

Syllabus

History Writing as a Narrative Art

A six-session, one-credit, pass/fail, intensive reading seminar, on the role of narrative art in historical writing and its impact in shaping the mythologies of nations and the ideologies of political actors.

The first session will begin with readings that seek to understand why narrative endures as a way of writing history. The second session will be devoted to the rhetorical qualities of narrative and their implications for the use of historical evidence. The third session will look at Natalie Zemon Davis's microhistory and explore the relationship between narrative and historical truth. The fourth session will examine competing classics of nineteenth-century historical narration, Michelet's and Tocqueville's histories of the French Revolution, and the fifth will look at how a contemporary historian, Christopher Clark, handles competing and overlapping narratives in *The Sleepwalkers* (2012) on the origins of World War I. A final session will contrast 'warring narratives' devoted to the history of the present: Vladimir Putin's 'On the historical unity of the Russians and Ukrainians' (2021) vs. Serhii Plokhy's *The Russo-Ukrainian War* (2023).

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Sessions:

Pass/Fail/ No auditors.

Students will be expected to present readings in class, to discuss them critically, and to write a 1000-word paper, referring to the assigned texts and detailing what they have learned from the course.

Class 1: The Art of Narrative

How did great historians conceive the narrative art? What does narrative do? Are we being seduced by story?

Readings:

1. Peter Brooks, *Seduced by Story: The Use and Abuse of Narrative* (2022), ch. 6, ps.118-146.
2. Wilhelm von Humboldt, "The Historian's Task" (1822) in Adam Budd (ed.), *The Modern Historiography Reader: Western Sources* (2009), ps.166-171.
3. Leopold von Ranke, Preface to the first edition of *Histories of the Latin and German Nations* (1824) in Budd ps.172-4.
4. Herbert Butterfield, "The Underlying Assumption" in *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931) in Budd, ps.190-194.

Class 2: Narrative and Evidence: Critical Perspectives

What does narrative's rhetoric do to us? How does it structure our understanding of time and historical causation? How does it relate to the use of historical evidence?

Readings:

1. Hayden White, "The Historical Text as Literary Artefact" in *Tropics of Discourse* (1978), ps.81-100.
2. Arnaldo Momigliano, "The Rhetoric of History and the History of Rhetoric: On Hayden White's Tropes" in *Comparative Criticism: A Yearbook*, Vol. 3 (1981), ps.259-268.
3. Carlo Ginzburg, "Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method" in *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 9, No 1 (1980), ps.5-36.

Class 3: Microhistory and the Question of Historical Truth

Natalie Zemon Davis's masterful exercise in microhistory and its critical discussion. How does narrative enable us to reach historical truth — or distance us from it?

Readings:

1. Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1982), entire.
2. Robert Finlay, "The Refashioning of Martin Guerre" in *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 93, No. 3 (1988), ps.553-571.
3. Natalie Zemon Davis, "On the Lame" in *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 93, No. 3 (1988), ps.572-603.

Class 4: Historical Narrative as Political Ideology

Michelet and Tocqueville on the French Revolution: two competing accounts of a key event in modern political history. What do they tell us about the political implications of narrative art?

Readings:

1. Jules Michelet, *History of the French Revolution* (1847), ps.1-72.
2. Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (1856), ps.i-37.

Class 5: Multiple Narratives, Chance, and Contingency

Christopher Clark's *Sleepwalkers* is an influential modern exercise in history as a narrative art. How does it handle chance, contingency, and multiple narratives?

Reading:

1. Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (2012), introduction, conclusion, chs. 1 and 12.

Class 6: Warring Narratives

Narratives, as well as peoples and nations, are at war in Ukraine. How does narrative function as a justification for a war of conquest? How does narrative also function as a legitimation for a national struggle for survival?

Readings:

1. Vladimir Putin, "On the Historical Unity of the Russians and Ukrainians" (2021), entire.
2. Serhii Plokhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History* (2023), preface and ch. 1.