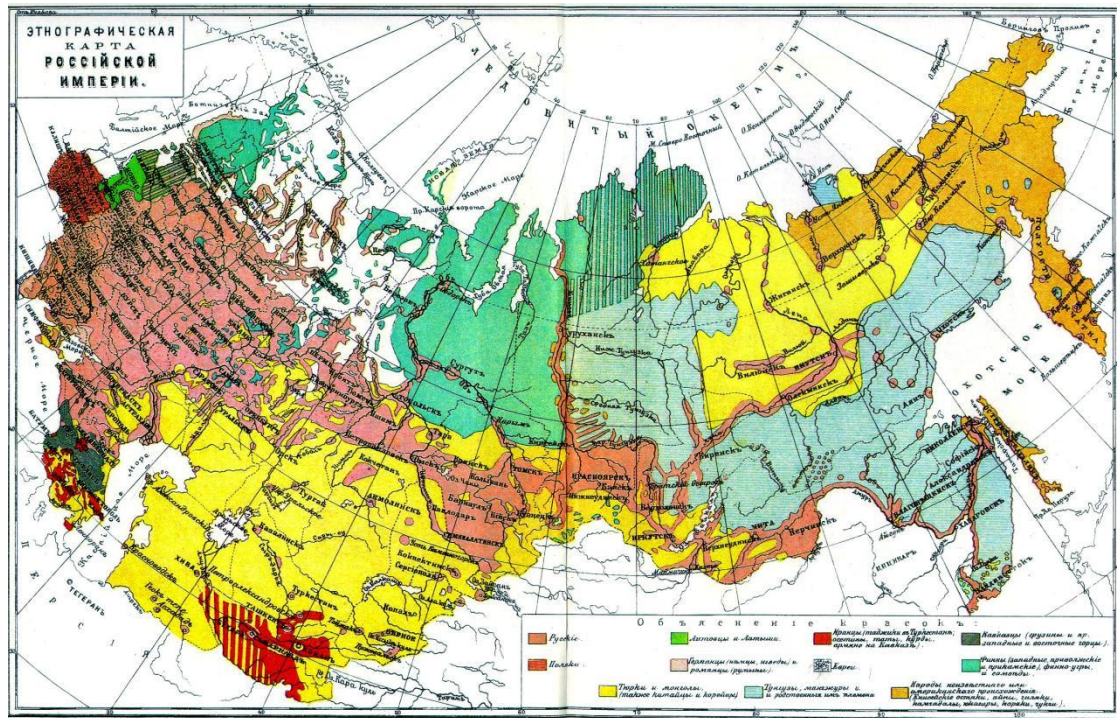


# The Russian Empire: Identity and Power in Eurasia from Medieval Times to Modernity

Fall 2023 • Department of History • George Mason University

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Asynchronous lecture course (HIST 328)



*An “Ethnographic map of the Russian Empire” printed in Moscow in 1912. Different colors correspond to various ethnic groups. Where do you think the “Russians” are located?*

## I. Course overview

Just how “Russian” was the Russian Empire? On the eve of the First World War, the Russian Empire was the world’s third-largest state by both land area and population, a vastness matched by its dizzying human diversity. Of the nearly 125 million subjects counted in its first and only census in 1897, slightly less than half reported “Russian” as their native language, with a majority consisting of people that we would today describe as Ukrainian, Polish, Jewish, Tatar, or Yakut, among many others. This course surveys the formation of the multiethnic Russian Empire over the span of a millennium, starting from its medieval roots at the intersection of Byzantine and Mongol influences before tracing its consolidation under Peter and Catherine the Great and reconstructing its fateful encounters with nationalism, industrialization, mass politics, and total war during its final century. Weekly lectures and readings combine the traditional view of political elites in centers of power such as Moscow and Saint Petersburg with the perspectives of ethnically non-Russian groups from the outlying “borderlands” that experienced Russian imperial and colonial rule firsthand.

By taking this composite, multiethnic approach, students will learn not only how policies and reforms were implemented in the capitals but will equally get a feel for how they worked on the ground in uneven and complex ways. Lectures, in particular,

will reconstruct the rich and often messy layering of ethnic, regional, national, religious, gender, class, and estate identities that prevailed across the Russian Empire through, and often far beyond, its collapse in 1917. In a set of essay assignments focused on the analysis of primary documents, students will have the opportunity to closely examine some of the ideas and ideologies that circulated across the Russian Empire, sharpening their skills as historical writers and thinkers in the process. The course does not assume any prior study of history at the university level and will equip students with an essential knowledge of Russian geography and important concepts during the first week.

## **II. Learning objectives**

Throughout the semester, students who view all lectures and complete the required assignments will learn to:

1. Trace the historical origins of the Russian Empire, account for its rise and collapse, and understand its lasting political, economic, and cultural impacts on the modern world;
2. Appreciate the importance of historical debate and interpretation to the narratives of the past that we encounter and create in our studies and in everyday life;
3. Develop their own definitions of complex historical concepts, enriching them with thoughtful examples and comparisons from Russian and world history;
4. Identify a historical argument and its supporting evidence, arrive at a nuanced assessment of its strengths and weaknesses, and formulate a counterargument or critique in response;
5. Carefully analyze a primary document by identifying its main ideas and claims while constructing a context that establishes the identities and motives of its author(s) and discusses the conditions of its production and circulation;
6. Practice introspection toward their own ideas about self and community by reconstructing how other people have historically lived, thought, and struggled in settings and circumstances different from our own;
7. Engage in respectful, thoughtful debates and discussions by supporting their statements with historical evidence and considering alternate viewpoints, seeking to reconcile or combine contrasting perspectives where possible;
8. And, in the years ahead, apply their skills as historical thinkers in the communities that matter to them.

## **III. Required readings and ways to approach them**

While all of our readings will be electronically available through Blackboard as PDF files or as eBooks at [archive.org](https://archive.org), you may want to consider acquiring these two main texts if you prefer to own a physical copy:

1. Paul Bushkovitch, *A Concise History of Russia* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

2. Daniel H. Kaiser and Gary Marker, *Reinterpreting Russian History: Readings, 860 to 1860s* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1994).

Each week's reading load of approximately 50 to 60 pages will consist of a short background chapter (or two) from the Bushkovitch book along with a selection of primary sources that will either be drawn from the Kaiser and Marker anthology (on archive.org) or uploaded to Blackboard. The Bushkovitch chapters will provide you with a solid grasp of the chronology, geography, and concepts that are essential to making the most of the primary texts and the lectures, so I strongly recommend completing them before each Tuesday. The primary sources, meanwhile, will form the main focus of our Blackboard and in-class discussions, so give yourself plenty of time to read them carefully and start crafting your posts, which will be due by the end of Wednesday whenever they are assigned.

#### **IV. Making the most of readings and lectures**

We will cover the thousand-year history of a vast part of the world in just a single semester, so taking thorough, well-organized notes will be essential to doing your best work in the course. I personally recommend Evernote for your at-home readings, though I find that a more traditional, pen-and-paper approach is better for lectures. As our pace picks up in the first few weeks, you will find that keeping track of the main ideas and interpretations from our readings and lectures will serve you further down the road, especially as you try to recall information from earlier on while putting together your written assignments or preparing for discussions. For each text that you read, make a note of its topic and main ideas as well as any important people, places, events, or concepts that it mentions.

I will structure my lectures around slideshows that include bullet points with important concepts, so you can use these as the basic outlines for your notes while filling in what you think is significant. The slideshows will be uploaded to Blackboard at the end of each week, so you can always revisit them later. Remember that the point of this course is not to walk away with an encyclopedic knowledge of every single detail that comes up, which is why the description of the readings and lectures for each week concludes with a few crucial **learning goals** that you should concentrate on achieving. Most of these ask you to explain a historical phenomenon or discuss different approaches to a historical question, which is also what we will be doing on Blackboard and in our class discussions.

#### **V. Written assignments and grading**

The assignments in this course are designed to gradually strengthen your abilities as analytical writers and thinkers, especially if you are completely new to the genre of the interpretive historical essay. I have spaced them out so that you will have ample time to reflect on the essay prompts and read the necessary sources before completing and submitting your writing. Grading, for me, is more about communication than it is about judgement, so all of my marks on your essays will be accompanied by brief explanations of what you did well and what you should try to improve for the next assignment. For each assignment, you will receive a letter grade (on an A to F scale) that I will convert using the university's 4.00 scale when computing your overall mark for the course. At the start of Week 5, we will spend time going over the essentials of

historical writing and argumentation to give you a set of tools that you can use in your future assignments.

Your work in the course will consist of the following components:

1. At the beginning of Week 5, I will distribute a take-home essay examination covering the lectures and readings from Weeks 1 through 4. You will be asked to choose three terms or concepts out of six possible options and, using examples and evidence from the course, define each of them in a short answer of 150 to 200 words. Then, in a longer, interpretive essay of 450 to 500 words, you will respond to one of three prompts dealing with an important historical question or debate that we will have covered in the previous weeks. This essay exam will be due at the start of Week 6 and will help me assess your interests and background as a writer so that I can give you individualized support and feedback on the later assignments. As your first piece of work in the course, the exam will count for 15% of your final mark.
2. At the beginning of Week 7, you will have the chance to choose one of three possible primary sources to analyze in an essay of 1000 to 1200 words that will be due at the beginning of Week 9. Each source will relate to a topic covered in a previous week and will come with a set of questions to help guide your essay. The purpose of this assignment is to familiarize you with methods for primary source analysis and help you identify topics in imperial Russian history that interest you personally. As your first effort at primary source analysis, this essay will count for 15% of your final mark.
3. At the beginning of Week 10, I will provide you with several pairs of primary sources that are somehow in conversation with one another. By the start of Week 12, it will be your responsibility to read both sources and compose an essay of 1000 to 1200 words that analyzes the sources and explains how they are connected to one another. As with the previous essay, I will include a set of questions to help you structure your essay. The goal here is to go a step further than last time by constructing an overarching historical context around multiple sources. This essay will count for 20% of your final grade.
4. At the beginning of Week 13, I will distribute the guidelines for your final papers, which should build upon one of your earlier pieces of work in the course and must be submitted by the end of examination week (Week 15). This time, it will be up to you to formulate a research question that interests you and find two additional sources with which to engage in your extended analysis. This paper should be 1200 to 1500 words in length must be driven by a focused historical argument that closely examines primary documents and somehow engages with the existing scholarship on your topic. I ask that you run your ideas for your papers by me during Week 14. We will have a writing workshop during examination week to address your concerns and questions. The final paper will count for 25% of your grade.
5. Aside from Weeks 1, 6, 9, 12, and 14, each week will feature a discussion thread on Blackboard that addresses a prompt related to the assigned reading. Your responsibility will be to submit a 150-word response to the prompt by the end of Friday and then contribute two (2) 75-word replies to posts by your peers before the end of Sunday. Cumulatively, your posts and replies will count for 25% of

your mark, though you may miss one week's work in this area without any penalty.

Component	Assigned	Due date	Weight
Take-home exam	Week 5 (M)	Week 6 (W)	15%
Source analysis	Week 7 (M)	Week 9 (M)	15%
Debate analysis	Week 10 (M)	Week 12 (M)	20%
Final paper	Week 13 (M)	Week 17 (F)	25%
Blackboard posts and responses	N/A	N/A	25%

## **VI. Your responsibilities as a member of the class**

One of our shared projects, as a group, is to cultivate an inclusive atmosphere and learn to communicate with one another over the course of the semester. While this may not happen immediately given our diverse interests, beliefs, identities, and educational backgrounds, the success of the course depends heavily upon your best efforts and good faith in putting forward the strongest work of which you are capable, both in your individual assignments and in your interactions with your peers. Based on my experience as both a teacher and a student, there are a few important principles that I have consistently found to be crucial for creating an environment in which everybody feels included and supported as they grow. If we all strive to abide by them, we may very well evolve into a community of learners who can depend upon each other.

1. **Respect contrasting viewpoints.** The history of the Russian Empire overflows with wars, famines, forced resettlement, revolutions, and violence, while relations between Russia and the West are presently at their worst in decades. We will deal with weighty questions and divisive debates that will inevitably evoke a wide range of responses from the class, and we may find ourselves, maybe for the first time in our lives, having difficult conversations about issues of power, inequality, and human difference. Listen carefully and considerately to one another in discussions, whether virtually or in person, and remember that one of the most important skills of a historian is the ability to assess and synthesize competing interpretations. Respond to the points that a person is making rather than belittling the individual, and leave it up to your peers to decide whether they are persuaded.
2. **Strive for nuance as a writer and thinker.** While “the truth doesn’t always lie in the middle,” as we say in Polish, you will frequently find that competing historical arguments may actually overlap in surprising ways or, better yet, can be combined or reconciled because they rely on separate bodies of evidence that support seemingly opposing conclusions. When assessing an argument or interpretation, whether in class or in your readings, consider the specific circumstances under which the person who made it was living and thinking, taking into account what they knew or didn’t know at the time. The best historians, I think, are the ones who know how to revise or update their views in light of new evidence and perspectives that they did not previously consider. Teaching and learning, after all, are impossible without one another, no matter how much experience you have with either one.

3. **Be authentic in your work.** No matter where you are in your studies or where you come from in life, seek out your own interpretations by exposing yourself to fresh evidence and ideas as much as possible. While we live in a time when artificial intelligence can compose a stylistically elegant essay, no computer program can fill those pages with the unique content that you can produce based on your observations and experiences. Make your best effort and ensure that everything that you submit is genuinely your own. It may be tough at the start, but you will grow in time.
4. **Don't hesitate to ask for help when you need it.** I encourage you to come by my office hours before your essay exam is due in Week 5 so that I can get to know you and learn about your interests. Should you find yourself struggling in the course for any reason, let me know by email or in person so that we can set up a meeting and come up with a strategy for your success. If your needs are beyond what I can address personally, I will make sure that you find the appropriate resources on campus and will help you figure out a plan for completing your work.

## **VII. Course policies**

**Attendance:** Because this is an asynchronous class, you will not be graded on attending any scheduled meetings. Instead, your participation grade will be based on your completion of Blackboard discussion exercises (as outlined above).

**Accommodations:** If you have a documented medical condition that entitles you to any learning accommodations, let me know and be sure to provide me with an official letter from the university by the beginning of Week 2.

**Honesty:** All written work submitted in this course must entirely be your own, meaning that any ideas or interpretations drawn from other sources must be properly cited whenever they are paraphrased or quoted. Additionally, all citations must correspond to the precise pages from which you are drawing specific data or pieces of information. While sharing your thoughts and working through difficult topics with your peers is rewarding, you are expected to independently craft the interpretations that go into your written work and compose your essays entirely on your own. Please familiarize yourself with the GMU Honor Code, which you can download here: <http://oai.gmu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/George-Mason-University-Honor-Code-2023-2024-final-SaveasPDF.pdf>

## **VIII. Weekly calendar**

<b>Week 1: Foundations</b>
<p><b>Background:</b> 1) Paul Bushkovitch, "Prologue" in <i>A Concise History of Russia</i>, xv-xviii. 2) Andreas Kappeler, "Introduction" in <i>The Russian Empire: A Multiethnic History</i>, 1-13.</p> <p><b>Primary sources:</b> 1) Photos from the Sergei Prokudin-Gorskii collection at the Library of Congress (in class). 2) Ethnographic maps of the Russian Empire (in class).</p> <p><b>Learning goals:</b> 1) Be able to define "empire," "ethnicity," "nation," and "state," distinguishing between them and giving historical examples of each. 2) Explain the</p>



structure of power in the Russian Empire by using concepts such as “borderland,” “center,” “colony,” and “metropole” while drawing comparisons with another world empire.

### **Week 2: In search of origins**

**Background:** 1) Bushkovitch, “Russia before Russia” in *CHR*, 1-18.

**Primary sources:** 1) Daniel H. Kaiser and Gary Marker, *Reinterpreting Russian History*, 3-13, 21-29, 50-53, 54-59, 63-72, 99-100.

**Learning goals:** 1) Assess different attempts at claiming Kyivan Rus’ for national narratives and describe the different forms of identity that coexisted on its territory. 2) Explain how Christianity reached Kyivan Rus’ and spread to its inhabitants. 3) Account for the rapid growth of the Mongol Empire and describe how its rulers governed their territory.

### **Week 3: Muscovy and its rivals**

**Background:** 1) Bushkovitch, “Moscow, Novgorod, Lithuania, and the Mongols” in *CHR*, 19-35. 2) Kappeler, “The Mediaeval Background” in *REMH*, 14-20.

**Primary sources:** 1) Kaiser and Marker, *RRH*, 79-83, 87-98, 103-107, 108-116, 117-126.

**Learning goals:** 1) Assess the impacts of Mongol rule on the former territory of Kyivan Rus’. 2) Compare the major successor states of Kyivan Rus’ in terms of their cultures, economies, and forms of political organization. 3) Discuss the relative importance of religion, ethnicity, estate, and dynastic loyalty in early-modern Muscovite identities.

### **Week 4: Forging a multiethnic state**

**Background:** 1) Bushkovitch, “The Emergence of Russia” in *CHR*, 37-58.

**Primary sources:** 1) Kaiser and Marker, *RRH*, 147-153, 154-163, 172-179, 180-192.

**Learning goals:** 1) Explain what early-modern Muscovites might have meant when they called themselves “slaves” of the Tsar and describe the concept of *mestnichestvo*. 2) Reflect on the historical significance of Ivan’s conquest of Kazan’, Astrakhan’, and their Turkic Muslim inhabitants. 3) Give an overview of the main actors and interests involved in the scramble for power after the end of the Rurikid Dynasty.

### **Week 5: Expansion between the Baltic and Black Seas**

#### **Essay exam distributed on Monday (due next Monday!)**

**Background:** 1) Bushkovitch, “Consolidation and Revolt” in *CHR*, 59-78.

**Primary sources:** Translated text of the Treaty of Hadiach (1658).

**Learning goals:** 1) Explain the roots of the destabilization of Poland-Lithuania after 1648. 2) Compare and contrast how the Russian Tsar and Cossack Hetman

understood their new relationship after 1654. 3) Account for how the situation in the Ottoman Empire contributed to Russia's southward expansion.

#### **Week 6: The Petrine project**

##### **Essay exams due by the end of the day on Monday!**

**Background:** 1) Bushkovitch, "Peter the Great" in *CHR*, 79-100.

**Primary sources:** 1) The Bendery Constitution of 1710 (available on Blackboard).

**Learning goals:** 1) Explain how Enlightenment ideas reached Russia and inspired Peter's style of rule. 2) Describe Peter's main reforms and assess the degree to which they constituted a "revolution." 3) Reconstruct the motives and calculations of the Cossacks who turned against Peter at Poltava and wrote the Bendery Constitution.

#### **Week 7: Enlightenment and empire under Catherine**

##### **Primary source project distributed on Monday (due in Week 9!)**

**Background:** 1) Bushkovitch, "Catherine the Great" in *CHR*, 117-137.

**Primary sources:** Kaiser and Marker, *RRH*, 223-231, 232-241, 241-245, 246-255.  
2) *Ukazy* (decrees) of Emel'ian Pugachev, 1773-1774 (available on Blackboard).

**Learning goals:** 1) Provide a definition of "enlightened despotism" and trace its historical origins. 2) Explain Catherine's approach to governing a religiously and ethnically diverse population as her empire expanded. 3) Discuss the social roots of Pugachev's rebellion and the reasons for its appeal to many peasants.

#### **Week 8: Reaction in the age of revolution**

**Background:** 1) Bushkovitch, "Russia in the Age of Revolution" in *CHR*, 138-154.

**Primary sources:** 1) Polish constitution of 3 May 1791 (available on Blackboard). 2) Mikhail Bakunin, "Appeal to the Slavs" (available on Blackboard).

**Learning goals:** 1) Explain how the emergence of modern nationalism and republicanism challenged Tsarist rule and provoked counterrevolutionary policies. 2) Determine the degree to which Russification formed a coherent state policy and explain how it impacted different populations. 3) Locate the Russian Empire within the system of European states that emerged from the Napoleonic wars.

#### **Week 9: The discovery of "the people"**

##### **Primary source project is due by the end of Monday!**

**Background:** 1) Bushkovitch, "The Pinnacle of Autocracy" and "Culture and Autocracy" in *CHR*, 155-185.

**Primary sources:** 1) Mikhail Lermontov, "Taman" (available on Blackboard). 2)



Mykola Kostomarov, "Books of the Genesis of the Ukrainian People" (available on Blackboard).

**Learning goals:** 1) Explain how romantic nationalism arose in the context of the Napoleonic Wars and why its proponents challenged Enlightenment universalism. 2) Describe the main points of disagreement between the Slavophiles and Westernizers in the mid-nineteenth century and link them to concrete social and political issues in the Russian Empire. 3) Give a brief sketch of Marx's theory of historical materialism and explain its limitations in the Russian case.

#### **Week 10: Russia's colonial mission and the "Orient"**

##### **Debate analysis distributed on Monday (due in Week 12!)**

**Background:** 1) Kappeler, "Colonial Expansion in Asia in the Nineteenth Century" in *REMH*, 168-208.

**Primary source:** 1) Aleksandr Pushkin, "A Prisoner of the Caucasus" (available on Blackboard).

**Learning goals:** 1) Discuss the impact of the advance into the Caucasus on ideas of Russian identity in contemporary art and literature. 2) Compare and contrast Russia's style of colonial rule in Central Asia with those of other empires, namely Britain. 3) Explain how the creation of knowledge about the Caucasus and Central Asia influenced Russian approaches to governing these territories.

#### **Week 11: The Great Reforms**

**Background:** 1) Bushkovitch, "The Era of the Great Reforms" in *CHR*, 186-207.

**Primary sources:** 1) Kaiser and Marker, *RRH*, 428-435, 436-442. 2) Lev Tolstoy, excerpts from the *Sevastopol Sketches* (available on Blackboard).

**Learning goals:** 1) Identify the main reasons for Russia's defeat in the Crimean War and how Alexander sought to address them. 2) Describe the major reforms introduced under Alexander and evaluate how they played out in practice. 3) Explain the longevity of serfdom in the Russian Empire and assess the degree to which its abolition impacted the lives of peasants in different regions, such as Poland and Ukraine.

#### **Week 12: Industrialization**

##### **Debate project is due by the end of Monday!**

**Background:** 1) Bushkovitch, "From Serfdom to Nascent Capitalism" in *CHR*, 208-227.

**Primary source:** 1) Theodor Herzl, *The Jewish State* (available on Blackboard).

**Learning goals:** 1) Account for the relative earliness of Polish industrialization within the Russian Empire. 2) Explain the factors behind the decision of the imperial

authorities to embark upon state-directed industrialization in the 1890s. 3) Compare Russia's experience with industrialization to those of other parts of the world, including the United States, Britain, Germany, and Japan.

### **Week 13: Modernity and mass politics**

#### **Final paper guidelines distributed (due in Week 15!)**

**Background:** 1) Bushkovitch, "Autocracy in Decline" in *CHR*, 272-291.

**Primary sources:** 1) "The Saint Petersburg Workingmen's Petition to Tsar Nicholas II" (available on Blackboard). 2) Vladimir Lenin, "The Beginning of the Revolution in Russia" (available on Blackboard).

**Learning goals:** 1) Describe the major orientations in the Russian labor movement that emerged between the 1890s and 1905. 2) Come up with definitions for "federalism," "autonomy," and "nation-state," explaining how each compares to your understanding of "empire." 3) Identify the major social pressures that drove the Revolution of 1905 and the novel forms of labor and parliamentary democracy that emerged from the turmoil.

### **Week 14: Paper ideas and strategies**

**Monday:** Informal presentations on paper topics and time to discuss research and writing strategies

### **Week 15: World war and imperial crisis**

**Background:** 1) Bushkovitch, "War and Revolution," in *CHR*, 293-317.

**Primary sources:** 1) Documents of the Ukrainian Central Rada (available on Blackboard).

**Learning goals:** 1) Identify the proximate and structural causes of the First World War and weigh their relative importance. 2) Explain the structural origins of the collapse of Russia's war effort against Germany and Austria-Hungary by 1917. 3) Distinguish between the two revolutions of 1917 and explain their social causes.

### **Week 16: Into the Soviet experiment**

**Background:** 1) Bushkovitch, "Compromise and Preparation," in *CHR*, 318-333.

**Primary sources:** 1) Extracts from the Twelfth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (1923)

**Learning goals:** 1) Assess the degree to which different "turning points" (e.g. 1917, 1922, 1928) constituted a break between the Tsarist and Soviet systems. 2) Explain the logic behind the New Economic Policy and Stalin's "great break."

### **Week 17: Examination week**

**Final papers are due by the end of Monday!**