

**Global Legal History
AS.100.453.01
Johns Hopkins University
Spring 2026**

**Draft Syllabus
(Jan. 21, 2026)**

**Mondays, 4:30pm - 7:00pm
Gilman 381**

Instructor: Prof. James Loeffler

Office: Gilman 394

<https://history.jhu.edu/directory/james-loeffler/>

Office hours: Tuesdays, 12:30-1:30 and by appointment

Course Description

Where does our law come from? Can we speak of law's past in terms of a single global story? Does the recent rise of modern international law reflect a triumph of universal human ethics over state power or a displacement of politics and hierarchy into new forms? This course explores these and other questions about the nature of law in global perspective. Our focus is on the intertwined stories of the globalization and formal legalization of the world from the eighteenth century to the present. We will focus on nationalism and empire, war and atrocity, economics and ideology as drivers of legal change. Our goal will be to understand how law is understood by different historical actors across the world and down through time.

The conceptual goals of the course are two-fold: (1) to introduce students to critical historical methods of examining the past and its relationship to present-day legal, political, and moral questions; and (2) to guide students through the process of developing and completing individual research projects on subjects of their own choosing. Working closely with the instructor, students will learn to develop methods and skills for advanced academic research, project design, and scholarly writing.

Requirements and Grading

This course will be conducted seminar style. Students are expected to come prepared to engage reading assignments in detail and will take turns presenting specific readings to the class. This will be chosen by week 2. Besides active class participation, students will post one paragraph each week in which you discuss the week's theme/reading, either reflecting on some of the major points or posing a thoughtful question about the readings. Finally, students will work on a research project culminating in a ~5000-word essay on a topic of legal history selected in consultation with the instructor due on the

last day of class. If you prefer to pursue an UnEssay, a different form of final project in a creative vein such as a data-driven digital humanities narrative, an artistic interpretation, or something else, this can be arranged in consultation with me.

Student Class Participation 30%

One-page, single-spaced paper proposal, 5%

One-page bibliography, 5%

Reading Responses 10% [Due by 12PM on the day of class via Canvas Discussion]

Research Paper 50%

The above notwithstanding, to pass the course it is necessary to complete all assignments, including acceptable papers on approved topics, and to attend all class sessions. Multiple repeated absences will be grounds for failure. Students who need to miss class for religious holidays, family emergencies, athletic commitments or other reasons must obtain permission from the instructor prior to the date in question. The same applies to the submission of written assignments and exams. Late assignments will be penalized.

If you have a recognized accommodation, please let me know. If you are experiencing difficulties that affect your ability to participate in this course, you should feel free to discuss it with me at any time.

Grading Guide:

A+ 99-100 A 94-98 A- 90-93

B+ 87-89 B 84-86 B- 80-83

C+ 77-79 C 74-76 C- 70-73

D+ 67-69 D 64-66 D- 60-63

F Below 60

Required Reading

The books listed below are available for purchase and on E-Reserves.

Class Schedule

Week 1: Jan. 26 Global / Legal / History – On the Origin of Our Laws

Week 2: Feb. 2 Encounter

Hendrik Hartog, "Pigs and Positivism" *Wisconsin Law Review*

Berg, *Writing the History of the Global*, Introduction

Thomas Duve, "Global Legal History: A Methodological Approach" *Oxford Handbooks Online*

Brian Owensby, *Empire of Law and Indian Justice in Colonial Mexico*

Week 3: Feb. 9 Diffusion

Lauren Benton and Lisa Ford, *Rage for Order: The British Empire and the Origins of International Law, 1800–1850*

Emmanuelle Tourme Jouannet, "International Law as History and Culture," in E.T. Jouannet, *A Short Introduction to International Law*, 4-21

Week 4: Feb. 16 Agency

Draft Paper Proposal due by 5PM Feb. 18

Jessica Marglin, *The Shamama Case*

Week 5: Feb. 23 Space

Fahad Bishara, *A Sea of Debt: Law and Economic Life in the Western Indian Ocean, 1780-1950*

Week 6: March 2 Translation

Graded Paper Proposal due by 5PM March 3

Li Chen, *Chinese Law in Imperial Eyes: Sovereignty, Justice, and Transcultural Politics*

Week 7: March 9 Temporality

Draft Bibliography due by 5PM March 10

Natasha Wheatley, *The Life and Death of States: Central Europe and the Transformation of Modern Sovereignty*

Week 8: March 16 No Class – Spring Break

Week 9: March 23 Imagination

Graded Bibliography due by 5PM March 24

Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia*

Ingrid Wuerth, "International Law in the Post-Human Rights Era," *Texas Law Review*

Week 10 March 30 Research Week – In-Class Paper Workshop

Week 11 Apr. 6 Writing Week – No Class

Week 12 Apr. 13 Change

Leora Bilsky, *The Holocaust, Corporations, and the Law: Unfinished Business*

Week 13 Apr. 20 Harm

Rough Drafts due by beginning of class

Neeti Nair, *Hurt Sentiments: Secularism and Belonging in South Asia*

Week 14: Apr. 27 Conclusions

Final Paper due by 9AM on May 5