

HIST Major Seminar

FALL 2025

HIST 301E – Approaching the Past: Transnational, Colonial, and Postcolonial Histories

This course examines the practice of history from the nineteenth century to the present. We will examine the sources, methods, and theoretical assumptions that have shaped the historical craft in this period, as well as the deeper questions that all historians must confront, implicitly or explicitly: What is “history”? Who makes it and how? How do these questions figure into national, transnational, colonial and post-colonial histories? To address these issues, we will discuss the work of canonical and non-canonical historians from across the world, and from outside as well as inside the academy. The particular focus will be on the production of history from the rise of the nation-state through the spread of new imperialisms in the late nineteenth century and on to the emergence of the “Third World,” decolonization, and the “new globalization” over the course of the twentieth century. In weekly meetings we will analyze texts and how their authors define historical subjects/actors and processes, as well as the meanings of history for different audiences and eras.

Roger Kittleson

HIST 301F – Approaching the Past: Biographical Methods

This seminar grapples with the methodological, conceptual, theoretical, and ethical challenges of writing biography, and of using biography as an approach for understanding the past. We will ask how historians attempt to understand the past through the lives of individuals; and how historians attempt to understand the lives of individuals through a wide range of interpretive methods. As we explore the goals, challenges, and possibilities of the genre of biography as practiced by historians, we will consider questions about archival abundance and archival scarcity; about the contested meanings of “facts” and the function of imagination; and about the different scales and categories of analysis used by historians writing biographies. We will consider a variety of answers to these questions by reading theoretical work about history and biography, as well as by reading examples that represent a wide range of theoretical and methodological approaches.

Sara Dubow

HIST Major Seminar

SPRING 2026

HIST 301B – Approaching the Past: Contemplating American Power

Historians have long debated how best to approach the study of U.S. “diplomatic history,” which is now often subsumed under the more capacious descriptor “The United States and the World.” In the 1960s, prevailing orthodox interpretations of American power—often patriotic and elitist—gave way to challenges from New Left revisionist historians who focused largely on economic motives for American imperialism. By the 1970s, however, the once dominant historical field of diplomatic history was beset by a sense of crisis; its practitioners consumed with anxiety over their marginalization in a discipline that embraced social and cultural theories that seemed to render the narrow study of Western white men in power increasingly obsolete. For the past half-century, historians of American foreign relations have engaged in a sustained and ever-shifting debate, not only about the nature of American power, but over what can and should be included within the field’s parameters. Today, annual meetings of the Society for American Foreign Relations—and its marquee journal, *Diplomatic History*—feature scholarship ranging from “traditional” approaches to those centered on gender, sexuality, race, cultural exchange, emotion, environmental studies, sports, music, and more. Yet, debates still rage about whether this broadening has enriched the study of American power, or diluted it to the point of meaninglessness while discouraging young scholars from pursuing critical research on high-level diplomacy. In this course, we will grapple with key historiographical schools and critical debates, and assess the current state-of-the-field of diplomatic history.

Jessica Chapman

HIST 301G – Approaching the Past: Writing the Past

“History” refers to the aggregate of past events as well as to the branch of knowledge that seeks to understand those past events. Whereas history courses often take as their content the first of these two meanings of history, focusing on the politics, society, and culture of a particular place in a particular historical era, this course will examine history’s often concealed “other” meaning: the practices of historians, their methods and assumptions. In so doing, this course aims to unsettle history majors’ own assumptions about what history “is” and what historians “do”. How do historians reconstruct the past, and how and why have their approaches to sources, theories, and narrative strategies changed over time? And on a deeper level, how have historians’ suppositions changed—if they have changed—about the nature of historical truth, knowledge, and the value of history to the societies in which they wrote? Taking history-writing itself as our object of study, over the course of the semester we will read the work of twelve, quite different historians from the classical to the modern era. Each week in our seminar meetings, we will subject these texts to a careful reading in order to understand and assess these historians’ theories and practices.

Alexandra Garbarini