

HY3007 – Eastern and Central Europe under Communism



An artist in Bulgaria paints American cultural icons onto a Soviet Red Army monument. The caption reads 'In step with the times'

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First Semester

Five Credits

Wednesday

11-12 (Auxilia Lecture Hall 1)

1-2 (John Hume Lecture Hall 7)

Course Description

This module is about Eastern and Central Europe in the twentieth and the twenty-first history, and it is particularly concerned with the period of communist rule: where the communists came from, how they ruled the region (from the end of the Second World War until 1989), and what legacies they have left on it. This is not just a political history of the region - although we will certainly discuss the main political processes and events in our timeframe - we will also think about the 'lived experience' of the people under this political system. We will look at movies, and leisure time and how they shaped the communist experience. We will think about men and women under communism, sex and sexuality the LGBT experience (rarely a good one, I am sorry to say), support and resistance, complacency. We will listen to some socialist-era pop music and watch clips of popular TV shows. We'll think about what it was like to go on holiday in the socialist bloc, or visit the supermarket or the grocery store. We will explore the part played by personalities, leaders, the (communist) party, intellectuals, and the ordinary people in the establishment, maintenance, and eventual downfall of the communist system. Key questions will include: what was the lived experience of communism really like for the average person? Why did the system last so long? Why did it end when it did? And what are the long-term implications of this time for the future integration of Europe?

Course Structure

The course consists of lectures designed to address some of the broader themes and problems in Eastern and Central European history.

Our 'textbook' for the module is Richard Crampton's *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century and After* (1997). Also useful are Joseph Rothschild's *East Central Europe Between the Two World Wars* (for the interwar period), and his *Return to Diversity: A Political History of Eastern Central Europe after World War Two* (with Nancy Wingfield for the communist period and after).

Since understanding the experience of communism is such a large part of this module, it might also be useful to look at some general works on this topic. Highly recommended is Archie Brown's *The Rise and Fall of Communism* (2009), and Paulina Bren and Mary Neuberger's *Communism Unwrapped: Consumption in Cold War Eastern Europe* (2012), for an insight into consumerist culture under communism.

Assessment

30% 1,500 Case Study: Between Nationalism and Communism (due 1 November 11pm)

In the first of our two written assignments I want you to consider the relationship between two key political ideologies: nationalism and communism. You are to pick a single country in our area of study and consider the development of both nationalism/national identity and communism within the country in question, both before and after the communist takeovers of

1944-1948. In particular, I want you to consider the friction caused by the implementation of communism in a nation-state, the accommodations communists made or were forced to make to national sentiment, and the suitability of communism as a ruling ideology on the nation-state in question.

Countries: Albania, the Baltic States (Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia), Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Yugoslavia.

70% Final Project (due 4 Jan, 11pm)

The final project is an opportunity to explore in some detail one of the topics we have looked at over the course of module. You are to pick the topic (from our weekly sessions) and title question yourself, although I strongly recommend that you discuss this with me first during consultation hours. Especially high marks will be given to projects that make transnational comparisons between the various Eastern European countries, and which integrate into their answer the work of one or more of the individuals we have discussed during our lecture sessions.

Lectures

Week One, September 22: Introduction to Eastern and Central Europe

- **Lecture: Introduction: where and what is Eastern and Central Europe?**
- **Lecture: Course materials, assignments.**

In this session we will find out what we know (or think we know!) about Eastern Europe, and about how the region has been constructed throughout history. We will also use this session to go through course materials and talk about how the module will unfold.

All Read: there is no assigned reading for the first week, but it would be a good idea to try and get hold of our course textbook (Crampton) and take a look at it.

Week Two, 29 September: The Interwar Period

- **Lecture: Democracy, Authoritarianism and Fascism in the Interwar Period.**
- **Lecture: Karel Čapek, *The War with the Newts* (1936).**

In this session we will discuss the problems of the interwar period in Eastern Europe. This was initially, for many people, a period of optimism and hope as a region of nation-states emerged from the ruins of old empires at the end of the First World War. But democratic politics were quickly supplanted by authoritarianism in almost every single country. Why was this? And what are the long-term implications of this failure? This week will also be the first of our 'case studies' into a significant writer/intellectual from Eastern Europe. We will look at Czech philosopher, author, presidential favourite, and polymath Karel Čapek. We will discuss his *outré* satirical science-fiction masterpiece *The War with the Newts*, a novel

which ponders that all too likely scenario: a world war in which human beings are defeated and enslaved by intelligent three-foot tall newts.

All read: Joseph Rothschild, 'Introductory Survey' in *East Central Europe between the Two World Wars* [Moodle].

Further Reading:

- Margaret Macmillan, *Peacemakers: The Paris Peace Conference of 1919 and its attempt to End War* (2002) [sections on Eastern Europe].
- Thomas Ort, *Art and Life in Modernist Prague: Karel Čapek and His Generation, 1911-1938* (2013).
- Antony Polonsky, *The Little Dictators: The History of Eastern Europe since 1918* (1975).
- Zara Steiner, *The Lights that Failed: European International History 1919-1933* (2005) and *Triumph of the Dark: European International History 1933-1939* (2011) [sections on Eastern Europe].



Newts take over the world in Karel Čapek's science fiction masterpiece 'The War with the Newts'

Week Three, 6 October: The Second World War

- **Lecture: The Second World War: Occupation and Collaboration**
- **Lecture: The Second World War: Resistance**

In this session we will be looking at Second World War and its impact on the region. The entire region was for most of the war under Axis 'occupation', raising the question of collaboration or resistance, guilt, victimhood, and so on, questions which to this day remain

controversial and sensitive to many (and certainly did during the communist period). We will discuss these matters, and, of course, the Holocaust in Eastern Europe.

All Read: Istvan Deák ‘Introduction’ and Jan Gross ‘Themes for a Social History of War Experience and Collaboration’, in Istvan Deák, Jan Gross, Tony Judt (eds.), *The Politics of Retribution in Europe: World War Two and its Aftermath* [Moodle].

Further Reading:

- Mark Mazower, *Hitler’s Empire: How the Nazis Ruled Europe* (2008).
- Milovan Djilas, *Wartime* (1980).
- Norman Davies, *Rising 44: The Battle for Warsaw* (2004).
- Walter Roberts, *Tito, Mihailović and the Allies* (1987).

Week Four, 13 Oct: The Communist Takeovers

- **Lecture: The Stalinization of Eastern Europe, 1944-1948**
- **Lecture: Czesław Miłosz, *The Captive Mind* (1953)**

In this session we will look at how the communists, with the support of the Soviet Union, came to power after the Second World War. It is still unclear exactly what Stalin’s intentions for the region were in the wake of war, but it seems that within the context of the Cold War and worsening relations with the west, the Soviet dictator moved towards complete political and economic control of the region through the installation of loyal party regimes. Although in most cases small, the communists garnered significant support, since many people hoped that this new political system could deliver them from the evils of the past. We will also meet the first of our Eastern European writers and works, the Warsaw poet Czesław Miłosz and his work *The Captive Mind*, in which he explores how his friends, intellectuals and writers of the pre-war and wartime generation, critical thinkers all, could be lured into Stalinist conformity.

All Read: Norman Naimark, ‘Introduction’ in Norman Naimark (ed.), *The Establishment of Communist Regimes in Eastern Europe 1944-1949* [Moodle]

Further Reading:

- Vladimir Tismaneanu, *Stalinism Revisited: The Establishment of Communist Regimes in East-Central Europe* (2009).
- Georgi Dimitrov, *The Diary of Georgi Dimitrov, 1933-1939* (2003).



From the 'Monument to 1300 Years of the Bulgarian State', put up in 1981 in the city of Shumen, a prime example of the communist appropriated national history (this statue depicts a 'Khan' of the medieval Bulgarian empire)

Week Five, 20 October: The Tito/Stalin Split, Albania

- **Lecture: The Soviet/Yugoslav Split and its Consequences**
- **Lecture: The Last Stalinist? The Weird World of Enver Hoxha's Albania**

This week we will look at the first significant example of resistance to Soviet hegemony within the Eastern Bloc: that of Tito and Socialist Yugoslavia in 1948. We will examine the origins and the consequences of the split, paying particular attention to the party purges and state terror that followed in its wake. In our second session, we will stay with the Balkans but move to Albania, a tiny state whose hardline leader, Enver Hoxha, resisted throughout his reign all pressures to reform the communist system. This led Albania to some strange and far flung alliances, most notably Mao's China.

All Read: Geoffrey Swain, 'The Cominform: Tito's International?', *The Historical Journal*, 35, 3 (1992).

Further Reading:

- Milovan Djilas, *Conversations with Stalin* (2014).
- Carol Lilly, *Power and Persuasion: Ideology and Rhetoric in Communist Yugoslavia 1944-1953* (2001).
- Elidor Mëhilli *From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the Socialist World* (2017).

- Wayne S. Vucinich (ed.), *At the Brink of War and Peace: the Tito-Stalin Split in a Historic Perspective* (1982).

[READING WEEK]

Week Six, 3 Nov: Building Socialism, De-Stalinization

- **Lecture: Unfinished Utopias: Building Socialism in the 1950s**
- **Lecture: De-Stalinization, Uprisings in Poland and Hungary 1956**

This week we will look at the significant (but at the time rather mysterious) changes taking place in the communist world before and following the death of Stalin in 1953. We will look at the dramatic transformations on eastern and central European societies during this period. Rapid industrialization, urbanization, and collectivization uprooted and disorientated many people in the region, but also created professional and personal opportunities for many more. We will also discuss the new directions taken in the region following the death of Stalin. This seemed to be a period of relaxation and liberalization of the rigid Stalinist brand of communism enforced in Eastern Europe, and was initially met with optimism in the bloc. However, such optimism was shattered by the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, and event that shook the communist world to its very foundations.

Further Reading:

- Milovan Djilas, *Rise and Fall* (1986).
- Katherine A. LeBow *Unfinished Utopia: Now Huta, Stalinism, and Polish Society 1949-1956* (2013).
- Kevin McDermott, Matthew Stibbe (eds.), *Revolution and Resistance in Eastern Europe: Challenges to Communist Rule* (2006).

[PLEASE NOTE: FIRST ASSIGNMENT DUE 1 NOVEMBER]

Week Seven, 10 Nov: Life and Leisure on the Bloc

- **Lecture: ‘Life is Getting Better, Comrades’: Consumerism and Leisure Time**
- **Lecture: Screening Socialism: Cinema in Eastern and Central Europe**

This week we will take a break from the political narrative of Eastern European History to look at how people under communism relaxed and spent their free time. It is a common misconception of life under communism that there was no consumerism of any kind; in fact from the 1960s onwards the regimes in Eastern Europe promoted a watered down brand of consumerist society in order to placate and ‘de-politicize’ their populations. We will consider this apparent paradox of Eastern European communist society. We will also look at how

filmmakers adapted to and/or challenged the orthodoxies of the socialism system, in many cases producing films that gained international audiences and acclaim, and which are to this day considered classics of world cinema.

All Read: Patrick Hyder Patterson, 'Risky Business: What Was Really Being Sold in the Department Stores of Socialist Eastern Europe?', in Bren, Neuberger, *Communism Unwrapped*. [Moodle]

Further Reading:

- Patrick Hyder Patterson, *Bought and Sold: Living and Losing the Good Life in Socialist Yugoslavia* (2011).
- Imre Aniko, *A Companion to Eastern European Cinemas* (2012).
- Mary Neuberger, *Balkan Smoke: Tobacco and the Making of Modern Bulgaria* (2012).



'Three Tankmen and a Dog': a popular TV series from Poland

Week Eight, 17 Nov: Reform and Revolution

- **Lecture: The Prague Spring 1968**
- **Lecture, Václav Havel, 'The Power of the Powerless' (1978)**

This week we will look at the events surrounding the failed reform movement in 1960s Czechoslovakia and the subsequent Warsaw Pact invasion in 1968. The invasion was for many a signal that the communist system was simply irreformable and, moreover, that any attempt to change things would be forcibly put down. Many people abandoned politics in favour of apathetic detachment. But also, from the failures of 1968 arose a small but significant dissent movement across the bloc, most notably manifested in the Charter 77 movement and its inspirational leader Václav Havel, an author of absurdist plays whose essay 'The Power of the Powerless' seemed to offer a way out of the political and cultural malaise of the socialist system.

All Read: Václav Havel, 'The Power of the Powerless' (1978) [Moodle]

Further Reading:

- Paulina Bren, *The Greengrocer and his TV: The Culture of Communism After the 1968 Prague Spring* (2010).
- Jaromir Navratil, *The Prague Spring 1968: A National Security Archive Documents Reader* (1998).
- Kieran Williams, *The Prague Spring and its Aftermath: Czechoslovak Politics, 1968-1970* (1997).



Grudge match: the Czechoslovak ice hockey team celebrate victory over the USSR at the World Championships in Stockholm, Sweden. The tournament was originally to be held in Prague, but had to be moved due to the invasion and occupation of 1968.

Week Nine, 24 November: Late Socialism and the Solidarity Crisis in Poland

- Lecture: Poland and the Solidarity Crisis, 1980/1981
- Lecture: 'Think of me as Fire': Lyudmila Zhivkova and Late Socialism in Bulgaria

This week we will look at the rise of the Solidarity trade union movement in the Lenin Shipyards of the Polish city of Gdansk. This was a mass movement of workers that threatened to expose the communist regime's lie of representing the working classes in Poland, led by the inspirational electrician Lech Wałęsa. The communist government see-sawed in its dealings with Solidarity, initially hostile to the group, then treating with it, and finally outlawing the movement and imposing martial law on the country (in 1981). We will consider the reasons behind this inconsistent approach. We will also look at how 'late socialism' was experienced in Bulgaria in the 1980s, paying particular attention to the cultural work of Ludmila Zhivkova, the extremely popular daughter of Bulgarian communist leader Todor Zhivkov.

All Read: Timothy Garton Ash, 'Introduction: Why Poland? Why Workers? Why 1980?', in Garton Ash, *The Polish Revolution: Solidarity* (1984, 2nd ed. 2002).

Further Reading:

- Ivan Berend, *Europe since 1980* (2010) [sections on Eastern Europe].

Week Ten, 1 Dec: 1989

- **Lecture The Revolutions of 1989: Velvet Revolutions.**
- **Lecture The Revolutions of 1989: Nicolae Ceaușescu's Romania.**

This week we will look at the end of communism in 1989, an entirely unexpected historical juncture in which one by one, and almost without exception, the communist regimes were swept away in a tide of popular protest. We will look at the political and social impetuses behind these dramatic transformations, ask why it could not have happened earlier, and consider why these revolutions were in large part non-violent affairs (with the important exception of Romania, which we will discuss in detail, and Yugoslavia, dealt with in the following week's lecture).

All Read: Ivo Banac, 'Introduction', in Banac (ed.), *Eastern Europe in Revolution*. [Moodle]

Further Reading:

- Timothy Garton Ash, *The Uses of Adversity: Essays on the Fate of Central Europe* (1999).
- Vladimir Tismaneanu, *The End and the Beginning: The Revolutions of 1989 and the Resurgence of History* (2012).
- Stephen Kotkin, *Uncivil Society: 1989 and the Implosion of the Communist Establishment* (2010).

Week Eleven, 8 Dec: War in the Balkans

- **Lecture: Yugoslavia Disintegrates 1980-1991**
- **Lecture: War and Ethnic Conflict in the Balkans, 1991-2001**

In this session we will look at the violent demise of socialist Yugoslavia during the 1980s and 1990s. Of great importance in this session is the figure of Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević and his utilization of Serbian nationalist grievances in Kosovo, as well as the role played by Serbian intellectuals in nurturing and inflaming those grievances. Our first session will look at socialist Yugoslavia and its breakdown at the end of the 1980s, our second session will focus on the wars themselves.

All Read: Andrew Wachtel and Christopher Bennett, 'The Dissolution of Yugoslavia', in Charles Ingrao and Thomas A. Emmert, *Confronting the Yugoslav Controversies*. [Moodle]

Week Twelve, 15 Dec: Post-communism

- **Lecture: Years of Transition: Eastern Europe in the 1990s, the region's 'Illiberal Turn' in the 21st Century.**
- **Lecture: Conclusions, discussion about final assignment.**

In this final session we will look at Eastern Europe in the quarter-century since the fall of communism. Predictably enough, the initial euphoria of 1989 gave way to the serious and stern work of economic and political transition to free-market capitalism. This was a taxing and at times frustrating process, although many of the countries formerly of the Eastern Bloc had achieved the goal of membership into the EU by the early years of the twenty-first century. Today, the spectres of the communist past, along with those of the interwar and Second World War authoritarianisms, continue to haunt many of the countries in question. The Euro-zone crisis since 2008 has made the European Union seem like less of an economic and social model that it once did, and many countries are beginning to re-assess their position within the union and with their own past. Liberal democracy and economy do not have the same appeal as they did at the beginning of the 1990s, as the trajectory of Hungary in the last few years shows.

All Read: Holly Case and John Palattella, 'Is humour the best weapon against Europe's new wave of toxic xenophobic nationalism?', *The Guardian*, 6/1/2016 [available online]

Further Reading:

- Paul Lendvai, *Hungary: Between Democracy and Authoritarianism* (2012)
- Paul Lendvai *Orbán: Europe's New Strongman* (2019)



Czechoslovak cartoon character Krtek ('the Little Mole') heads off into the cosmos on his rocket. Krtek was and is a beloved character by people throughout the Eastern Bloc and beyond (and including your lecturer!).