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 which 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 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 tragic 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**


All other readings will be on E-Res, Oberlin’s electronic reserve system. In addition, several hard copies of the books will be available at the reserve room in Mudd Library.

**Course Requirements**

Requirements for this class include regular attendance in class, mandatory attendance at film screenings outside of regular class time, a mid-term quiz, two 6-7 page papers, and a final examination. Grading will be done on the following basis:

*Mandatory attendance* in class and
at film screenings 15%
Mid-term quiz 15%
First paper 20%
Second paper 20%
Final examination 30%
Part One: Eastern Europe Before Communism

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

Tues. 2/7


Thurs. 2/9


Week Two: Modernization vs. World System Theory

Tues. 2/14


Thurs. 2/16


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

Tues. 2/21


Thurs. 2/23


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

*Tues. 2/28*

*Vladimir Tismaneanu, Reinventing Politics, 1-22.*

*R.V. Burks, The Dynamics of Communism in Eastern Europe, 38-87, 107-130.*

**Film Screening: Istvan Szabo’s Sunshine**

*Thurs. 3/2*


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


*Tues. 3/7*


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

*Thur. 3/9*

**Mid-term Quiz in class, 40 minutes**

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

Tues. 3/14


Stokes, *From Stalinism to Pluralism*, 78-87; 94-114; 126-134

**Film Screening: Man of Marble**

Thurs. 3/16


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. 3/21

*First paper due in class*


Thurs. 3/23

David Ost, *Solidarity and the Politics of Anti-Politics*, chapters 1 and 5 (1-17, 75-111).


Spring break (March 25-April 3)

Week Eight: The Collapse of Communism and the Revolutions of 1989
Tues. 4/4


Thurs. 4/6


**Part Three: Post-Communism and Its Challenges**

**Week Nine: The Challenge of Capitalist Transformation**

4/11-4/13


R.Frydman, K.Murphy, A Rapasczynski, *Capitalism with a Comrade's Face*, 1-54.


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

4/18-20


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

4/25-4/27

*Second paper due 4/27 in class*


**Week Twelve: Post-Communist Nationalism: The Yugoslav Catastrophe**

5/2-5/4

*Film Screening: No Man’s Land*


Chuck Sudetic, *Blood and Vengeance. One Family’s Story of the War in Bosnia*, 1-134.


**Week Thirteen: Small States in a Big World**

5/9-5/11


*Final exam: Friday, May 19, 7pm.*