and build a game: a choose-your-own-adventure style game. Your game will present players with a tantalizing question that must be answered. Think of sending players on an intellectual treasure hunt. Along the way, you will demonstrate your ability not only to produce spatial history but to present an element of Russia's spatial history in such an engaging way that even someone who doesn't know where Moscow is would want to play. Your game will be designed around a theme (mineral baths? church architecture? fossils? fortifications? electricity?) you pick out of the *Handbook*.

Due: 8pm on December 18, pending final exam schedule

Required elements: starting point, waypoints (min 12), wildcards (min 2), coda

Words: approximately 3,600

Platform: Scalar