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 social inequality 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 interwar 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: 1) regular attendance (including the three mandatory film screenings); 2) four Blackboard postings at specified times during the semester; 3) a film response paper (5-6 pages); 4) an analytic essay (6-7 pages); 5) a final exam. Grades will be determined on the following basis:

- Class attendance, participation, film screenings: 15%
- Blackboard postings: 15%
- Film response paper: 20%
- Analytical essay: 25%
- Final exam: 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

Wed. 9/4:


Week Two: Modernization Theory

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

Wed. 9/11:
Huntington, Political Order in Changing Societies, pp. 32-92.

Week Three: World System Theory and Relative Backwardness

Mon. 9/16:

Wed. 9/18:


Week Four: Eastern Europe in the Interwar Period

First Blackboard posting due by midnight on Sunday, 9/22.

Mon. 9/23:


Wed. 9/25:

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

Film Screening: Istvan Szabo, Sunshine [Sun. 9/29, 7:30 pm]

Week Five: World War Two and the Rise of Stalinism in Eastern Europe

Mon. 9/30:


Wed. 10/2:
Part Two: The Rise and Fall of Communism in Eastern Europe

Week Six: From Stalinism to the Titoist Challenge and the Rise of Khrushchev: 1948-1956

Mon. 10/7: Vladimir Tismaneanu, Reinventing Politics, pp. 22-54.

Gale Stokes, From Stalinism to Pluralism, pp. 19-32; 43-77.

Mon. 10/7: Film Response Paper (due in class)

Wed. 10/9:


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

Second Blackboard posting due by midnight, Sunday 10/13

Mon. 10/14: Tismaneanu, Reinventing Politics, pp. 54-111.

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

Wed. 10/16:


[analytic essay assignment distributed]

Fall break 10/19-10/27

Week Eight: The Rise of Civil Society and Poland’s Solidarity

Mon. 10/28:
Tismaneanu, Reinventing Politics, pp. 113-174.

Stokes, From Stalinism to Pluralism, pp. 156-7, 163-180.

Film Screening: Andrzej Wajda, Man of Marble [Mon. 10/28 at 7.30 p.m.]
Wed. 10/30:
David Ost, *Solidarity and the Politics of Anti-Politics*, chapters 1, 5 (1-17; 75-111)

Branko Milanovic, “Was Socialism Egalitarian?” in *The Haves and Have-Not*, pp. 53-60.


**Week Nine: The Collapse of Communism and the Revolutions of 1989**

**Mon 11/4: Analytic essay due in hard copy in class**


**Wed. 11/6:**


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

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

**Third Blackboard posting due by midnight on Sunday 11/10**

**Mon. 11/11:**


**Wed. 11/13:**

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

**Film Screening:** Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, “The Lives of Others” [Sun., 11/17 at 7.30 p.m.]

*Mon. 11/18:*
Valerie Bunce, “The Political Transition,” in Curry and Wolchik, eds., *Central and East European Politics*, pp. 31-51.


*Wed. 11/20:*


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

*Mon., 11/25:*


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


*Fourth Blackboard posting due by midnight on Tuesday 11/26*

*Wed. 11/27:*


118-140.


Born in ’89, selections.

Week Thirteen: Post-Communist Nationalism: The Yugoslav Catastrophe

Mon. 12/2:

Wed. 12/4:

Stokes, From Stalinism to Pluralism, pp. 256-288.

Week Fourteen: Small States in a Big World

Mon 12/9:


Wed. 12/11:


Final exam Friday December 20, 9-11 am.