

Syllabus of Record

Program: CET Prague

Course Code / Title: (PR/CEST 360) A History of Communist Europe Told Through Humor

Total Hours: 45

Recommended Credits: 3

Primary Discipline / Suggested Cross Listings: Central European Studies / History, Sociology, Cultural Studies

Language of Instruction: English

Prerequisites / Requirements: Prior coursework in Modern European History recommended

Description

This course confronts 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,” are contextualized and analyzed so as to reconstitute their implicit meaning. The course takes a close look at aspects of everyday life under communism (such as economic shortages and the delicate power relationships between individuals and authorities), the relationship to Moscow, cultural stereotypes among countries of the Eastern Bloc, as well as cultural stereotypes and Cold War propaganda between the two blocs, repression and the atmosphere of denunciation among normal citizens, as well as positive aspects of day to day life such as sports, arts and leisure, the luxury of time, and the assistance of the state in various social matters. Last but not least, the course reflects on “Ostalgia,” or nostalgia for the former East.

Communist jokes are understood as a key cultural legacy of the communist times, and analysis of them is complemented by audio-video material so as to recreate a lively impression of the main issues at stake under a dictatorship of the communist type.

Objectives

Through their participation in this course, students:

- Understand the basic social and political conditions of life under communism in the Eastern Bloc.
- Analyze and compare primary and secondary texts that give them a comprehensive knowledge about cultural and social history under communism.
- Gain insight into the everyday life of common citizens under communism and the role that humor played in coming to terms with the various challenges of day to day life.
- Explore the ways that jokes offer valuable insight into the political and social realities of communist life.
- Engage with and respond to three main interrelated questions: What was the life of a communist citizen like? How has propaganda impacted our long-standing stereotypes of East and West? And what place has communism taken in European history?

Course Requirements

The course is designed as a series of guided discussions outlined by brief lecture-based introductions to

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the assigned readings. Students read approximately 150-200 pages per week or have an equivalent assignment of watching a film. Students should come to class prepared to discuss actively.

Once per semester students have an in-class presentation on one of the topics covered in the course. The final analytical paper builds on the material covered in the presentation. Both the presentation and paper should include a discussion of relevant reference materials where possible.

The final test covers all material in the course.

Students are expected to abide by CET's attendance policy.

Grading

The final grade is determined as follows:

- Participation 25%
- Oral presentation 25%
- Final paper 25%
- Final test 25%

Readings

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

Hart, Marjolein T. "Humour and Social Protest: An Introduction." *International Review of Social History*, 52 (2007): 1-20.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/231997481_Humour_and_Social_Protest_An_Introduction

Scott, James. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance. Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.

Additional Resources

Czech Dream (Vít Klusák, Filip Remunda, 2004)

Doctor Strangelove, Or: How I learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb (Stanley Kubrick, 1964)

The Firemen's Ball (Milos Forman, 1967)

Goodbye, Lenin! (Wolfgang Becker, 2003)

The Spy Who Came in from the Cold (Martin Ritt, 1965)

Outline of Course Content

Topic 1 – Introduction: How to Apprehend Propaganda or the Notion of Truth in History

- 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?

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- 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?

Topic 2 – The Image of the West in the Soviet Bloc: Potato Bug Issue and Kitchen Debate

- Coordinated propaganda campaigns against the West - the “potato bug” (Colorado beetle) plague.
- Desire for Western consumerism by people in the East.
- The « kitchen debate » between Khrushchev and Nixon.

Topic 3 – The Image of the Soviet bloc in the West: From James Bond to Dr. Strangelove

- The Soviet bloc as seen from the West.
- The image of superiority of the Western culture and negative stereotypes of Russian and other East European cultures in popular culture (James Bond, *The Tamarind Seed*, etc.).
- Analysis and deconstruction of the collective perception of the former East in Western culture.

Topic 4 – Power Relations: Repression and Self-Repression

- How did terror work in practice? What conditions allows for the level of terror in the Eastern Bloc?
- Jokes on terror and repression as a tool for identifying elements of the practices of domination.
- Reflections on the social practice of denunciation through the study of everyday life under communism in a small Czech town at the foot of the Iron Curtain (Ceske Velenice.)

Topic 5 – The Cold War, East and West: From Stasi Mustaches to Cold War Design

- The Stasi (East German political police) mustache program known as the “Art of Disguise”
- The Cold War in design contests between East and West. What image did both camps try to promote, and how successful were they in demonstrating a superior vision of modernity?
- The archetypal Western representation of the Cold War competition between superpowers: the film *Dr. Strangelove*.

Topic 6 – The Economy: Shortages and Living Conditions

- Shortages as a visible characteristic of “real existing” socialism, and its most visible failure.
- Jokes about shortages (including President Reagan’s department of joke experts at the Pentagon).
- Investigating the image of backwardness that befell the former Eastern bloc through statistics related to the standard of living East and West

Topic 7 – Cultural Stereotypes and Nationalism Among Eastern Bloc Countries

- The joke “In 1956, the Hungarians behaved like Poles, the Poles behaved like Czechs, and the Czechs behaved like swine” as a means to revisit the region’s postwar history and the differences between each country’s version of communism.
- How communist regimes used (and often abused) the national argument.

Topic 8 – Feature Films and Inner Criticism: Dancing at the Firemen’s Ball

- *The Firemen’s Ball* (Milos Forman, 1967) and the literary works of Kundera and Škvorecký as allegorical represents the shortcomings of communist life in its smallest details.
- Deconstruction of humor as a delegitimizing strategy against the communist rule.

Topic 9 – Tasting Communism: (Our) Western Palates vs. the Eastern Bloc

- Did socialism have a specific taste?

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- Does nostalgia relate to a genuine good taste of socialism or is the past fantasized as part of people's youth?
- Blind tasting of samples of Eastern and Western foodstuff and drinks
- Analysis of the packaging and selling strategy of pre-1989 products in Czechoslovakia/Czechia, both under communism and today
- Nostalgia.

Topic 10 – The East is Leading and Tomorrows will Shine

- The Eastern Bloc's leading role in the space race.
- The first "Doctor House" and other leading television series during the communist period, including cartoons that continue to fascinate (Eastern and Western)
- Consumer society in the East

Topic 11 – Sports and Entertainment

- What was the relationship between mass gymnastic events (spartakiads), communism, and national movements?
- What do the spartakiads say about individual corporeality vs. the body politic?
- Did the estheticism of mass gymnastics help create the socialist "new man"?
- Did people like to participate, did they like to watch?

Topic 12 – Ostalgia: Shall We Wave Goodbye to Lenin?

- Why are there almost no jokes about and after 1989?
- Reflection on the disappearance of jokes, nostalgia for communism, and the rewriting of communist history in post-communist times.