

Humanities 2590

The Making of the Modern World: Renaissance to the Present

Spring 2026
Tues. and Thurs. 1:30–2:50pm
LG3008

INSTRUCTOR

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Office: Rm 3352
Office hours: Tues. 3:00–5:00pm and by appointment

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course surveys the major ideas, political developments, and cultural movements in European societies from the Renaissance to the collapse of Communism, and beyond. It aims to provide undergraduate students with foundational and thematic knowledge of European history, as well as an understanding of the ways that European politics, culture, and economy have been shaped through encounters with non-European societies—through cultural and commercial exchange, imperialism and decolonization, Cold War rivalries, and globalization. The course is aimed at students from all backgrounds; no prior acquaintance with history is presupposed.

Intended learning outcomes include:

1. Grasp the major ideas, political developments, and cultural movements in European societies from the Renaissance to the present, as well as an understanding of the ways that European politics, culture, and economy have been shaped through encounters with non-European societies.
2. Acquire familiarity with some of the major interpretative paradigms and theories for explaining long-term change in European societies and their relationships to the rest of the world.
3. Learn to conceptualize historical change in a comparative and long-term framework, and not simply in terms of individual events, persons, and dates.
4. Analyze and write persuasively about primary historical sources.

ASSESSMENTS

1. Quiz: 10% (March 10)
This assessment engages CILO-1. Students are assessed on their understanding of major ideas, developments, personalities, and concepts in European history.
 - The quiz will last approximately 30 minutes and feature multiple-choice questions and an identification question covering the lectures and assigned readings. The quiz will be closed book.
 - The identification question will be organized around key terms and concepts. Each of

the terms (person, place, event, thing, idea) will be followed by several specific questions about that noun—questions that require you to explain what it is and why it mattered.

2. Midterm examination: 30% (March 26)

This assessment engages CILOs-1, 2, 3. Students are assessed on their understanding of key events, concepts, personalities, and developments, as well as their broader understanding of the major themes and interpretive paradigms in European historiography.

- The examination will last 80 minutes and feature multiple-choice, identification, and essay questions covering the lectures and assigned readings. The examination will be closed book.
- The in-class essay will require students to pull together evidence from the first half of the course to answer a major thematic question.

3. Paper: 30% (due April 28)

This assessment engages CILO-4. Students are assessed on their ability to write clearly and persuasively about primary sources related to the course content.

- Students must write a 6-pp. analytical paper (12 pt. Times New Roman, double spaced, 1 inch margins top/bottom/left/right) in response to one of two proposed topics.

4. Final examination: 30% (date TBA)

This assessment engages CILOs-1, 2, 3. Students are assessed on their understanding of key events, concepts, personalities, and developments, as well as their broader understanding of the major themes and interpretive paradigms in European historiography.

- Closed-book, in-class examination lasting 3 hrs.
- Students will be asked to answer multiple-choice questions and map questions and complete a series of short essay questions based on the lectures and assigned readings.
- The final examination will cover only the second half of the course.

TEXTBOOK

The assigned textbook for the course is Judith Coffin, Robert Stacey, Joshua Cole, and Carol Symes, *Western Civilizations: Their History & Their Culture*, 17th ed., vol. 2 (New York: Norton, 2011). It is available as a PDF on the course's Canvas webpage. The textbook readings are designed to provide orientation for students, especially those without prior knowledge of European history. The lectures presuppose that students have read the relevant textbook section and are familiar with its content; they strive to make general observations and draw deeper connections. Students are strongly encouraged to read the assigned pages before class, otherwise the lectures may be challenging to follow. Completing the textbook reading doesn't mean fully understanding all of it the first time. The lectures will provide additional clarification, but they also contain much that will not be found in the textbook.

THE ESSAY

The essay requires students to read and evaluate a set of primary source documents on a specified topic. All texts will be available as PDF packets on the course's Canvas webpage. The aim of the presentation and paper is to engage deeply with these sources, and to focus on

understanding and analyzing them. No outside reading is required or expected. Use of generative AI for researching, outlining, or writing papers is forbidden. Students should, of course, spell-check their work, but besides that, they should not use any corrective software.

Papers will be graded primarily on the basis of their argument, uses of sources, organization, and clarity. English prose style is a secondary consideration.

- An A-range paper features a clear and persuasive thesis statement and utilizes all the assigned readings that are pertinent to the topic. It provides thoughtful analysis of the assigned readings and makes specific references to the texts through quotation and paraphrase. It exhibits clarity of thought and good organization of evidence.
- A B-range paper fulfills the paper assignment but lacks some combination of a clear thesis statement, adequate breadth of source material, in-depth analysis, organization, and accuracy of citation.
- A C-range paper does not properly fulfill the paper assignment by failing to answer the question, properly engage with the assigned readings and course material, or provide coherent analysis.

OFFICE HOURS

Students are strongly encouraged to meet with the instructor to discuss questions about the course and its subject matter. Office hours will be held by appointment. If you have any questions about the course material or would like further guidance in preparing for the paper or exams, please do not hesitate to contact the instructor via e-mail.

DEADLINES AND ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

If you are forced to miss an exam or paper deadline due to illness or other emergency, you must provide a doctor's note or equivalent; otherwise, a make-up test or extension cannot be arranged. Without a legitimate excuse, late papers will be docked 5 points (out of a total 100) per day they are late. This course enforces a zero-tolerance policy on cheating and plagiarism. The use of ChatGPT or similar generative AI tools is NOT permitted for researching, outlining, or writing papers. Violations of this policy will be treated as acts of plagiarism.

COURSE OUTLINE

Feb. 3: What are the aims and expectations of this course?

Feb. 5: Why did Europeans try to make contact with peoples on other continents?

- Reading: *Western Civilizations*, pp. 347–71.

Feb. 10: How did Europeans in the Renaissance innovate by looking to the past?

- Reading: *Western Civilizations*, pp. 373–97.

Feb. 12: Why did Western Christianity splinter into different churches?

- Reading: *Western Civilizations*, pp. 399–425.

Feb. 17: *Chinese New Year* — No Class

Feb. 19: *Chinese New Year — No Class*

Feb. 24: How did Europe's military advantage arise?

- Reading: *Western Civilizations*, pp. 427–37.

Feb. 26: How were society and politics organized in early modern Europe?

- Reading: *Western Civilizations*, pp. 437–49, 457–69.

Mar. 3: What were the origins of modern science?

- Reading: *Western Civilizations*, pp. 493–515.

Mar. 5: How did Europeans construct commercial empires?

- Reading: *Western Civilizations*, pp. 478–91.

Mar. 10: What explains success in great power politics? + **QUIZ**

- Reading: *Western Civilizations*, pp. 469–78.

Mar. 12: What did it mean to be “enlightened”?

- Reading: *Western Civilizations*, pp. 517–43.

Mar. 17: Discussion Class — The Enlightenment

- Reading: Enlightenment Source Packet

Mar. 19: What was the French Revolution all about?

- Reading: *Western Civilizations*, pp. 545–77.

Mar. 24: Why did the Industrial Revolution begin in Britain?

- Reading: *Western Civilizations*, pp. 579–611.

Mar. 26: **Midterm examination**

Mar. 31: What are ideologies and why did they emerge when they did?

- Reading: *Western Civilizations*, pp. 613–41, 643–51, 661–66.

Apr. 2: How did globalization and mass politics change European society?

- Reading: *Western Civilizations*, pp. 711–24, 729–31.

Apr. 7: *Public Holiday — No Class*

Apr. 9: Why did European empires transform during the nineteenth century?

- Reading: *Western Civilizations*, pp. 679–709.

Apr. 14: Why did the First World War break out?

- Reading: *Western Civilizations*, pp. 747–69.

Apr. 16: Discussion Class — The First World War

- Reading: First World War Source Packet

Apr. 21: How were the Bolsheviks able to gain control over Russia?

- Reading: *Western Civilizations*, pp. 731–34, 769–73, 784–86.

Apr. 23: Why was democracy so fragile in interwar Europe?

- Reading: *Western Civilizations*, pp. 773–81, 783–84, 793–99, 803–5.

Apr. 28: How did Stalin and Hitler rule?

- Reading: *Western Civilizations*, pp. 786–93, 799–803.

Apr. 30: Could Germany have won the Second World War?

- Reading: *Western Civilizations*, pp. 815–49.

May 5: What was the impact of the Cold War and decolonization on Europe?

- Reading: *Western Civilizations*, pp. 851–77.

May 7: Why did Communism collapse in Europe?

- Reading: *Western Civilizations*, pp. 885–89, 895–915.