Collective Identity in a Totalitarian Regime
Syllabus Spring 2012

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Course description:
This course examines the totalitarian oppression from the point of view of ordinary citizens in communist Czechoslovakia. It focuses on the construction of collective mentality through everyday official/public and unofficial/private activities, including mass parades, ceremonies and performances, work relations, children’s education, housing schemes or collective vacationing. The goal of the seminar is to demonstrate the consequences of life in an oppressive regime: suppression of fundamental forms of civic interaction, such as independent public communication, and distortion of moral and behavioral norms. At the end of the semester, students will be able to evaluate the main theoretical concepts and historical events of totalitarianism against the background of specific activities, problems and aspirations of the people directly affected by life in a totalitarian system, the citizens of communist Czechoslovakia.

The main theme of the course is the concept of collective mass identity, which was celebrated by the Czechoslovak leaders as an embodiment of the best communist qualities and a guarantee of successful and happy future. We will consider what participation in public mass activities meant for ordinary people, but also how the idea of united homogeneous masses was officially presented in propaganda and other materials. Almost any nation’s history contains numerous incidents characterized by people’s ‘mass’ participation, e.g., elections, demonstrations, revolutions, or wars. However, the totalitarian regime of communist Czechoslovakia took these events to an extreme, turning the regularly occurring and elaborately planned mass events and activities into one of its primary defining characteristics. At the same time, many aspects of people’s private lives were also forcefully structured by the ideology of mass collectivity – even the most intimate experiences of love, marriage or parenthood were to be opened to public discussion and intervention.

A variety of texts, including the classic Western theories of the masses, will be contrasted with the writings on similar topics that emerged in the Eastern Europe both during and after the communist era. In addition, officially produced films, fiction and propaganda materials as well as samizdat and censured writing will also be examined as concrete illustrations of the discussed phenomena.

Grading policy
Class participation/attendance: 20%
2 Reading Presentations: 20%
Midterm Test: 20%
Written Film Analysis: 20%
Final Test: 20%
Requirements, Assignments and Evaluation:

**Class participation:** (20%)  
Active class participation is necessary for this type of course; therefore, it will form a considerable part of a student’s grade. You are expected to ask questions and/or comment on the issues discussed frequently.

**Reading presentations:** (20%)  
Each student will be asked to present **2 readings** from the assigned list according to her/his choice over the course of the semester. At least 1 presentation is due before the Midterm. More than 1 person, but no more than 3 people, can present the same article (please note that in the case of short texts it is not advisable to have more than 2 people presenting the same reading). As a **discussion facilitator**, you will shortly introduce the reading (max. 5 minutes) and then focus on your evaluation of it. Your task is to present your own arguments and/or comments regarding the key points discussed in the text. Come prepared with a written short summary of the text and at least half a page of your own commentary and questions or thought-provoking points that you wish to make about the reading. Please make enough copies for class distribution. Your written and spoken presentation should be focused and to the point; avoid lengthy quotations. The goal is to stimulate discussion of the readings and to make connections with previous class topics. Each presentation will be worth 10% of the final grade (5% for the questions/points sheet, 5% for the verbal presentation of the reading). Please note, however, that all students, not just the discussion facilitators, are expected to read and discuss the assigned reading each week.

**Midterm test:** (20%)  
In-class written exam: **March 28**

**Written film analysis:** (20%)  
5 pages, 20% of the final grade, deadline **May 16**. In-depth analysis of one of the assigned films. You should demonstrate your knowledge of previously read class materials, relate your analysis to the relevant historical, cultural and social phenomena that we discussed, and provide evidence of your own independent thinking. Please follow standard citation criteria. **No late submissions will be accepted.**

**Final test:** (20%)  
In-class written exam: **May 21**

**Attendance and tardiness policy:**  
No cell phones, and no use of the Internet for other than educational purposes in the classroom. **PLEASE NOTE THAT IF YOU HAVE MORE THAN TWO UNEXCUSED ABSENCES PER TERM, YOU WILL BE AUTOMATICALLY MARKED HALF A GRADE DOWN FOR EACH ADDITIONAL UNEXCUSED ABSENCE IN THE FINAL ASSESSMENT.** Tardiness of more than 20 minutes without a reasonable excuse will be regarded as an absence.
Schedule of classes

Week 1
February 13 – Overview of course

February 15 – Definitions of Basic Concepts; Historical and Social Background to Totalitarianism in Central Europe.
SIGN UP FOR READING PRESENTATIONS

Week 2
February 20 – Lecture: Propaganda
READING:

February 22 – Text analysis and discussion: Theories and Images of Propaganda
READING:

Class Analysis of the Soviet and Czechoslovak political posters

Week 3
February 27 – Class visit: “Red Museums” (National Memorial Vitkov) – on site analysis of propaganda materials used in Czechoslovak communist museums

February 29 – Film analysis and discussion: Power and Control in a Totalitarian System
FILM: The Lives of Others (Das Leben Der Anderen)

Week 4
March 5 – Lecture: Western Theories of the Masses – Are They Applicable in the Context of Eastern European Communist Systems?

March 7 – Text analysis and discussion: Western Theories of the Masses
READING:

Week 5
March 12 – Lecture: The Ideology of Collective Identity in Czechoslovakia

March 14 – Text analysis and discussion: Public and Private Aspects of Imposed Collective Mentality in Czechoslovakia
READING:

Week 6
March 19 – Lecture: Official Mass Ceremonies and Performances

March 21 – October 17 – Text analysis and discussion: Participation in Organized Mass Events
READING:

Week 7
March 26 – Film analysis and discussion: Parades and Their Parodies
FILM: Bila Pani (The White Lady)

March 28 – MIDTERM TEST

Week 8
April 2 – Lecture: Collectivization of Life in the Private Sphere. Spending Free Time with the Masses – Weekend Housing and Vacationing
Media analysis and discussion: Construction of Private and Public Life in Communist Media – excerpts from Panelstory, examples of socialist documentary films and advertising

April 4 – Text analysis and discussion: Construction of the Socialist Home. Collective Vacationing
READING:

**Week 9**

**SPRING BREAK – NO CLASSES (April 9 – April 15)**

**Week 10**

April 16 – Lecture: Mass Gymnastics as a Collective Performance

April 18 – Text analysis and discussion: Disciplined Communist Bodies

READING:

**Week 11**

April 23 – Lecture: Children as the Perfect Socialist Collective

READING:

April 25 – Film Analysis and Discussion: Childhood during Normalization

Excerpts from Pelisky (Cosy Dens)

**Week 12**

April 30 – Lecture: Women and Men as Unanimous Collectives – Gender Aspects of Collective Identity

May 2 – Film Analysis and Discussion: Gender Relationships in Public and Private Spheres, Socialist Masses Vacationing

FILM: Dovolena s Andelem (Holidays with Andel)

**Week 13**

May 7 – Text analysis and discussion: Ideology and Reality of Enforced Equality

READING:

May 9 – Film analysis and discussion: N(Ost)algia for Communism?
FILM: Goodbye Lenin

Week 14
May 14 – Lecture and class discussion: N(Ost)algia for Communism?

May 16 – Final Summary of the Course
FILM ANALYSIS DUE

Week 15
May 21 – FINAL TEST