

## **History 600. Oil: Local and Global Histories**

This course considers the oil industry in the nineteenth and, primarily, twentieth centuries from a wide range of perspectives. By exploring the political, economic, environmental, social, and cultural interaction of human society with this most modern of commodities, we will develop a multi-faceted understanding of our own material culture. The syllabus emphasizes the extent to which oil is not only a global good, held accountable for war and peace, poverty and prosperity – but also the ways in which oil industries are locally, regionally, and nationally colored.

Wherever oil is discovered, exploited, distributed, refined, sold, and consumed, certain questions arise – questions about power and money, but also about social status, economic development, gender relations, the relationship between human beings and the environment, exploitation, landscape, national identity and more. Can we expect to find uniform answers? Does the logic of the oil industry defy local, regional and national cultures, political institutions, social and economic structures, and environmental conditions? Or, is the outcome of the contest between human society and ‘Mother Nature’ over who will control how, when, and why oil is used determined to a large extent by particular, rather than universal, considerations?

Oil, of little interest to humans before the 1850s, has since then been looked for – and found – on every inhabited continent. The USA (Pennsylvania, Indiana, Texas, California, Alaska, Louisiana), the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, Austria-Hungary (Poland, Ukraine), Mexico, Scotland (North Sea), Australia, Venezuela, Argentina, Nigeria, Indonesia, India, Persia (Iran), the Arab states of the Middle East (Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait, etc.) – all boast (or boasted) oil industries (as do many states and regions not listed here). In each of these regions, the exploration for and exploitation of oil affected human society and culture – and human society and culture affected the ways in which the oil industry developed.

### **Requirements**

Attendance at and regular and enthusiastic participation in all meetings of the seminar are required. In addition, each student will prepare two presentations and two papers.

#### *First Presentations (15 minutes)*

In every session from Week 7 through Week 14, two students will present an analysis of one oil industry each. The students will suggest important themes and questions that arise from the reading as a catalyst for group discussion.

#### *First Paper (5-7 pages)*

The first paper will address the topic of the student’s first (regional) presentation.

#### *Second Presentation (5-7 minutes)*

Our last session will be devoted to brief presentations of the thesis and argument each student has developed for the second paper.

#### *Second Paper (12-15 pages)*

Over the course of the semester, students will choose (in consultation with the instructor) a theme to explore in further depth in a second paper, due at the end of the term. Possible themes will develop from keywords like the following:

- Women and Men (gendered labor, gendered industry)
- Colonialism, Metropolises and Colonies, Centers and Peripheries
- Workers, Peasants, Wildcatters.
- Boomtowns.
- Financial Empires.
- Big business, Cartels, Trusts.
- Economic development, Industry, Modernization
- War and the Mechanization of Warfare.
- Spills, Explosions, Fires – Environmental Catastrophe.
- Derricks, Pipelines, Smokestacks – Landscape.
- Geopolitics.
- Everyday Life – Evenings, Leisure, Lamps, Lighting.
- Nationalism, National Identity
- Oilmen: Heroes, Villains

**Preliminary Schedule (may change slightly)**

Part One: The Global

Week 1	Oil: Images and Impressions at the turn of the twenty-first century
Week 2	The Global Quest for Oil, Money and Power
Week 3	Oil and the Environment
Week 4	Oil and 'Everyday life' before the Internal Combustion Engine
Week 5	Oil and the Law
Week 6	Oil and Society

Part Two: The Local

Week 7	Pennsylvania, Texas
Week 8	Romania, Galicia
Week 9	Russian Empire
Week 10	Mexico, Venezuela
Week 11	India, Indonesia
Week 12	Persia, Mesopotamia
Week 13	OPEC
Week 14	North Sea, Nigeria
Week 15	Summary and Student Paper Presentations

**To Register:**

**Students interested in taking this course will be required to submit a 1-2 page essay answering the following question:**

“When does the history of oil begin? When does the history of the oil industry begin?”

Interested students should send their essays, along with a brief statement a) explaining their interest in the course, and b) listing previous history courses they have taken, to Professor Alison Frank via email: [alisonfrank@wisc.edu](mailto:alisonfrank@wisc.edu). Essays will be evaluated on a “first-come, first-serve” basis.