Semester: Fall 2015
Class code: CORE-UA9548001
Instructor Details: Petr Mucha
  mucha@nyu.edu
  Office hours: Wednesday 4:30-5:00 pm; Professors’ office at Malé nám. 2
Class Details: Cultures and Contexts: Prague - In the Heart of Central Europe
  Thursday 1:30-4:20 pm
  Location to be confirmed.

Prerequisites: No special prerequisites.

Class Description: Prague is certainly one of the key 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 characterized simply as a space on the edge between the West and East, most scholars see, however, a distinct Central European culture based on values and characteristics shared by the countries of this geopolitical entity. It is the result of complicated cultural, ethnic, political and religious interactions throughout more than a thousand years of history. Identified as having been one of the world’s richest sources of creative talent 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.

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 examine primary sources and artifacts (art, literature, music, architecture, film) in their contexts and environment.

Class sessions are composed of class presentations and discussions on weekly readings and other study sources. Guided visits and excursions to sights related to the course are also an important part of the course.

Desired Outcomes: As a typical core course, this class is based on a cross-disciplinary approach to the regional study, concentrating on main ideas and their contextual analysis. It is designed to equip students with the understanding of different historical phenomena that formed Central European culture. Students will improve their skills of critical and contextual analysis of primary materials and will develop abilities to interpret artifacts through group discussion and effective writing.

Assessment Components:

Class active participation (15%): Frequent class discussions are the key part of the course. Students are expected to be active in class discussions and other class activities. It contributes to their overall assessment significantly.

Response papers (altogether 15%): Students write 2 page response papers several times during a semester. The papers should take the form of a personal reflection and their focus must be on topics discussed in the class with the stress on ideas and context rather than on specific data. Due dates will be announced in class.

Oral presentation (10%): 5-10 minutes class presentation of a chosen cultural phenomenon. Course instructor is ready to assist you in choosing the topic. PowerPoint and any possible artifacts should be used for better illustration (slides must be submitted at least one day beforehand via email). The presentation must be accompanied by a class discussion on prepared question(s) concerning the reflected topic. For due date see the sign-up sheet.

Mid-term paper (15%): It is a 4 page take-home essay. Themes discussed in the class so far can serve as a topic for this essay or students can extend research on any of their response paper topics. The paper is due in the session 9.

Test (20%): The multiple choice test concentrates on key terms and regional cultural characteristics as well as their contexts covered in class lectures and readings. The test is expected in the middle of a semester (session 9).
Final paper (25%): The final paper is 8-10 pages long in-depth exploration of a theme discussed in response papers or in the class. It is both more detailed and aimed at a higher level of abstraction than previous papers. Students are expected to develop an argument that analyzes the examined topic more deeply, placing it within a broader context. This paper represents major project for the term and must contain all required parts and attributes of academic papers. Lectures, course readings and issues raised during class discussions should serve as a basis for defining the thesis for the final paper. Class instructor is ready to assist you in choosing your topic for this final course project. The paper must be submitted by the last session of the class.

Reading report (optional): 5 minutes presentation of a class reading followed by a short discussion.

Family visit project (optional).

Failure to submit or fulfill any required course component results in failure of the class.

Assessment Expectations

Grade A: Excellent work, exceptional research, papers and presentations; high level of participation in class discussions, involving original thought.

Grade B: Good work, necessary research and well done all required assignments, average involvement in class work.

Grade C: Satisfactory work, limited participation in class discussions and demonstrates lack of individual insights.

Grade D: Passable work, meets minimum requirements but with significant mistakes and poor class activity.

Grade F: Fails to meet minimum requirements.

Grade conversion


Attendance Policy

Absences only for medical reasons and for religious observance will be excused. To obtain an excused absence, you are obliged to supply either a doctor’s note or corroboration of your illness by a member of the housing staff (either an RA or a Building Manager). To be excused for religious observance, you must contact the instructor and the Associate Director via email one week in advance of the holiday. Your absence is excused for the holiday only and does not include days of travel associated with the holiday. Unexcused absences will be penalized with a 2% percent deduction from your final course grade for every week of classes missed.

Late Submission of Work

Work submitted late will affect the grade unless there is an agreed extension. Work submitted more than 8 days after the submission date without an agreed extension fails.

Plagiarism Policy

According to the Liberal Studies Program Student Handbook, plagiarism is defined as follows:

Plagiarism is presenting someone else’s work as though it were one’s own. More specifically plagiarism is to present as one’s own a sequence of words quoted without quotation marks from another writer, a paraphrased passage from another writer’s work; facts or ideas gathered, organized and reported by someone else, orally and/or in writing. Since plagiarism is a matter of fact, not of the student’s intention, it is crucial that acknowledgment of the sources be accurate and complete. Even where there is no conscious intention to deceive, the failure to make appropriate acknowledgment constitutes plagiarism.

The College of Arts and Science’s Academic Handbook defines plagiarism similarly and also specifies the following:

“Presenting an oral report drawn without attribution from other sources (oral or written), writing a paragraph which, despite being in different words, expresses someone else’s idea without a reference to the source of the idea, or submitting essentially the same paper in two different courses (unless both teachers have given their permission in advance).

Receiving help on a take-home examination or quiz is also cheating – and so is giving that help – unless expressly permitted by the teacher (as in collaborative projects). While all this looks like a lot to remember, all you need to do is give credit where it is due, take credit only for original ideas, and ask your teacher or advisor when in doubt.”

“Penalties for plagiarism range from failure for a paper, failure for the course or dismissal from the university.” (Liberal Studies Program Student Handbook)

Required Text(s)


Internet Research Guidelines

Session 1
Thursday, September 3
Course overview and introduction to the class topic.
Explanation of expectations and assignments.
Main reading: Timothy Garton Ash, The Puzzle of Central Europe

Session 2
Thursday, September 10
Geographical concepts of Central Europe,
Geopolitical determinants and dynamics,
Central Europe as a cultural intersection.
Excursion: “cultural puzzle of Prague”
Main reading: Milan Kundera, Tragedy of Central Europe

Session 3
Thursday, September 17
Historical foundations and the birth of the region,
Regionalization of Central Europe and “space between powers.”
Central Europe in different historical periods.
Excursion: Prague in historical epochs
Readings: Jiří Sláma, Boiohaemum-Čechy,
Miroslav Hroch, Central Europe - The Rise and Fall of a Historical Region

Session 4
Thursday, September 24
“In the heart of the European heart” – medieval Central Europe and Prague,
Feudalism, religion and the medieval idea of the Central European society,
Cultural development in medieval period.
Excursion: Prague medieval religious site
Readings: František Kafka, Politics and Culture under the Charles IV,
Excerpts from the medieval texts

Session 5
Thursday, October 1
Reformation in Central Europe and religious disintegration,
Societal and cultural emancipation process and its political consequences,
Central Europe as a battlefield and “Region on the boundary.”
Excursion: Prague Protestant sites
Readings: T. G. Masaryk, Jan Hus and the Czech Reformation
Excerpts from Labyrinth of the World and Paradise of the Heart by Comenius

Session 6
Thursday, October 8
Central European culture from 17th to early 20th centuries,
“Golden time of thoughts” and factors of the cultural development,
Political, religious and economic circumstances.
Excursion: Baroque, Mozart and Prague
Readings: Peter Demetz, Mozart in Prague
Excerpts from Two Stories of Prague by R. M. Rilke

Session 7
Thursday, October 15
“Rise of a nation” - nationalism in the Central European context,
Notion of nationalism, its sources and characteristics, cultural and political consequences.
Pan-Slavism and German nationalism.
Excursion: National sites and monuments
Session 8  
Thursday, October 22  
Readings: Lonnie Johnson, *From Nations to Nationalism*, Excerpts from *Old Bohemian Legends* by Alois Jirásek  
German hegemony in Central Europe,  
Buffer space and region “among the giants”,  
Concept of Mitteleuropa, German nationalism and Nazism, WWI and II.  
Readings: Raffael Scheck, *Building up German Hegemony in Central Europe*  
Excerpts from *Democracy and Humanity* by Tomáš G. Masaryk  
*Midterm test*  

Fall Break  
October 26-31  
No classes.  

Session 9  
Thursday, November 5  
Readings: Helena Krejčová, *Czechs and Jews*  
Excerpts from *Selected Stories* by Franz Kafka  
Jewry in Central Europe in historical perspective,  
Ashkenazi tradition and its contribution to Central European culture,  
Anti-Judaism, anti-Semitism and tragedy of Holocaust; “the lost culture.”  
Excursion: part of Prague Jewish Town  

Session 10  
Thursday, November 12  
Film and discussion on Jewish culture in Central Europe.  

Session 11  
Thursday, November 19  
Readings: Václav Havel, *Power of the Powerless*  
Russian hegemony, Communism and Central Europe,  
Principles of totalitarianism in Soviet satellites in Central Europe,  
Czechoslovakia in fifties, Prague Spring and normalization,  
Social and cultural consequences of totalitarianism.  
Excursion: Prague in the period of totalitarianism  

Session 12  
Thursday, November 26  
Struggle for democracy in Communist countries,  
The phenomenon of dissent, forms and representatives,  
Velvet Revolution and its legacy.  
Film: part of *Citizen Havel*  
Main reading: Tomáš Halík, *Essay on Reconciliation*  

Session 13  
Thursday, December 3  
Post-communism and transition period in Central Europe,  
Challenges in building democracy, political culture and problem of corruption,  
Political, social and cultural characteristics.  
Reading: Milada Vachdova, *Corruption and Compliance in the EU’s Post-Communist Members and Candidates*  

Session 14  
Thursday, December 10  
(last day of classes)  
Restoring its European identity – Central Europe in international context,  
European Union and NATO, relations with Russia, globalization.  
Readings: Ingmar Karlsson, *European Identity and the Enlargement of the European Union*  
Václav Havel, *New Democracies for Old Europe*  

Session 15  
Thursday, December 17  
*Final paper due*  

Classroom Etiquette  
Mobile phones must be set on silent and should not be used in class except for emergencies. Laptops must be switched off during class discussions. Food & drink should be consumed during class breaks and should not be brought in class.