

CORE-UA 9556

CULTURES IN CONTEXT: GERMANY

Monday, Tuesday 1.30-4.30
NYU Berlin Academic Center
Professor Thomas Ertman

This course seeks to introduce students to modern German culture through the works of seven emblematic figures—both positive and negative—whose ideas have helped shape, for good and for ill, that culture over the past century and continue to do so in varying degrees in our own day. We begin with Lessing and Kant, Enlightenment thinkers whose values in part provide the legitimacy for today’s democratic Federal Republic of Germany, then turn to the ambiguous universal genius Goethe, long considered the country’s equivalent to Shakespeare but whose relationship to enlightened values is far from clear. Next we examine the case of Richard Wagner, perhaps the most influential artistic figure of the 19th century, who saw his own masterpieces of music drama as proof of German cultural superiority and whose theoretical writings provided the basis for the racist national socialist theory of culture. Friedrich Nietzsche, first a supporter and then a vocal opponent of Wagner, was also later idealized by the Nazis, though his writings attacked and even ridiculed the German nationalism of his day. We then analyze the self-presentation, as found in **Mein Kampf**, of Adolf Hitler himself, the impact of whose life and horrific deeds continues to cast a shadow on an almost daily basis over Germany. Finally, we turn to the great, recently deceased East German writer Christa Wolf, who for most of her life fervently believed that her communist homeland was the “better Germany,” even while illustrating the reality and human costs of this state in her novels.

Extensive readings from all of these figures will be supplemented by lecture tours through relevant areas of greater Berlin that will help provide the historical context to their works and uncover what traces they have left in the German capital. In addition, we will take an extended day trip to two cities that played an inordinate role in the lives of our authors and in the development of modern German culture more generally: Weimar and Leipzig.

Course requirements: Class members are expected to attend all sessions, do the reading on time and participate in class discussions (20% of grade). In addition, students will write **5** two-page response papers (double-spaced, 12 point) on the readings. Each paper should address some aspect of the week’s reading that the student finds **surprising, provocative** or **inspiring**. These papers are due in class, printed out on the following Mondays: July 14, July 21, July 28, August 4, August 11 (40% of grade). Finally, a **10 page paper on a topic suggested by the instructor** is due on **Friday, August 15** (40% of grade). *Any cases of plagiarism will result in an F on the assignment in question and the reporting of the incident to the appropriate dean of your college.*

It is highly recommended that you purchase the books we read in the course in the U.S. before leaving and bring them with you to Germany. Many can be found used and some in kindle format at Amazon. If you do not wish to keep them, they can most likely be sold to the English-language bookstore St. George's (Wörtherstrasse 27, Prenzlauer Berg) after the program is over or, if in good condition, donated to the NYU Berlin library.

Professor Ertman can best be reached by e-mail (tel1@nyu.edu). If you wish to speak to him please make an appointment either just before or after class.

SCHEDULE OF TOPICS AND READINGS

Week 1: (July 7): Walking Tour of Enlightened Absolutist Frederick the Great's Potsdam

(July 8): *Aufklärung*: Enlightened Germany

Reading: Gottfried Ephraim Lessing, **Nathan the Wise, Minna von Barnhelm and Other Plays and Writings**, ed. Peter Demetz (Continuum, 1991), pp. 137-276; Immanuel Kant, "What is Enlightenment?" available from the web.

Week 2: (July 14): Walking Tour of Berlin of Goethe's Day

(July 15): Goethe: Friend or Foe of the Enlightenment?

Reading: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, **The Sorrows of Young Werther** (Oxford World's Classics, 2012), pp 1-112; **Faust, Part One** (Oxford World's Classics, 2008), pp. 1-148.

Week 3: (July 21): Richard Wagner: **Der Ring des Nibelungen**

(July 22): Richard Wagner: The Most German of Artists?

Reading: Richard Wagner, "The Art Work of the Future," available on web; Richard Wagner, "Judaism in Music," available on the web.

Friday, July 25: Group trip to Leipzig (city where Goethe studied, part of Faust is set, and Wagner was born) and Weimar (Goethe's later residence, site of Nietzsche's death and location of Buchenwald Concentration Camp).

Week 4: (July 28): Walking Tour of the Berlin of Nietzsche's Day

(July 29): Nietzsche: Cosmopolitan Anti-Nationalist or Father of the Blond Beast?

Reading: Friedrich Nietzsche, **Beyond Good and Evil** (Oxford World's Library, 2009), pp. 1-180.

Week 5: (August 4): Walking Tour of Hitler's Berlin

(August 5): Hitler: Historical Aberration or the Embodiment of "German Values"?

Reading: Adolf Hitler, **Mein Kampf** (Houghton Mifflin, 1998), pp. 187-329, 373-407, 422-462, 607-625, 630-667.

Note: Please buy this book before leaving the United States as it cannot be purchased legally in Germany.

Week 6: (August 11): Walking Tour through Communist East Berlin

(August 12): The German Democratic Republic: "The Better Germany" or Brutal Dictatorship?

Reading: Christa Wolf, **They Divided the Sky** (University of Ottawa Press, 2013), entire.

FINAL PAPERS DUE ON FRIDAY, AUGUST 15 BY 5PM