Social Change and Political Transformation 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
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 which 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, 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 Film screenings 15%
Mid-term quiz 15%
First paper  20%
Second paper  20%
Final examination 30%
Part One: Theories of Social Change and Eastern Europe

Week One: What is Eastern Europe?
Andrew Janos, East Central Europe in the Modern World, 1-10, 29-53.

Week Two: The World System, Relative Backwardness, and Eastern Europe
Jaroslav Hašek, The Good Soldier Švejk, 5-34.

Week Three: Eastern Europe in the Inter-War Period and World War Two

Part Two: The Triumph, Development, and Demise of Communism in Eastern Europe

Week Four: Communist Revolutions, Stalinism, and the Titoist Challenge: 1948-1953
Janos, East Central Europe in the Modern World, 218-256.
Tismaneanu, Reinventing Politics, 1-54.
Stokes, From Stalinism to Pluralism, 44-77
Film Screening: Istvan Szabo’s Sunshine
Week Five: Reform Communism and Its Dilemmas, 1953-1968: From 1956 to the Prague Spring
Tismaneanu, Reinventing Politics, 54-111.
Stokes, From Stalinism to Pluralism, 101-136.
Mid-term Quiz, Friday, March 12.

Week Six: The Crisis of Communism and The Rise of Civil Society
Tismaneanu, Reinventing Politics, 113-174.
Jack Bielasiak, “The Party: Permanent Crisis”
Aleksandar Smolar, “The Rich and the Powerful,”
Leszek Kołakowski, “The Intelligentsia,” and
Alex Pravda, “The Workers,”
all in Abraham Brumberg, ed., Genesis of a Revolution, 10-93.
Stokes, From Stalinism to Pluralism, 137-166, 193-208.
Film Screening: Man of Marble

Week Seven: The Collapse of Communism and the Revolutions of 1989
Tismaneanu, Reinventing Politics, 175-239.
Stokes, From Stalinism to Pluralism, 216-254.

Part Three: Post-Communism and Its Challenges
Week Eight: The Challenge of Democratic Transformation


First paper due on Friday April 9

Week Nine: The Challenge of Capitalist Transformation


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


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


Week Eleven: Post-Communist Nationalism: The Yugoslav Catastrophe

Film Screening: No Man’s Land


Chuck Sudetic, Blood and Vengeance. One Family’s Story of the War in Bosnia (read as much as you can).

Stokes, From Stalinism to Pluralism, 256-288.

Week Twelve: Small States in a Big World


Andrew Janos, “From Eastern Empire to Western Hegemony,” East-European Politics and Societies, 15, 2, 2001, 221-249.


Second paper due on Wednesday, May 5

Week Thirteen: Eastern Europe: West or South


Final exam as scheduled