

# GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY

## DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

Fall 2012 HISTORY 393-001, Tuesdays, 1:30-4:10 pm, Sandbridge Hall #107  
Instructors: Martin J. Sherwin & Geoffrey Ross Office: 353 Robinson B  
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Office hours: Sherwin: Tues 12-1+ by appointment;  
Ross: 4:30 - 5:30+by appointment

### THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS AND THE COLD WAR: HISTORY THROUGH LITERATURE AND FILM



**Course Description:** Soon after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and

Nagasaki nuclear weapons began to shape the military and diplomatic policies of the United States and the Soviet Union. Both superpowers rationalized their burgeoning nuclear arsenals as deterrent forces. Yet it was the amassing of these weapons that led to the Cuban Missile Crisis [CMC], the seminal event of the Cold War that came close to precipitating a nuclear holocaust.

The *setting* for our course is the Cold War from the atomic bombings of Hiroshima to its end in 1989, and the nuclear legacy it created. The *premise* of our course is that current (post cold war) nuclear issues cannot be understood without knowledge of their historical antecedents. The overarching *theme* of our course is the pervasive impact that nuclear weapons had on the politics and culture of the United States, and its relationship with the Soviet Union. But we will concentrate on the events during the Kennedy administration that both precipitated and resolved the CMC.

Our course will combine traditional (written) history with visual history, the documentary and feature film. We will consider some of the following questions: Is history altered when it is presented on film? What is the difference between memory, oral history, researched written history, historical documentary films and historical feature films?

**Format:** We intend to make our class meetings as interactive as possible. Some classes will include a lecture, a documentary or feature film, but also a class discussion of the film and the related reading assignments. Others will be devoted to your group projects. (SEE BELOW)



**Writing Assignments and Requirements:** In addition to keeping up with the readings, and attending all classes, students will be responsible for the following written assignments:

- (1) A weekly memorandum to your editor. Explanation: You are a documentary film maker on the staff of the WGBH PBS television documentary series, “The American Experience.” (Look it up on the web if you are not familiar with it.) Your Executive Producer has asked you to research a script with the working title: “***The Cuban Missile Crisis At 50: The Critical Moments.***” She has asked you for a weekly memorandum of no more than 200 words (one page) on your thoughts about the films you are viewing, the books you are reading and anything else you are learning related to the assignment. *The memo is not intended to be a summary of assignments but rather a “think piece” that contains your reflections on the issues raised by the films, readings, discussions and lectures.* Email this assignment to both Sherwin and Ross no later than noon on Mondays before class. Be sure to keep a copy for yourself in a separate folder on your computer; it will become the basis of your research paper.

**ALSO, be sure to begin every email in the SUBJECT BOX with H393F12. If you fail to do this there is a good chance it will get lost.**

**\*\*\*\*\*Remember H393F12 (no deviation, please) \*\*\*\*\***

- (2) **Projects, papers and Quizzes for History 393-1:** In addition to the weekly memo, the written work for the course includes a **group documentary film project**, an **individual short research paper** (your contribution to your group’s film project), and **one or two in class quizzes on the readings**. Approximately 40% of the final grade will be based on the project, 40% on your individual paper and 20% on contributions to class discussions, attendance, quiz grades, and the weekly memoranda.

(3) Your projects (film scripts) will be presented to the class near the end of the semester. **Explanation:** Members of the class will be divided into groups of 4-5 students. Each group will write a script for a short documentary film on the CMC broadly defined. (It can be what led to it, an aspect of the crisis itself, or some issue related to its aftermath.) Each group will choose the subject of its film (but it must be approved by Sherwin and Ross.) Additional details of this assignment will be discussed in class.

(4) Your research paper will be related to your film script project. It will be the research work that you have done as a contribution to the script. (Approximately 8-10 pages).



### **Assigned Readings:** Consider the assigned books (available at the

bookstore) and posted articles to be basic research sources.

Robert Kennedy, *Thirteen Days* - The “orthodox” view that represents the Kennedy administration’s view of the CMC.

E.H. Carr, *What Is History?* - The classic explanation of what it is that historians do.

Fursenko and Naftali, *One Hell of A Gamble* - The most thorough multi-national study of the CMC.

Michael Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight* - The best recent detailed history of the resolution of the CMC.

Vladislav Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War* - A penetrating survey of Soviet foreign policy.

Philip Nash, *The Other Missiles of October* - A close study of the Eisenhower administration’s 1959 decision to place Jupiter missiles in Turkey, and its consequences.

## **Nuclear Weapons: A Framework**

Nuclear weapons were controversial from their inception. Even before they were used to destroy Hiroshima and Nagasaki they were seen and valued by members of the United States government as effective instruments for containing the Soviet Union. But nuclear weapons also were feared as the potential instruments of human extinction through madness or accident, a fear that the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis validated. This fear, shared by Americans and Soviets alike, eventually led to an arms control process that sought to square the circle of the nuclear arms race by creating a stable international nuclear regime that would prevent war by maintaining an expanding stable balance of forces.

The process began informally, late in the 1950s, and was stimulated by the Cuban Missile Crisis. The SALT and, later, the START negotiations moved this process forward. The Reagan administration's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI, aka "Star Wars") stagnated due to its inherent technological difficulties and enormous potential expense. Then at a meeting in 1986 at Reykjavik, Iceland, President Reagan and Premier Gorbachev came “within an inch” of reaching an agreement to abolish nuclear weapons altogether.

In the early 1990s the Soviet empire, and then the Soviet Union itself, disintegrated as chaos overwhelmed reform. The US-USSR nuclear arms race came to an end, but new rationalizations quickly emerged to prevent any rush to nuclear disarmament. The first nuclear age was characterized by the cold war and enormous US-Soviet stockpiles of nuclear weapons. The second nuclear age is different, and at this point extremely unstable. No arms control system has emerged to prevent nuclear proliferation, or the controlled expansion of nuclear arsenals.

*THE COURSE IS DIVIDED INTO THREE PARTS.*

PART ONE COVERS THE 17 YEARS FROM HIROSHIMA TO THE CMC.

PART TWO FOCUSES ON THE CMC AND ITS IMMEDIATE AFTERMATH.

PART THREE IS AN OVERVIEW FROM THE CMC TO THE PRESENT

## **READINGS, FILMS, QUIZZES & ASSIGNMENTS:**

### **PART I: HIROSHIMA AND ITS LEGACIES:**

The decisions about the development and use of atomic weapons taken during World War II, and the attitudes that influenced those decisions shaped the post war nuclear arms race. We will therefore begin with an overview of the early years of the cold war. While many of the decisions are understandable, none of them were inevitable. To understand why they were made we will try to understand the expectations, assumptions, and circumstances, that led to the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. We will study the arguments put forward by those who believe that the atomic bombings were necessary to bring about the surrender of Japan as well as the arguments put forward by the critics of those decisions. What evidence supports the different arguments?

The seeds of US nuclear policy had been sown during the Truman years, but it was during Eisenhower's administration that a nuclear weapons policy was established as the foundation of US military power.

Readings for this section include:

E.H. Carr, What Is History?

Nash, The Other Missiles of October, intro + chapters 1, 2, 3

Fursenko & Naftali, One Hell of A Gamble, intro + chapters 1, 2, 3, 4

Zubok, A Failed Empire, intro + chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 (to page 142).

Films:

“World At War: part 24, The Bomb” [UK, Thames TV, 1971, 59m]

“Atomic Café”

“Hiroshima: Why the Bomb Was Dropped”

“Ultimate Weapon: The H-Bomb Dilemma”

“Are We Winning, Mommy?”

WEEK 1. 8/28: Introduction: Hiroshima and Nagasaki

WEEK 2. 9/4 : Nuclear Weapons and the Origins of the Cold War

WEEK 3. 9/11: Technological Escalation: The U.S. Hydrogen Bomb Decision

WEEK 4. 9/18 : READING QUIZ #1 in class

The Eisenhower Administration and the Origins of the CMC

## **PART II: THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS:**

One of the ironies of John Kennedy's popular legacy is the note of cold war hysteria that he encouraged during the 1960 campaign. He claimed (as Ronald Reagan did in 1980) that the Soviets had achieved nuclear arms superiority. Both men knew that their claims were false. Kennedy also rekindled the "win at any cost" mentality that Eisenhower had (belatedly) attempted to bring under control during the last years of his presidency. (Recall his farewell address warnings about the growth of a military-industrial-scientific complex.) But for Kennedy, confronting communism at home and abroad were activist themes that served his purposes and fit his style. Thus, in the thousand days of his abbreviated administration, new counterinsurgency forces were organized, the CIA was expanded, our nuclear arsenal grew, and Eisenhower's nuclear strategy called "The New Look" and "Massive Retaliation" was jettisoned in favor of a different set of strategies for using nuclear weapons, called "Flexible Response". Much of this was based on innovative warhead and delivery system technologies. But much of it was the product of domestic political considerations and an arrogant, dangerous view that sophisticated people could skillfully use the threat of nuclear weapons to contain and manipulate the Soviet Union. Khrushchev found the situation intolerable. Enter the **Cuban Missile Crisis**.

Readings for this section include:

Robert Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, complete

Fursenko and Naftali, *One Hell of A Gamble* complete

Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight* complete

Nash, *The Other Missiles of October*, complete

Zubok, *A Failed Empire*, pp. 143-53

Films:

"The Bay of Pigs"

"The Missiles of October: What the World Didn't Know" [ABC, 1992, 90m]

"JFK October 22, 1962 CMC Speech"

"Thirteen Days"

Excomm Members Panel Discussion 1982

WEEK 5 9/25: Origins of the CMC, I: The Bay of Pigs Invasion

Week 6. 10/2: The Crisis Begins

**WEEK 7 10/9 Columbus Day Schedule - No Tuesday Classes this week**

Week 8. 10/16 On the Edge of Armageddon, I

WEEK 9. 10/23: On the Edge of Armageddon, II

**October 27, Saturday morning. SPECIAL EVENT: GMU CONFERENCE ON CMC. Participants include Sergei Khrushchev and Michael Dobbs. All class members are expected to attend. This conference substitutes for our November 20 class. (Details to be announced.)**

WEEK 10. 10/30 READING QUIZ # 2 in class  
Resolution and Aftermath

### PART III: THE LEGACY OF THE CMC

The nuclear arms race continued during the next seventeen years. In that time the US and Soviet arsenals accumulated approximately 60,000 nuclear weapons. It was an insane number that mimicked the mythical “Doomsday Device” in Stanley Kubrick’s movie, “Dr. Strangelove” which had the brilliant subtitle: “How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb.” The movie was released in 1963 and was therefore being shot during the Cuban Missile Crisis. But as dangerous as events were during the aftermath of the CMC, the leaders of both countries had learned an important lesson: threatening the use of nuclear weapons was more akin to skidding on a slippery slope than climbing an escalation ladder.

Readings for this section include:  
Zubok, *A Failed Empire*, complete

Films:

“Dr. Strangelove: or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb”

“The Fog of War”

“Countdown to Zero”

WEEK 11. 11/6: Arms Control to Reykjavik

WEEK 12 11/13: The Global Zero Movement

WEEK 13: 11/20 Research - no class - THANKSGIVING WEEK

WEEK 14: 11/27 Project Presentations

WEEK 15: 12/4 TBA (Final Essays due via email noon 12/3)

NO EXTENSIONS OR INCOMPLETES CAN BE GRANTED. SORRY.  
Please plan carefully.

<b>First day of classes;</b> last day to submit Domicile Reclassification Application; Payment Due Date	August 27
Labor Day, university closed	September 3

<b>Last day to add classes</b> —all individualized section forms due  <b>Last day to drop with no tuition penalty</b>	September 4
<b>Last day to drop with a 33% tuition penalty</b>	September 18
<b>Final Drop Deadline (67% tuition penalty)</b>	September 28
Midterm progress reporting period (100-200 level classes)—grades available via <a href="#">Patriot Web</a>	September 24 - October 19
Selective Withdrawal Period (undergraduate students only)	October 1 - October 26
Columbus Day recess (Monday classes/labs meet Tuesday. Tuesday classes do not meet this week)	October 8
Incomplete work from spring/summer 2012 due to instructor	October 26
Incomplete grade changes from spring/summer 2012 due to registrar	November 2
Thanksgiving recess	November 21-25
Last day of classes	December 8
<b>Reading Days*</b>	December 10 - December 11, 4:30pm

<b>Exam Period</b>	December 11, 4:30 pm - December 19
<b>Degree Conferral Date</b>	Dacember 20, 2012

*Next page: Detailed class schedule*