



## **Czech History, Arts, and Civil Society I**

EURO 3000 (3 credits / 45 hours)

SIT Study Abroad Program:  
**Czech Republic: Arts and Social Change**

PLEASE NOTE: This syllabus represents a recent semester. Because courses develop and change over time to take advantage of unique learning opportunities, actual course content varies from semester to semester.

### **Course Description**

The Czech History, Arts, and Civil Society I seminar explores history, society, and arts in the Czech lands and highlights the role of the arts in relation to the social and political changes of the twentieth century and the current challenges facing Czech society and the arts today. Umbrella themes include art, social control, and creative dissent; the role of art in relation to political systems and ideologies; and the relationship between art and economy in a post-socialist society.

The focus of the seminar is thus the rich and complex cultural history of the Czech lands and its relation to the post-socialist transition period through the lens of the arts. It aims to cultivate a basic knowledge of the history of Czechoslovakia and to investigate how social and political change is reflected in arts and civic activities of the past and present. This is an interdisciplinary course comprised of lectures, round-table discussions on Czech history, literature, theatre, and the visual arts. The seminar also integrates film screenings, museum visits, and music and dance performances.

The seminar helps the student gain a unique perspective on the ways in which the arts interacted with politics and society in the twentieth century and of the social and political complexity of the communist past and its relation to contemporary society. The seminar is structured around key modular themes: Art & Nation, Art & Ideology, Art & Dissent, Art & Revolution, and Art & Social Change.

### **Learning Outcomes**

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

- Demonstrate knowledge of the ways in which artists and writers engaged and reflected social and political change at critical moments in Czech twentieth century history.
- Describe and illustrate the mechanisms of creative dissent employed by artists, writers, and musicians of the underground communities under communism.
- Analyze and appraise the social and political context of art in totalitarian and democratic societies based on concrete examples from Czech theatre and visual arts history.

- Apply knowledge of Czech history and the arts in formal arts analyses and research papers.

### Language of Instruction

This course is taught in English, but students will be exposed to vocabulary related to course content as well as the nuances of the social and political context of art through in-country expert lectures and field visits in a wide range of venues and regional locales.

### Course Schedule

**\*Please be aware that topics and excursions may vary to take advantage of any emerging events, to accommodate changes in our lecturers' availability, and to respect any changes that would affect student safety. Students will be notified if this occurs.**

### Module 1: Art & Nation

Topics for this module include:

- Foundation of Czechoslovakia: constructions of national and cultural identity;
- Political and social revolution of the Czech avant-garde;
- WWII – consequences and reflections in the arts, past, and present;
- Arts and social projects dealing directly with national identity and critical interpretations and Czechoslovakia's history today.

#### Session 1: Czech Melting Pot: History & Ethnicity

This session provides an overview of the creation of Czechoslovakia, with an emphasis on the formation of national identity and the Czech, German, Jewish cultural identities of the First Republic – as represented by Franz Kafka. Discussion around the selected text is framed around an overview of the cultural and political context in which Kafka lived.

Required reading:

Holý, L. (1996). National traditions and the imagining of a nation. In *The little Czech and the Great Czech nation: National identity and the post-communist social transformation* (pp. 114-137). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Kafka, Franz. (1996). *Amerika (the Man who Disappeared)*. Translation and introduction by Michael Hofmann. New York: New Directions.

#### Session 2: The National Theatre

This session analyzes the role of citizens, artists, and politicians in the building of the National Theatre within the context of the Czech National Revival movement and the creation of Czechoslovakia. Students stage an in-class reading of a representative text.

Required reading:

Senelick, Laurence, ed. (2009) *National Theatre in Northern and Eastern Europe, 1746-1900*, pp. 232-233. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mrstik, Alois and Vilém. (2002) *Maryša*. Visegrad Drama I: Weddings. Bratislava: Bratislava Theatre Institute. (original published 1894).

#### Session 3: The Arts in a Threatened Democracy

This session focuses on the political and social commentary of artists and writers of the avant-garde movements of the First Republic through an analysis of the paintings, collage, manifestos, and other creations of the Devětsil group; and political satire and songs of the Liberated Theatre.

Required reading:

- Burian, Jarka M. (Spring, 1984) High Points in Theatre of the First Czechoslovak Republic. *Modern Drama*, 27 (1), 98-111.
- Vlček, Tomas. (Spring, 1999) Art Between Social Crisis and Utopia: the Czech Contribution to the Development of the Avant-Garde movement in East-Central Europe, 1910-1930. *Art Journal* pp.28-35.
- Turner, Gerald, trans. (2002) *Between Two Worlds: A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes, 1910-1930*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, pp. 79-118.

#### Session 4: The Sudetenland: Social and Cultural Consequences of WWII

This session focuses on the Munich Agreement of 1938 and the consequences of the policy of appeasement for Czechoslovakia and Czech identity in historical and contemporary terms. The session is accompanied by a field trip to a so-called lost village of the former Sudetenland to explore how artists and activists today address Czech-German relations and one of the most challenging historical topics in Czech society today.

Required reading:

- Bažant, Jan, Nina Bažantová, Orin Starn, Robin Kirk (eds.) *The Czech Reader: History, Culture, Politics*. Chapter 10, *Between Hitler and Stalin (1938-1948)*, pp. 295 -309 and 321-326.
- Head, Anthony. (June, 2002) The Tragedy of Lidice, *History Today*, pp. 44-45.
- Langer, Lawrence L. (July / August, 2002) The Art of Atrocity. *Tikkun* 17, (4), pp. 67-70.
- Matejka, Ondrej. (2008) The Sudetenland – A Sociological Laboratory (or) Sudeten Inspiration on the Question of Social Capital in Lewandowski, J., D. and Milan Znoj, eds. *Trust and Transitions. Social Capital in a Changing World (277 - 295)*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

#### Session 5: Module 1: Art & Nation - Reflection

Students are divided into groups to summarize and present their thoughts on a focused topic such as the national uprisings and the foundations of Czechoslovakia; how the arts and artists reflected, provoked, or moderated social and political change in pre-war and inter-war decades; or the challenge of reconciling and interpreting the past as evidenced in Sudetenland research and cultural projects.

#### **Module 2: Art & Ideology**

This module focuses on the following umbrella themes:

- The creation of the totalitarian state;
- Art as an ideological instrument under communism;
- The emergence and character of parallel cultures;
- Hope and disillusionment: artists and the Prague Spring.

#### Session 1: Are all Animals Equal?

This session presents the way in which the communist party gained control in 1948 and summarizes how power was secured through the *coup d'état* and the show trials and executions of the 1950s. In a provocative return to the Orwell text against the backdrop of Czech history, students analyze the tools and methods used in creating a totalitarian state.

Required reading:

Orwell, George. (1989). *Animal Farm*. London: Penguin Group. (original work published 1945)

### Session 2: Art as Political Program: Socialist Realism

This on-site session looks at official art of the first decade of communism and the story of the monumental Stalin Monument as well as a look at the repurposing of public locations of socialist-era propaganda by contemporary artists.

Required reading:

Petišková, Tereza. (2002) *Czechoslovak Socialist Realism 1948-1958*, Rudolfinum Gallery, Prague.

### Session 3: Czech Writers & Resistance - Samizdat Publishing

The themes of Bohumil Hrabal's novella are presented in the context of a discussion about the place of writers whose work was banned under communism. The cultural importance of the samizdat publishing circles, the consequences for writers and artists jailed for activities is further explored in a site visit to the Library of Prohibited Literature where students may see examples of the samizdat texts by Hrabal and other banned writers.

Required reading:

Hrabal, Bohumil. (1993) *Too Loud a Solitude*. London: Abacus (originally self-published by the author in 1976)

Grutorád, Jiří (2005) To the question "What have you got in here?" I sometimes answer half-jokingly, "The memory of the nation." *The Heart of Europe*, 12, (2).

### Session 4: The Prague Spring: Liberalization

Based on primary sources, manifestos, and open letters by writers and artists, this session looks at how political reforms and cultural institutions contributed to the liberalization of society in the 1960s, the Prague Spring and its end with the Warsaw Pact invasion in 1968.

Required reading:

Vaculík, Ladislav 2000 Words in Jaromir Navratil, *The Prague Spring 1968*. (1998) Budapest: Central European Press, pp. 177-181. (Originally published in Czech, June, 1968)

Harry Schwartz (1969) Prague's 200 Days: the Struggle for Democracy in Czechoslovakia, New York: Frederick A. Praeger, pp. 33-55

Rapold, Nicolas. (2012, June 29) An Audience for Free Spirits in a Closed Society. *The New York Times*.

### Session 5: Subversive Theatre in a Totalitarian State

The session focuses on Vaclav Havel and other members of Theatre on the Balustrade through a look at Czech Theatre of the Absurd, and discussion on theatre and censorship under communism. Students bring the discussion to life through a staged reading of a selection of the play.

Required reading:

Goetz-Stankiewicz, Marketa. (1979) *The Silenced Theatre, Czech Playwrights without a Stage*. Toronto: Toronto University Press.

Havel, Vaclav. (1983) Reflections on the Theatre. *Index on Censorship* (12, 2) pp. 31-32.

Havel, Vaclav. (1993). Memorandum In *The Garden Party: and Other Plays*. Vera Blackwell, ed. New York, NY: Grove Press, pp. 53-130. (Originally published in 1963)

### **Module 3: Art & Dissent: Central Europe in Context**

This module deals with the following umbrella themes:

- Social and cultural reality in the years of “Normalization”;
- Central Europe: political and cultural paradigms;
- Czechoslovakia-Poland in historical perspective.

#### Session 1: Rhapsody in Grey: 1970s & 1980s

The session looks at the social reality of life during “Normalization” and the role of Czech intellectuals and artists in impelling social and political change.

Required reading:

Declaration of Charter 77 (1985) *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens Against the State in Central-Eastern Europe*, pp. 142-145. London: Hutchinson & Co. Ltd. Original publication, January 1, 1977.

Havel, Vaclav (1992) “Dear Dr. Husák” In *Václav Havel or Living in Truth*. New York: Vintage Books. pp. 50-83. (Original work published, April, 1975).

Šiklová, Jiřina. (Summer, 1990) The 'Grey Zone' and the Future of Dissent in Czechoslovakia. *Social Science*, vol. 57, (2).

#### Session 2: The Question of Central Europe

The session engages the academic and literary discourse around the concept of Central Europe, placing Czechoslovakia and Poland in context through the writings of Milan Kundera and Adam Michnik.

Required reading:

Kundera, Milan. (April 26, 1984) The Tragedy of Central Europe: A Kidnapped West or Culture Bows Out? In *The New York Review of Books*, vol. 31 (7).

Kundera, Milan (January 8, 2007) Die Weltliteratur: How we read one another. *The New Yorker*, pp.28-29.

Michnik, Adam. (1998) Gray is Beautiful, A Letter to Ira Katznelson. In *Letters from Freedom: Post Cold War Realities and Perspectives*. Berkeley: University of California Press. pp. 317 – 327.

#### Session 3: Dialectic of Arts & Politics under Communism

This session takes place at a museum and looks at the work of select artists of the second culture, those who worked outside official institutions and dictates of the regime. It includes a meeting with an artist who can reflect on that time, relationships and projects with Polish colleagues, and provide a comparative reflection on the past and present situation for artists.

Required reading:

Chalupecký, Jindřich. (1985). The Lessons of Prague in *Cross Currents: A Yearbook of Central European Culture*. Vol. 4, pp. 323 -334.

#### Session 4: Martial Law & the Solidarity Movement in Central Europe context

This session provides a comparative look at the character and impact of civic resistance in 1980s Poland and Czechoslovakia, the role of artists and intellectuals in anti-

communist activities, and cooperation between leaders of the Solidarity and Charter 77 movements.

### Session 5: Module 2 & 3 Reflection

#### **Module 4: The Arts & Revolution?**

This module covers the following umbrella themes

- The “Velvet Revolution” of 1989 in historical perspective;
- Artists and revolution: debating the role of artists in the 1989 return to democracy;
- Decades of Dissent: the role of the underground seminars in social change;
- Ethical debates around opening the Secret Police files.

#### Session 1: Another Brick in the Wall? The ‘Revolution’ of 1989

In the seminar, students will consider the fall of communism in Czechoslovakia, the role of the Civic Forum, the Jazz Section artists group, and the student initiatives in bringing about the end of communism.

Required reading:

Judt, Tony, (2005) *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*. New York: Penguin Books, pp. 585-636.

Garton Ash, Timothy (1990) *The Magic Lantern: The Revolution of '89 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin and Prague*. New York: Vintage Books, pp. 78 – 130.

Smolar, Aleksanda (July, 2001) History and Memory: the Revolutions of 1989-1991 in *Journal of Democracy*, vol.12 (3).

#### Session 2: How Theatre Staged the Revolution

The Goose on a String theatre of Brno, Silenced playwrights of the 1980s, the role of theatres in organizing the civic initiatives and public events of the 1989 Velvet Revolution. Students are asked to analyze the subversive role of theatre through a staged reading of a selected text.

Required reading:

Day, Barbara. (26 August 1989): Small War in Absurdistan. *Spectator* 263, no. 8407, p. 28.

Sieglová, Tereza. (2009) Petr Oslzlý of the Goose on a String Theatre. Interview with Petr Oslzlý of the Goose on a String theatre (from the Post-Bellum Project. *My jsme to nevzdali*).

Interview with Vlasta Gallerová, former dramaturge of the Realist Theatre of Zdenek Nejedly -- from the Post-Bellum Project, *My jsme to nevzdali* (interview by Jan Jiřík).

Krobot, Ivo and Petr Oslzlý (adaptation) I Served the King of England. Adapted from the novel by Bohumil Hrabal by Brno premiere, Theatre on a String, 30 April 1985, Prague premiere, Drama Club, 25 May 1989.

#### Session 3: Decades of Dissent: Coming to Terms with the Totalitarian Past

A look at the role of surveillance of activities of intellectuals, artists, and others participants of the second culture under communism, as well as the contemporary debates around the ethics and implications of making these secret police files open to the public. This session also looks at the activities of the Underground university.

Required reading:

Day, Barbara. (2008) International Aspects of the “Underground University” in Czechoslovakia, 1948-1989 In *Jahrbuch fur Universitatsgeschichte*. Franz Steiner, Frank E.W. Zschaler, (eds). Stuttgart: Verlag Stuttgart. pp. 199 - 212.

#### Session 4: The Un/changing Role of Artists, Past & Present

This session focuses on artists who came of age in the 1980s and continue their work today and takes place at a studio or gallery where artists provide personal perspectives on the un/changing role of the artist.

Required reading:

Snodgrass, S. (1995). Post-Totalitarian blues with a happy ending. *Beyond belief: Contemporary art from East Central Europe*. Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art.

### **Module V: Art & Social Change**

This module covers the following umbrella themes:

- The social and political legacy of communism;
- Reflections of the new social reality in the literary and performing arts;
- Visual arts in transition: artists’ engagement in politics and social issues.

#### Session 1: Social Justice, the Czech Way

The leveling of the Czech society during the communist period and the subsequent “neo-liberal” transformation in 1990s created one of the most striking paradoxes in Central and Eastern Europe. Skepticism towards the welfare system and the purportedly ever-rising inequality create serious tensions. However, raw data tells a different story. Students draw upon their own observations and experience in Prague to debate the shape of this paradox, its reasons, and consequences.

Required reading:

Holý, Ladislav (1996). *The Little Czech and the Great Czech Nation: National Identity and the Post-communist Transformation of Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 16-33.

#### Session 2: Reflections on the New Social Reality

This session provides an analytical overview of contemporary authors of the post-89 decades. It shows how the inveterate Czech literary tradition has changed in the context of open markets and open society and how select contemporary novels reflect the impulses of the current reality. Students work in groups and present their ideas on one of the readings listed below.

Required reading, select 1:

Hakl, Emil. (2008) *Of Kids and Parents*. Translation and illustration by Marek Tomin. Prague: Twisted Spoon Press.

Hulová, Petra (2009). *All This Belongs to Me*. Transltion by Alex Zucher. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Topol, Jachým. (1994). *City, Sister, Silver*. Translation by Alex Zucker. North Haven, Connecticut: Catbird Press.

#### Session 3: Visual Arts in Transition

For visual artists, new challenges and opportunities have emerged with the burgeoning market and open society of the post-89 democracy. Students revisit the role of art and

look at how artists of the new generation engage political and social issues. Students meet with contemporary artists to hear first-hand the challenges and advantages of life and work of an artist in Prague today.

Required reading:

Snodgrass, S. (2000, April). Toward a new Bohemia. *Art in America*. pp.87 – 95.

#### Session 4: Contemporary Interpretations of the Past

This session is a look at a creative film project that draws upon historical themes of the semester through the lives and words of ordinary citizens. Through the films, students relive the historical moments reviewed during the semester and engage the ethical debates around the use of oral histories and sensitive historical material in creative arts today.

Required reading:

Radio Prague Broadcast (2006, June 13) *Jan Sikel's New Film Series "Private Century"*  
Visit the Private Century web page at: <http://www.facets.org/privatecentury/>

#### Session 5: Panel Debate and Discussion: Open Analysis and Debate on Course Themes

In a provocative return to our semester themes, students engage key lecturers in a structured panel discussion centered on the role of arts and artists around benchmarks in Czech history. Lecturers reflect upon and debate questions put forward by students on the role of art and artists in relation to political systems and ideologies, the character of creative dissent, past and present, and the arts and social change today.

#### **Evaluation and Grading Criteria**

Papers will be graded on style and structure, depth of analysis, and synthesis of secondary and primary sources. Participation will be graded by timely arrival, active involvement in class discussions, and culturally appropriate behavior on excursions.

#### Description of Assignments:

- Art Review. 4 pages. Select one art exhibition, theatre, or other performance that you can observe first hand and analyze within the frame of the initial semester themes of Art and National Identity or Art and Ideology. This may include a current theater performance dealing with a historical theme, a photography or visual arts exhibition dealing directly or tangentially with issues of national identity or political ideology. Recommendations provided. Consider the social and political context in which the work was created and integrate your personal interpretation of the work within the context of lecture notes and readings on one of the designated themes.
- Thematic Paper Pick up on one of the topics that came up during modules 3 and 4 to investigate in depth (6-8 pages), utilizing lecture readings and notes as well as at least three additional articles or other secondary sources available in the library. A focused look at parallel cultures under communism, the history of the courtyard exhibitions, depictions of the social reality during the "Normalization" decades in contemporary film, the structure and activities of citizen initiatives in the 1980s are a few of the topics that may be explored.



- Two quizzes: Two quizzes include at mid-semester and semester end offer a selection of essay questions connecting key historical moments with the themes of arts and social change, arts and dissent, and a comparative discussion of artist roles, past and present, drawing on lecture notes, readings, and first-hand experiences in the field.
- Participation: Students are required to be on time to all lectures and site visits, to attend all lectures, and to participate actively in classroom discussions, group assignments, and presentations.

Assessment:

Arts Review	20%
Thematic paper	30%
Two quizzes	40%
Participation	10%

Grading Scale

94-100%	A	Excellent
90-93%	A-	
87-89%	B+	
84-86%	B	Above Average
80-83%	B-	
77-79%	C+	
74-76%	C	Average
70-73%	C-	
67-69%	D+	
64-66%	D	Below Average
below 64	F	Fail

**Academic Policies:** SIT prides itself on providing students with an experientially based program; we hold ourselves, and our students, to the highest of academic standards. Students are asked to refer to the **SIT Study Abroad Handbook** for policies on academic integrity, ethics, academic warning and probation, diversity and disability, sexual harassment and the academic appeals process.

**Disability Services:** Students with disabilities are encouraged to contact Disability Services at [disabilityservices@sit.edu](mailto:disabilityservices@sit.edu) for information and support in facilitating an accessible educational experience. Additional information regarding SIT Disability Services, including a link to the online request form, can be found on the Disability Services website at <http://studyabroad.sit.edu/disabilityservices>.