Social and Political Change in Eastern Europe

This course focuses on Eastern Europe as the first “relatively backward” region in the world capitalist system. We will begin with a historical introduction to the region that raises questions about the causes and consequences of this relative backwardness. Next, we will turn to communist revolutions, Stalinism, reform communism, the rise of dissent, and the revolutions of 1989. Finally, we will discuss the problems of the post-communist era, including attempts to build democracy and capitalism, the rise of nationalism, and social problems such as increasing inequalities and the shifting politics of gender and labor.

It is our hope that in studying the developmental history of Eastern Europe, students will acquire not only historical knowledge of the region and its problems, but also develop new conceptual tools for studying social change in the non-Western world. As a region that has undergone several cycles of economic and political transformation and tried out a variety of different developmental models, but which still faces the challenge of modernization, Eastern Europe provides a good starting point for analyzing the problems of social change and political transformation more generally.

Plan of the Course

The course is divided into three parts.

In the first part of the course, we will explore how Eastern Europe became the “other Europe.” Specifically, we will examine some of the main factors that impeded the growth of capitalism and liberal institutions in Eastern Europe, relegating its peoples to a “peripheral” status in the world capitalist system. What were the reasons for the “relative backwardness” of Eastern Europe vis-à-vis the Western countries and what were the political consequences of its economic lag? We will also take a look at the developmental problems faced by the predominantly peasant societies of inter-war Eastern Europe.

In part two, we will explore the rise of Communism as a developmental alternative to Western capitalism, beginning with an examination of the social base of communist movements and the sources of its attraction to intellectual elites. We will then move on to the reasons of discontent with the Stalinist model which led to the Polish and Hungarian revolts of 1956 and the
Prague Spring of 1968. Why did so many intellectuals become disillusioned with “real, existing socialism” and why did they become dissidents? How was it that a multi-million working-class movement (Solidarity) arose in a socialist country ruled in the name of the interests of that very working class? Finally, how did communism collapse so quickly throughout Eastern Europe?

In part three, we explore the dilemmas posed by the demise of communism as an alternative to Western capitalism and liberal democracy. In particular, we focus on three distinct challenges that face post-communist Eastern Europe: building democracy, market transformation, and the construction of viable nation-states. More specifically, we try to show that these goals are not always compatible and are sometimes contradictory, with the consequence of exacerbating national and social tensions in the region. One tragic example of the obstacles which nationalism has posed to socio-economic and political transformation along liberal lines is the war in former Yugoslavia whose roots and course we explore in some detail. We then move on to a consideration of post-communist social problems, especially those relating to gender relations and the politics of labor. Finally, we conclude with some theoretically and historically grounded speculation on the future of this troubled and fascinating region of the world.

Required Books


These books are available for purchase in the bookstore and have also been placed on reserve at the reference desk in Mudd Library. All other required readings can be located on the Blackboard site for the class under “course documents.” They can be downloaded and printed for personal use only.

Course Requirements

Requirements for this class include regular attendance (including at the two film screenings and one public lecture outside of regular class time), participation in the Blackboard discussion forum, a short film response paper (4 pages), two 6-7 page essays, and a final examination. Grades will be determined on the following basis:

Class attendance (plus 2 film screenings and public lecture), participation, and Blackboard 20%
Film response paper 15%
First essay 20%
Second essay 20%
Final examination 25%

Course Policy

We ask that you not use laptop computers or other electronic devices during class time. While some use laptops solely to take notes, the temptation to do otherwise is great and it distracts other students. A small number of exceptions may be made only upon official notification. We think that Eastern Europe is best experienced unplugged: put on your school uniforms and sharpen your pencils, comrades!

Honor Code

This course and all its assignments are covered by the Oberlin College honor code. This means, most importantly, that—unless otherwise indicated—you are to produce your own work and honor the rules and conventions of scholarly quotation, attribution, and citation. While you are allowed to ask advice and help from librarians and official writing tutors, you are, in the end, to submit work produced by you. Any case of (suspected) plagiarism will be reported to the Honors Committee. For more details, see http://new.oberlin.edu/students/policies/10-Policies-Honor.pdf

For further clarification of the potential consequences see J.V.Stalin, Problems of Leninism (any edition).

Part One: Eastern Europe Before Communism

Week One: What is Eastern Europe? Introduction to the Region and Modernization Theory

Tues. 9/7:


Thurs. 9/9:
Samuel Huntington, Political Order in Changing Societies, pp. 1-32.

Week Two: Modernization vs. World System Theory

Tues. 9/14:
Huntington, Political Order in Changing Societies, pp. 32-92.

Thurs. 9/16:


Week Three: Relative Backwardness and Eastern Europe in the Interwar Period

Tues. 9/21:


Wed. 9/22: First Blackboard discussion posting due by midnight

Thurs. 9/23:


Week Four: World War Two and the Rise of Communism in Eastern Europe

Film Screening: Istvan Szabo, Sunshine [Time TBA]

Tues.9/28:
Vladimir Tismaneanu, Reinventing Politics, pp. 1-22.


Wed. 9/29: Second Blackboard discussion posting by due by midnight

Thurs. 9/30:


**Part Two: The Rise and Fall of Communism in Eastern Europe**


*Tues. 10/5:*

Gale Stokes, *From Stalinism to Pluralism*, pp. 19-77.

*Thur. 10/7:*

*Fri. 10/8 Short Film Response Paper (3-4 pages) due in hard copy by 4 p.m. in King 305a or Rice 211.*

**Week Six: Reform Communism and Its Dilemmas: From 1956 to the Prague Spring**

**Film Screening: Man of Marble [Time TBA]**

*[First essay assignment distributed]*

*Tues. 10/12:*
Tismaneanu, *Reinventing Politics*, pp. 54-111.


Stokes, *From Stalinism to Pluralism*, pp. 80-87; 94-114; 126-134.

*Wed., 10/13. Third Blackboard discussion posting due by midnight*

*Thurs. 10/14:*
Alex Nove, “Is There a Ruling Class in the USSR?” in Anthony Giddens and David Held, eds., *Classes, Power and Conflict*, 588-604.


**Week Seven: The Crisis of Communism and The Rise of Civil Society: The Case of Poland**
Tues. 10/19:


Thurs. 10/21:
David Ost, *Solidarity and the Politics of Anti-Politics*, chapters 1, 5 (1-17; 75-111)


Fri. 10/22: *First essay due in hard copy by 4 p.m. in King 305a or Rice 211*

Fall break 10/23-10/31

Week Eight: The Collapse of Communism and the Revolutions of 1989

Tues. 11/2:


Thurs. 11/4:


Part Three: Post-Communism and Its Challenges

Week Nine: The Challenge of Capitalist Transformation

Tues. 11/9:

R. Frydman, K. Murphy, A. Rapaczynski, *Capitalism with a Comrade’s Face*, chapt. 1 (pp.1-41).

**Wed. 11/10: Fourth Blackboard discussion posting due by midnight**

**Thurs. 11/11:**


**Week Ten: The Challenge of Democratic Transformation**

**Tues. 11/16:**

Valerie Bunce, “The Political Transition,” in *Central and East European Politics*, pp. 40-77.

**Thurs. 11/18:**


**Week Eleven: Post-Communist Gender, Labor, and Social Politics.**

**Tues. 11/23:**

David Ost, *The Defeat of Solidarity* (Cornell University Press, 2005), Introduction (pp. 1-12).


[Thurs. 11/25: Thanksgiving - no class]
Week Twelve. Post-Communist Gender, Labor, and Social Politics (continued).

Mon. 11/29 Fifth Blackboard discussion posting due by midnight.

Tues. 11/30:


Wed., 1/12, 4.30-6 pm. Oscar Jaszi Memorial Public Lecture by Professor Venelin Ganev, Miami University, Ohio

Thurs., 2/12. Guest Lecture in Class by Professor Ganev.


Week Thirteen: Post-Communist Nationalism: The Yugoslav Catastrophe

[Second essay assignment distributed]

Tues. 12/7:

Thurs. 12/9:


Fri. 12/10: Second essay due by 4pm in hard copy in King 305a or Rice 211
Week Fourteen: Small States in a Big World

*Tues. 12/14:*


*Final exam: Tuesday, December 21, 7-9 p.m.*