This course aims to introduce students to the defining debates of the Enlightenment in two very different places—France and Russia—that nonetheless have in common a commitment to political absolutism. We will take a comparative approach to the study of the Enlightenment period—a key moment in the transition toward modernity—in order to give students a more nuanced understanding of how the cultural myths and ideals that have come to define the era are both specific to their context, and developed in conversation with other perspectives, narratives, and models. By the conclusion to the course, students will have broad knowledge of two very distinct Enlightenment contexts, and a sense of the way in which the "timeline" of Enlightenment varies across cultures, often in surprising (and enlightening) ways.

The course takes as its central rubric the problem of "enlightenment and absolutism," or the relationship of new intellectual developments (in literature, arts, culture, and philosophy) to the consolidation and centralization of state power. This was a process that played out in France and Russia with very different effects, but that had, in both cases, a crucial influence, as Reinhart Koselleck has argued, on the trajectory of Enlightenment as a critical endeavor. In addition to giving students an introduction to significant moments in this history in both France and Russia—the birth of absolutism and its institutions, the reaction to the problem of the absolute ruler in early and late enlightenment thought, the crisis of absolutism toward the end of the century—this course will study the forms of exchange and transmission linking the French and Russian Enlightenments across the eighteenth century—processes that were themselves shaped (and often directly sponsored) by the absolutist state. More specific areas of inquiry will include: the new iconography of absolutism and the "querelle" of the ancients and moderns, absolutism and empire, salon culture and journalism under absolutism, the rise of the public sphere, the libertine critique of the subject of absolutism, absolutism and the new science, women and sentimentalism in political context. We will read key Enlightenment (and pre-Enlightenment) authors such as d'Argens, Boileau, Chulkov, Dashkova, Diderot, Montesquieu, and Radishchev, among others. Students with an interest in the French and Russian eighteenth centuries, the pre-history of modernity, and the relationship of intellectual life to political critique are encouraged to enroll. Readings will be available in French, Russian, and English.

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