In this seminar we will read a selection of political novels—novels about politics, but also novels that themselves became political agents—from the Russian literary canon. Since its flourishing in the nineteenth century and throughout the Soviet period, the Russian novel has been considered a privileged locus for the debate of social issues and political views, emerging as a critical space for the circulation of ideas in the absence of a consistently free press. Starting with Dostoevsky and Bely’s novels about terrorism, we will consider how literature responded to the radicalism of late imperial Russia and the crisis of an ever more disillusioned youth. With Pasternak, we will discuss a novel whose challenges to the state prevented its publication in the Soviet Union until its final years, yet also resulted in a sympathetic reception abroad. Our final text will be Sorokin’s recent novel, which layers premodern Russian history with a futuristic setting to critique institutions of power in the age of Putin. Additional topics of discussion will include: the literary representation of modernity and its pressures, especially the relation of the people to the state; the novel of ideas: conservatism, liberalism, progressivism, radicalism; the
politics of publication from imperial censorship to the Cold War; literature as a form of political activism, critique, and satire; and the social and cultural legacy of the “classic” Russian novel.

Readings and discussion in English.

Required Texts
Andrei Bely, Petersburg (trans. Maguire and Malmstad, Indiana 1979)

All books may be purchased at the Yale University Bookstore.
All other texts and supplementary readings will be available on Canvas.

Course Requirements
1. Regular attendance, participation in discussion—20%
2. 2 short papers (4–6 pp.)—40%
3. 1 “op-ed” (2 pp.)—20%
4. 1 final exam—20%

Schedule of Readings and Lectures

05.29 Introduction: Politics in the Russian Novel
06.05 Dostoevsky, Demons (1871–72)
06.07 Dostoevsky, Demons (1871–72)
06.12 Bely, Petersburg (1913)
06.14 Bely, Petersburg (1913)
06.19 Pasternak, Doctor Zhivago (1957)
06.21 Pasternak, Doctor Zhivago (1957)
Evening: Film screening, Doctor Zhivago (Lean, 1965)

06.26 Sorokin, Day of the Oprichnik (2006)
06.28 Conclusion and in-class final exam

“Op-ed” due by 5 PM on 06.29