

PL 328 Communism in Theory, History, and Film

Tu 14-17:15

Instructors: Ewa Atanassow, Denis Skopin
Guests: Maria Chernyshova, Margaret Litvin
Office Hours: after class, or by appointment

What is communism? What was everyday life like in so-called communist countries, and what were the cultural horizons of their citizens? What impact did communism have (and is it still having) on today's European societies? In this course, we'll study the nature of Soviet-type communist society by exploring its ideological foundations, tumultuous history, and cultural output. Our goal will be to understand the communist project without denigrating it, but also without ignoring the monumental violence perpetrated in its name, and the challenges it faced as an economic and political system. We'll begin by probing the social and political theory of revolutionary Marxism, and its contested reception by the main architects of the Soviet regime. We'll then examine how this theory was applied in historical practice to various aspects – economic, institutional, cultural and political – of social life under what was then termed “really existing socialism.” Taking the USSR and DDR as examples, we'll familiarize ourselves with their specific contexts, and draw on film as an artistic reflection of the self-understanding, normative horizon, and daily life of socialist culture. In addition to readings and film screenings, we'll visit museums and Berlin sites related to the communist past.

Required Texts
Course Reader

Library and Book Purchase Policies

Students are expected to have at their disposal a hard copy of all required texts. Copies of the required books and additional readings are available on reserve at the library.

Requirements

Attendance and Participation

Careful preparation, regular attendance and active participation are essential to the success of this course. Absences beyond two will affect the seminar grade. Please note: arriving late or leaving in the middle of a session will count as half an absence.

Assignments

Reflection paper and presentation: over the course of the semester, students will take turns to reflect on the proceedings of each week, and present these reflections at the beginning of the following week. The reflection paper should offer a concise (up to 1000-word) account of the week's reading and discussions that recapitulates its main

themes, probes deeper a key issue, and articulates questions for further discussion. The reflection papers should be posted on google classroom by 5 pm on Mondays.

Proposal and Final Project: at the end of the semester students will produce a visual essay on an aspect of the course material. To identify the topic students are expected to conduct individual research throughout the term and submit by Sunday, April 19 a project proposal, including bibliography, to be presented and discussed in class. The deadline for the final projects is May 15, 2026.

Assessment

Assessment will be based on seminar participation (30%); reflection paper and presentation (20%); a project proposal and presentation (20%) and final project (30%).

Late Submission and Academic Integrity

Late work will be downgraded in light of the policy outlined in the Student Handbook. Bard College Berlin maintains the staunchest regard for academic integrity and expects good academic practice from students in their studies. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

Deadlines at a glance

The schedule for reflection papers will be set up by Friday, January 30

Proposals for final projects are due on Sunday, April 19

Final Project deadline: Friday, May 15

Schedule

Week	1 st session	2 nd session	Films
1: Jan 27	Introductory: what is communism?	History and Geography of Communism key dates and events	
2: Feb 3	Marx, "On the Jewish Question"	Marx and Engels, "Communist Manifesto"	
3: Feb 10	Lenin, Declaration of the Working the Oppressed Lenin, "State and Revolution"	David King, <i>The Commissar Vanishes</i> <i>October</i> (1927), dir. S. Eisenstein	

4: Feb 17	Lenin on the national question	Tsvetaeva, Memoirs	
5: Feb 24	Stalin on class struggle and collectivization	Stalin on internationalism and the national question	
6: Mar 3	Collectivization: "The last grain collector"	Terror: Skopin, "Defacing the enemy"	<i>Ivan the Terrible</i> , dir. S. Eisenstein
7: Mar 10	The camps: Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich"	Varlam Shalamov, "The Artist of the Spade," in <i>Kolyma Stories</i>	
8: Mar 17	Sean McMeekin on <i>Stalin's War</i> Kotkin, "When Stalin faced Hitler"	Museum visit: https://www.museum-karlshorst.de/en/about-us/the-museum/	
9: Mar 24	The Eastern International: Arabs, Central Asians, and Jews in the Soviet Union's Anticolonial Empire	Film: <i>Kommissar</i> , 1967 (dir. Askoldov)	
March 30	SPRING BREAK		
10: Apr 7	Denis Skopin. Soviet Amateur Photographers Depict Blackness (1960s-1970s). Cartoons: African Tale (Afrikanskaya skazka), (1963, 14:55) Tiny Motorboat (Katerok) (1970, 10:13)	Films: White Sun of the Desert (1970), dir. V. Motyl -At Home Among Strangers, a Stranger Among His Own (Mikhalkov, 1974) Guest speaker: Maria Chernyshova	
11: Apr 14	-Alla Mozhdzhenskaya. Soviet life through the lens of 'Enemies of the State' Assignment: Concept Map of Communism	Films: -The Turning Point (Adbrashitov, Mindadze) -The	Siberiade (1979) dir. A. Konchalovsky

		Train has stopped (Adbrashitov, Mindadze)	
12: Apr 21	The satellite states: a visit to the Stasi museum	Film: <i>The Life of Others</i> (2006), dir. Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck	Proposals
13: Apr 28	Nationalist Internationalism Conference?	Slezkine, "USSR as a communal apartment"	
14: May 4	Famous last films: <i>Repentance</i> (1987) dir. Abuladze Цареубийца (1991) dir. Shahnazarov	Wrap up: communism today	
15: May 11	Final Essay due: Friday, May 15, 23:59		