

CET Syllabus of Term



Program: CET Prague

Course Title: A Social and Cultural History of Communist Europe Told Through Communist Humor

Course Code: CE360

Total Hours: 45

Recommended Credits: 3

Suggested Cross Listings: History, Sociology, Cultural Studies

Language of Instruction: English

Prerequisites/Requirements: None

Professor: Muriel Blaive

Email: mblaive@gmail.com

Class Schedule: Tue 13:00-16:00

Description of the course

This course will apprehend the political, social, economic and cultural history of communist Central and Eastern Europe from 1945 to 1989 as described in popular jokes. Famous and less famous *anekdoty* such as “In 1956, the Hungarians behaved like Poles, the Poles behaved like Czechs, and the Czechs behaved like swine”, will be contextualized and analyzed so as to reconstitute their implicit meaning. We will study key aspects of everyday life under communism, such as economic shortages, delicate power relationships between individuals and authorities at all levels; the relationship to Moscow, cultural stereotypes between countries of the bloc, cultural stereotypes and Cold War propaganda between the two blocs; repression and the denunciation atmosphere between small citizens; but also positive aspects such as sports, arts, and leisure, the luxury of time and the assistance of the state in various social matters. Last but not least, we will reflect on “ostalgie”, i.e. nostalgia for the former East.

Communist jokes will be understood as a key cultural legacy of the communist times, and complemented by audio-video material so as to recreate a lively impression of the main issues at stake under a dictatorship of the communist kind. There will be reading assignment from session to session, and students will have to work consistently on their presentation/final paper, while preparing for the final exam.

RECOMMENDED READINGS:

- James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance. Hidden Transcripts*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1990.
- Ben Lewis, *Hammer & Tickle. A History of Communism Told Through Communist Jokes*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2008.

CET Syllabus of Term

COURSE OBJECTIVES:

Students are expected through this cultural history of domination and resistance to develop an answer to the following three interrelated questions: What was the life of a communist citizen like? How did propaganda impact our longue durée stereotypes of East and West? And what place has communism taken in European history?

PREREQUISITES: A background in modern Europe is strongly recommended.

EVALUATION METHOD: Grades will be based on participation, attendance, and an oral presentation (33%), a final paper based on the presentation (33%), and a final test (34%).

Attendance Policy:

Mandatory attendance is a primary requirement for a responsible learning experience. Please consider that every absence has the potential to lower the final grade, as it may affect the “attendance and participation” portion of your grade or result in missing key information that could appear on quizzes or exams. In addition, professors take attendance at the beginning of the class. If you are more than 10 minutes late, professors mark one hour of absence from class. Onsite visits count as regular class hours. A no-show to a site visit counts as an absence. Detailed information about the Attendance you will find in the **CET Prague Academic Policies**

Grading scale

A:	93-100%	C+:	77-79%
A-:	90-92%	C:	73-76%
B+:	87-89%	C-:	70-72%
B:	83-86%	D+:	67-69%
B-:	80-82%	D:	60-66%
		F:	59% and below

Course Schedule

I. Introduction: How to Apprehend Propaganda or the Notion of Truth in History, 30 January 2018

How reliable are dates and facts in history? How do we avoid being fooled by propaganda? Is there such a thing as an “objective historical truth”? What is our collective image of communism and how was it formed? What is the difference between political, social, and cultural history, and how might it affect our understanding of life behind the Iron Curtain? What social role did “anecdotes” play?

II. The Image of the West in the Soviet Bloc, 6 February 2018

CET Syllabus of Term

The “potato bug” (Colorado beetle) plague led to one of the first coordinated propaganda campaigns against the West, but it can be also used to show and analyze differences between the various communist countries. Here we will take the East German, Polish and Czechoslovak examples. Yet communist propaganda did not manage to completely discredit the West. On the contrary, Eastern populations were eager to catch up to the Western consumption level, as demonstrated by the “kitchen debate” between Khrushchev and Nixon.

Assignment: Marjolein T. Hart, ‘Humour and Social Protest: An Introduction’, *International Review of Social History*, 52, 2007, p. 1-20.

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/231997481 Humour and Social Protest An Introduction](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/231997481_Humour_and_Social_Protest_An_Introduction)

III. The Image of the Soviet bloc in the West, 13 February 2018

In this session we will study the Soviet bloc as seen from the West and specifically as seen through the figure of James Bond, as well as other popular films such as *The Tamarind Seed* with Omar Shariff: we will analyze the image of superiority of the Western culture that these films convey, as well as their negative stereotypes of Russian and other East European cultures. This will help us analyze and deconstruct our collective perception of the former East in Western culture.

Assignment: Watch the film *The Spy Who Came In from the Cold* (Martin Ritt, 1965), or read the eponymous novel by John LeCarré (1963)

IV. Power Relations: Repression and Self-Repression, 20 February 2018

Terror is one of the first elements that comes to mind when reflecting on the communist dictatorship, yet how did it work in practice? The innumerable jokes on terror and repression will help us single out key elements of the practices of domination. We will then reflect on who and what made this terror level possible and on the social practice of denunciation by studying everyday life under communism in a small Czech town at the foot of the Iron Curtain (Ceske Velenice.)

Assignment: James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance. Hidden Transcripts*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1990, Chapters 1 and 2 (pp. 1-44.)

V. The Cold War, East and West, 27 February 2018

After we study the Stasi (East German political police) moustache program known as the “Art of Disguise”, we will move on to the Cold War in design contests between East and West. What image did both camps try to promote, and how successful were they in

CET Syllabus of Term

demonstrating a superior vision of modernity? This will lead us to the archetypal Western representation of the Cold War competition between superpowers, i.e. the film *Dr Strangelove*.

Assignment: Watch the film *Doctor Strangelove or: How I learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (Stanley Kubrick, 1964)

VI. The Economy: Shortages and Living Conditions, 6 March 2018

Shortages were probably the most visible characteristic of « real existing » socialism and its most visible failure, certainly one of the major causes for its downfall. They were also the butt of innumerable jokes, that were collected with great care by none other than President Ronald Reagan, who created an entire department of experts at the Pentagon. Yet we will study a number of statistics related to the standard of living East and West and question the image of retardedness that befell the former Eastern bloc. Who would have thought that communist Czechoslovakia boasted a lower infant mortality rate than the U.S.?

Assignment: Ben Lewis, *Hammer & Tickle. A History of Communism Told Through Communist Jokes*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2008 – Chapter 6.

VII. Cultural Stereotypes and Nationalism Among Eastern Bloc Countries, 13 March 2018

In this session we depart from the joke “In 1956, the Hungarians behave like Poles, the Poles behaved like Czechs, and the Czechs behaved like swine” to revisit the region's postwar history and the differences between each country's version of communism. Far from having eradicated nationalism, we study how communist regimes used (and often abused) the national sentiment.

VIII. Internal Criticism, 27 March 2018

The *Firemen's Ball* (Milos Forman, 1967) allegorically represents the shortcomings of communist life in his smallest details, notably the famous “Who is not stealing from the state is robbing his family.” Through the study of this satire, as well as through other examples in film and literature (Kundera, Skvorecky), we will deconstruct humor as a delegitimizing strategy against the communist rule.

Assignment: Watch the film *The Firemen's Ball* (Milos Forman, 1967.)

IX. Tasting Communism: Western Palates vs. the Eastern Bloc, 10 April 2018

In this session we try to find the answer to the following questions: did socialism have a specific taste? And does nostalgia relate to a genuine good taste of socialism or is the past fantasized as part of people's youth? For so doing, we sample Eastern and Western

CET Syllabus of Term

foodstuff and drinks (products that first appeared in the 1970s, of varying provenience: East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Russia, France, UK, Austria, etc.). We then study the packaging and selling strategy of those pre-1989 products, both before 1989 and today.

X. The East is Leading and Tomorrows Will Shine, 17 April 2018

From the ever-present attempt to “catch up wit the West” to the ubiquitous desire to lead the way to scientific progress, the Eastern bloc was not always as backward as it seemed – for instance in the space race. Meet also the first “Doctor House” and other leading television series of the time, familiarize yourself with cartoons that fascinate (Eastern and Western) children until today, and discover a developed consumer society... or perhaps not so developed if you look at it retrospectively.

Assignment: Watch the film Czech Dream (Vit Klusak, Filip Remunda, 2004)

XI. Dealing with the Past: How to Write the History of Communism Today? (part 1), 24 April 2018

In this session we take a guided tour of the Museum of Communism and reflect on how to write communist history today. We study the narrative the guide conveys us. How we account all at once for the victimization of the population and for its survival strategies, including, if need be, collaboration with the regime?

XII. Ostalgia: Shall We Wave Goodbye to Lenin? How to Write the History of Communist (part 2), 8 May 2018

Why are there almost no jokes about and after 1989? In this session we reflect on the disappearance of jokes, nostalgia for communism, and the rewriting of communist history in post-communist times. We visit the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes and meet with the educational department and archivists.

Assignment: Watch the film Goodbye, Lenin! (Wolfgang Becker, 2003)

XIII. Final Exam, 15 May 2018