Preliminary Examination: Russian History
(Spring 2009)

Read through the questions carefully and decide how you wish to answer them. Relax. Good luck.

Choose three of the following five questions (be sure that at least one answer engages the period before 1815):

1. The Muscovite and early Imperial periods of Russian history (ca. 14th-18th centuries) have long been notorious for a scarcity of sources shedding light on social life and social thought. In recent decades, however, scholars have turned to a number of new sources—rituals, maps, judicial and administrative records, and others—to reconstruct everyday life and the social imaginary during this period. Write an essay that outlines some emerging understandings of early Russian society in its practical as well as intellectual dimensions, and also provides some comment as to which of these traditions retained the most power into the 19th and 20th centuries.

2. What is the meaning of “empire” in Russian and Soviet history? What categories are most useful for interpreting the relations between the Russian center and the multiple ethnicities and nations that constituted Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union: empire, imperialism, colonialism, frontier, Orientalism, etc.? Focusing on the 19th and 20th centuries, what have been the key principles (or ideologies) and forms of Russian relations with non-Russians within the borders of the state?

3. In recent years, the study of religion and spirituality in Russian and Soviet history has received much new attention. Adding to an older historiography focusing on the Church and theology, new work views religion as entwined with other aspects of social, cultural, and political life. Focusing on a two or three periods of your choosing from the pre-Muscovite era to the present (choose periods that best allow you to discuss comparative methodologies), examine how religion fits into interpretations of Russian history. Describe the approaches of some of the historians working in this area.

4. What was “cultural revolution” in Soviet theory and in practice? Focusing on the period from 1918 to about 1934, discuss the meanings and practices of “cultural revolution.” Were there multiple cultural revolutions? Were they sponsored or spontaneous? You may choose examples from particular fields of cultural practice to illustrate your discussion.

5. World War II is often treated as a great watershed in Soviet life. Most histories of “Stalinism,” on the one hand, focus on the 1930s, while many recent studies of the Soviet Union have centered on its history “post-war.” To what extent is this customary division justified? How much was the course of Soviet history transformed by World War II, and how, specifically? What, on the other hand, are the most important continuities between pre- and post-war life in the Soviet Union?