

# CET Syllabus of Record



**Program:** CET Prague

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

**Course Code:** PR/CEST 360

**Total Hours:** 45

**Recommended Credits:** 3

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

**Language of Instruction:** English

**Prerequisites/Requirements:** Open to all students

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## Description

This course will confront 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, but also 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.

## Objectives

Through this cultural history of domination and resistance, students are expected 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? Students will read primary and secondary texts that will give them a comprehensive knowledge about cultural and social history under communism. A background in modern European history is recommended.

## Course Requirements

The course is designed as a series of guided discussions outlined by brief lecture-based introductions to 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. Students will have to work consistently on their presentation/final paper, while preparing for the final exam.

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Students submit a final analytical paper that will build off the presentation. Students should include a discussion of relevant reference materials where possible.

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

### Methods of Evaluation

The final grade is determined as follows:

Oral presentation	33%
Final Paper	33%
Final test	34%

### Primary Texts

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.

Supplementary texts will also be provided.

### 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? 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

The “potato bug” (Colorado beetle) plague was 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: Ruth Oldenziel, Karen Zachman, *Cold War Kitchen. Americanization, Technology and European Users*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2009 – Part 1: Staging the Kitchen Debate: Nixon and Khrushchev, 1949 to 1959.

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

In this session we will study the Soviet bloc as seen from the West and specifically as seen through the

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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 conveyed, 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* (Matin Ritt, 1965), or read the eponymous novel by John LeCarré (1963)

### Topic 4 – Power Relations: Repression and Self-Repression

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 to single out key elements of the practices of domination. We will then reflect on who and what made this terror level possible and reflect 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.)

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

After we study the Stasi (East German political police) mustache 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 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)

### Topic 6 – The Economy: Shortages and Living Conditions

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 backwardness that befell the former Eastern bloc. Who would have thought that Czechoslovakia under communism 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.

### Topic 7 – Cultural Stereotypes and Nationalism Among Eastern Bloc Countries

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In this session we will 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 will study 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) 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)

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

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 blind taste samples of Eastern and Western foodstuff and drinks (products that first appeared in the 1970s, of varying provenience: East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Russia, France, UK, Austria, etc.). We will then study the packaging and selling strategy of those pre-1989 products in Czechoslovakia/Czechia, both before 1989 and today - and reflect on nostalgia.

### Topic 10 – The East is Leading and Tomorrows will Shine

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 might seem – 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)

### Topic 11 – Sports and Entertainment

Mass gymnastics (Spartakiads) literally embodied communism and were an important part of social life. What was the relationship between mass gymnastics, 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?

Petr Roubal, « Mass Gymnastic Performances under Communism: The Case of Czechoslovak Spartakiads », in Balazs Apor, Peter Apor, E.A. Rees (eds), *The Sovietization of Eastern Europe. New Perspectives on the Postwar Period*, Washington, New Academia Publishing, 2008, pp. 171-180.

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

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.

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

Topic 13 – Final Exam and Final Discussion