

Cultures and Context: Prague - In the Heart of Central Europe

Syllabus Fall 2011

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Office hours: Wednesday, 4:30-5:00 pm, Professors' office at Malé nám. 2

Course description:

Prague is certainly one of the most important historical, geopolitical and cultural capitals of Central Europe. The concept of Central Europe is somewhat elusive and it is difficult to define it by geographical or political categories. Often, it is characterized simply as a space on the edge between the West and East. However, most scholars agree that there is a distinct Central European culture. Identified as having been one of the world's richest sources of creative talent and thought between the 17th and 20th centuries, Central Europe was represented by many distinguished figures such as Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Kant, Goethe and Hegel; later followed by Kafka, Rilke, Freud, Mendel and Dvorak, to mention only a few. Central European culture is based on historical, social and cultural characteristics shared by the countries of this geopolitical entity. It is a result of complicated historical, political, ethnic, cultural, artistic and religious interactions throughout more than a thousand years of history. We explore the characteristics of Central Europe primarily from the perspective of Prague and its cultural history, which is so typical and almost archetypal for this region. Students study geopolitical characteristics and various phenomena that co-create the idea of Central Europe. Taking advantage of the course's location in Prague, students have the opportunity to examine the primary sources and artifacts (art, literature, music, architecture, film) in their contexts and environment.

As a typical MAP course it is based on a cross-disciplinary approach to the regional study, concentrating on main ideas and their contextual analysis. Presentations, discussions and writing assignments are a key part of the course. Active participation in class discussions is expected and students are required to write a short (one-page) response paper every two or three weeks. Their focus is on topics discussed in the class with the stress on ideas and context rather than on specific data. Class discussions and assignments include also critical consideration of general phenomena and notions such as culture, nation, nationalism, etc.

Other requirements include a mid-term exam (5-page take-home essay) and a final paper (10-15 pages). The final paper is an in-depth exploration of a theme discussed in one or more response papers and is both more detailed and aimed at a slightly higher level of abstraction than any of the response papers. The instructor will assist you in refining your approach to this final course project.

Class sessions will be composed of lectures, guided visits and excursions to sights related to the course (e.g. historical sights, galleries and museums) and discussions on weekly readings as well as on other sources such as music, films etc.

Grading policy:

Class participation/attendance:	20 %
Response papers (altogether):	20 %
Presentation	15 %
Mid-term exam/paper:	15 %
Final paper:	30 %

Recommended readings:

Demetz, P.: Prague in Black and Gold - Scenes in the life of a European City, 1997. Penguin, London.

Johnson, L.R.: Central Europe - Enemies, Neighbors, Friends, 1996. Oxford University Press, New York.

Klíma, I.: The Spirit of Prague, 1994. Granta Books, London.

Lord, C. ed.: Central Europe: Core Or Periphery?, 2000. Copenhagen Business School Press, Copenhagen.

Rupnik, J.: The Other Europe, 1989. Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London.

Stern, J.P.: The Heart of Europe – Essays on Literature and Ideology, 1992. Blackwell, Oxford.

Teich, M. ed.: Bohemia in History, 1998. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Required texts for weekly readings will be available on the internet or distributed in class.

Schedule of classes:

Week 1

8 September

Course overview and introduction.

Week 2

15 September

Geographical concepts of Central Europe, geopolitical dynamics - “A space between powers.”

Week 3

22 September

Historical foundations of Central Europe; feudalism and the medieval idea of Central Europe.

Week 4

29 September

Medieval cultural development - “In the heart of the European heart.”

Week 5

6 October

“Golden time of thoughts” - Central European culture from 17th to early 20th centuries.

Week 6

13 October

Religion and Central Europe in medieval period, social role of religion in Middle Ages.

Week 7

20 October

“On the edge” - religion and Central Europe in modern and contemporary periods.

****Midterm Paper Due****

Week 8

27 October

Central European absolutism and consequences - “Among growing giants.”

Week 9

3 November

“Rise of a nation” - nationalism and its context; concepts of Mitteleuropa and Pan-Slavism, cultural and political consequences.

Week 10

10 November

Cultural heritage of the Central European Jewry and the tragedy of Holocaust.

Week 11 – Fall Break – no classes

Week 12

24 November

Birth of democracy in Central Europe, struggle against German Nazism and Russian Communism.

Week 13

1 December

Central Europe and human rights movement, “Velvet Revolution” and its heritage.

Week 14

8 December

“Seeking the lost European identity” - Central Europe and post-communism, European Union and contemporary political and cultural situation.

Week 15

****Final Paper Due****