

Hist 4004: Topics in Social and Cultural History

AMERICA IN THE NUCLEAR AGE

CRN 95056, Tuesdays 2:00-4:50, 427 Major Williams
Fall 2001

Instructor: Dr. Mark V. Barrow, Jr.

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Office Hours: M, W 1-2 p.m., and by appt.

The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything save our mode of thinking, and thus we drift toward unparalleled catastrophe. --Albert Einstein

Prerequisites:

This course is one of a series of writing-intensive, senior-level seminars designed primarily for history majors. The formal prerequisites include: Hist 2004, one other history class, and junior or senior standing. These requirements may be waived at the instructor's discretion for qualified students.

Objectives:

Although scientists had long dreamed of unlocking the power of the atom, not until World War II did they finally figure out how to achieve that goal. Since then atomic energy--in all its guises--has had a powerful impact on American life. The bomb has transformed our culture, fostered the growth of peace and environmental movements, revolutionized foreign relations and military strategy, and shaken our confidence in science, technology, and government. This course uses readings, videos, student-led discussions, writing assignments, and a major research paper to explore the far-reaching implications of nuclear technologies for American history and culture.

Requirements:

1. Attendance and Participation: This class is designed to facilitate active learning and give students a primary role in the presentation and discussion of class material. To achieve these goals, students are expected to attend each class meeting, to complete the assigned reading before class, and to offer informed contributions to the class discussion.

2. Reaction Papers: To sharpen writing skills, help focus ideas, and facilitate discussion, on most weeks during the first two-thirds of the semester each participant will turn in a short (ca. 1 p., double spaced) reaction paper. While I may occasionally assign specific topics for the reaction papers, in most cases you will be given wide latitude in how you approach this assignment. You may assess the strengths and weaknesses of the assigned reading, respond to its major arguments, critically examine its theoretical and/or methodological frameworks, relate it to other readings for the course, or some combination of these approaches. Simple summaries will not suffice; reaction papers must come to terms with the significance and meaning of the reading. I want you to

demonstrate that you have read and given serious thought to the material for that week. Regardless of the particular strategy you adopt for doing this, your reaction papers should also be concise, well-written, and carefully proofread. Reaction papers will be graded using an informal check/check+/- check- evaluation system. Occasionally we may also do peer evaluations of them. Reaction papers must be turned in by the beginning of the class in which they are due to receive credit; failure to turn in reaction papers will result in a grade of zero for that assignment.

3. Discussion Anchors: Each week one or more volunteers (depending on the final size of the class) will be responsible for leading class discussion. Discussion anchors are expected to be especially familiar with the reading for the day and to compose a brief set of questions to help guide our discussions. They will also want to view the videos scheduled for that session and help decide when would be the most appropriate point during class to show them. Discussion anchors must post their individual reaction paper(s) (each anchor should complete one on weeks when there are two or more anchors) and a single set of broad discussion questions (which should be jointly constructed when there are two or more anchors) on the class listserv no later than twenty-four hours before class. During class they will not only be responsible for leading discussion, but also be available to answer questions, share resources, and summarize major arguments of the reading. No formal presentation is necessary, but discussion anchors may provide a brief introduction to the discussion if they wish. Creative formats for discussion (e.g., class debates, in-class group projects, etc.) are welcome.

4. Research Paper: All participants in the seminar are required to complete a ca. 15 page double-spaced (or ca. 3,750 word) paper on a topic of their choice (to be negotiated with the instructor). The paper must be based on original research and use a range of appropriate primary and secondary source materials. It should also contain proper documentation (notes and bibliography) cited in the standard format historians generally use (i.e., the styles in Kate Turabian, *Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, or Dissertations*, 6th ed., or *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 14th ed.). Early initiation and consistent effort throughout the term are crucial to the production of a successful paper. To encourage students to begin working early and to provide opportunities for feedback from others in the course, participants will occasionally be asked to report to the class on how their work is progressing. In addition, a preliminary topic choice, an abstract/working bibliography, and an initial draft are due according to the schedule below. At one of the sessions near the end of the semester, students will formally present their research to the rest of the class. The final paper is due on the last day of class (see schedule, below).

Some ideas for appropriate research paper topics:

Japanese Reaction to Hiroshima and/or Nagasaki

The Enola Gay Controversy

The Bomb as Depicted in Art, Literature, Music, or Film

Debates about the Effects of Fallout (e.g., Atomic Veterans and Downwinders)

The Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission

Atomic Espionage (e.g., Julius and Ethel Rosenberg or Klaus Fuchs)
Civil Defense and Bomb Shelters
National Committee for Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE)
The Development of Commercial Nuclear Reactors
Nuclear Disasters (e.g., Three Mile Island or Chernobyl)
Human Radiation Experiments
Anti-Nuclear Protest (against nuclear weapons and/or nuclear power)
Evolution of Nuclear Weapons Policy (e.g., MAD, deterrence, etc.)
Radiation before the Bomb
The Cuban Missile Crisis
Biographical explorations of major figures associated with the bomb or nuclear energy
Antiballistic Missile Systems (Star Wars)
Nuclear Terrorism and Proliferation

This list is not exhaustive, but only meant to suggest the broad range of possible topics that might be explored in a research paper for this seminar. Whatever topic the student chooses, it should be historical in orientation and cleared with me before proceeding.

5. Reading: The following books ordered at the University Bookstore, Volume Two Bookstore, and the Tech Bookstore. They are also on reserve at Newman Library.

Ronald Takaki, *Hiroshima: Why America Dropped the Bomb*
John Hersey, *Hiroshima*, new ed.
Allan Winkler, *Life Under a Cloud: American Anxiety about the Atom*
Herbert York, *The Advisors: Oppenheimer, Teller, and the Superbomb*
Robert Kennedy, *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis*
Jonathan Schell, *The Fate of the Earth*

In addition to the assigned books, supplemental readings will occasionally be passed out in class or posted on the Web.

6. Grades: Grades for the course will be based on the following:

Attendance and participation 20%
Reaction papers 20%
Discussion anchor 10%
Abstract and bibliography 5%
Draft research paper 10%
Research presentation 10%
Final research paper 25%

7. Honor Code: Students are expected to follow the Virginia Tech Honor Code for all assignments. I don't mind if you consult with your classmates for homework and paper assignments, but any work you turn in should ultimately represent your own thoughts and words. Otherwise we would all be forced to live in a world of deceit and distrust that most of us would prefer not to inhabit.

Optional Film Series:

Because films and videos provide an important window onto the development and impact of nuclear technologies, they will figure prominently in this course. In addition to regular screenings of videos in class, I plan to organize a nuclear film series on a regular night and location to be announced. This will provide an informal opportunity to learn more about the culture of the bomb through the eyes of Hollywood producers and documentary filmmakers. You can also learn more about your classmates and instructor. Attendance at this film series is optional, but highly recommended. Besides, it will be fun!

A Personal Note:

I am here to help you learn. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions, concerns, special needs, or difficulties related to this course (or even if you just want to talk about the issues it raises). I know that approaching a professor can be intimidating, but I want to assure you that I enjoy meeting with students, and I do everything possible to make myself accessible.

Schedule:

Subject to revision as necessary (any changes will be announced in class and posted on the class homepage). Reading assignments are to be completed by the time of class on the day they are listed below. Unless otherwise noted, the numbers in the reading assignment column refer to chapters. On-line readings are marked as OLR, and are available on the class schedule.