

Czech Culture and Society: Literary Perspective

Lecturer: PhDr. Jan Šulc

Contact e-mail: jan.sulc@cerge-ei.cz

Course description

The objective of this course is to help students understand Czech culture and society from 1918 to the present. Students will learn about history and culture of this era from the perspective of life and work of Václav Havel (1936-2011), Czechoslovak and Czech president (1989-2003), the most important and influential personality of modern Czech history and culture.

Using my extensive experience as an editor of Václav Havel's Collected Writings and also my personal contacts with him and with many important Czech writers and artists of modern era, I have prepared a series of thirteen lectures on twentieth-century Czech culture and society, based on Václav Havel's life and cultural and political activities, friends, family, and associates, and wide range of interests.

Together these themes present modern Czech culture in its complexity, with its many links to world literature, culture, and politics. They provide a deeper and broader understanding of modern Czech culture and society in the historical and cultural perspective.

In this course, lectures are combined with interactive discussions and tutored readings from essential texts. Further contact with the subject matter will be provided through excursions to places of direct relevance for our topic and through historical documents (musical recordings, photos, films).

A further aim of the course is to bring students into personal contact with important figures of Czech public life (writers, critics, politicians, artists, translators) whom I have known and worked with for decades.

Assessment and Grading

Students' final grades consists of the following components:

1. Class participation – 15%
2. Midterm – 30%
3. Research paper – 30%
4. Final paper – 25%

The midterm (in-class essay) takes places in accordance with the term calendar below, and it also marks the time your research paper topic is due. The full original paper is due the final week (min. 12 000 characters without space), as is the surprise final exam.

At the end of the term, cumulative percentage points will be converted into grades.

Attendance Policy

Students are expected to attend every class and they have to comply with the attendance policy of the UPCES program. One excused absence is tolerated; more than one absence has significant consequences. Students are responsible for catching up with the material they have missed.

Letter Grade	Percentage	Description
A	93-100	Outstanding work
A-	90-92	
B+	87-89	Good work
B	83-86	
B-	80-82	
C+	77-79	Acceptable Work
C	73-76	
C-	70-72	
D+	67-69	Work that is significantly below average
D	63-66	
D-	60-62	
F	0-59	Work that does not meet the minimum standards for passing the course

UPCES Non-Discrimination/Harassment Policy

The UPCES program in Prague promotes a diverse learning environment where the dignity, worth, and differences of each individual are valued and respected. Discrimination and harassment, whether based on a person's race, gender, sexual orientation, color, religion, national origin, age, disability, or other legally protected characteristic, are repugnant and completely inconsistent with our objectives. Retaliation against individuals for raising good faith claims of harassment and/or discrimination is prohibited.

UPCES Diversity Policy

UPCES fully embraces diversity and strives to create a safe and welcoming environment for students from all backgrounds. Prague is a wonderfully diverse community and UPCES is no different. All students should feel at home while studying abroad and UPCES will do its utmost to make sure that becomes a reality. Although unique challenges may arise, we believe that students from all walks of life will encounter wonderful opportunities for enrichment as they explore a new culture while studying abroad.

Course Outline and Reading Assignments

Week 1

Academic Orientation.

Week 2

Introduction and a brief overview of Czecho(-slovak) history 1918-2018.
The birth, development and fall of the First Czechoslovak Republic. Nazi occupation and anti-Nazi resistance 1939-1945. After the war.
Václav Havel and the formation of his generation in the 1940s and 1950s, and the influence of contemporary European thinking upon them.

Reading

Rupnik, Jacques 1989. *The Other Europe*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
Čornej, Petr & Pokorný, Jiří 2015. *The Short History of the Czech Lands*. Prague: Práh.

Week 3

Václav Havel and contemporary European and American theatre, particularly the Theatre of the Absurd.

Readings

Fidelius, Petr (pseud.) 1992. 'The Mirror of Communist Discourse' in: Markéta Goetz-Stankiewicz (ed.). *Good-Bye, Samizdat: Twenty Years of Czechoslovak Underground Writing*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 193-204.
Havel, Václav 1994. 'The Garden Party' in: Václav Havel. *The Garden Party: And Other Plays*. New York: Grove/Atlantic Inc.

Week 4

Václav Havel and Czech and Slovak Cinema in the 1960s (Forman, Chytilová, Juráček, Menzel, Němec, Schorm etc. – The Czech "New Wave")

Reading

Chapters on film-directors Miloš Forman, Jiří Menzel, and Jan Němec 1971 in: Škvorecký, Josef. *All The Bright Young Men and Women. A Personal History of the Czech Cinema*. Toronto: Peter Martin Associates.

Week 5

Václav Havel and modern poetry of western Europe, the English-speaking countries, and Russia, experimental writing, Letterism and its forms around the world, including Bohemia.

Reading

Havel, Václav 2013. *Antikódy*. Prague: KVH

Week 6

Václav Havel and 1960s America, his links to modern American poetry and rock music.
Václav Havel, the Czech underground and its American roots.

Reading

Jirous, Ivan Martin 2018, 'Report on the Third Czech Music Revival' in: Machovec, Martin (ed.). *Views from the Inside. Czech Underground Literature and Culture (1948-1989)*. Prague: Karolinum.

Week 7

Midterm and Museum visit

In-class essay exam (lasting one hour), followed by a visit to places connected with Václav Havel's life and work.

Week 8

Václav Havel, modern Czech philosophy and its international context.

Readings

Havel, Václav 1990. *Letters to Olga*. London: Faber and Faber.

Tucker, Aviezer 2000. *The Philosophy and Politics of Czech Dissidence from Patočka to Havel*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Week 9

Václav Havel, his essay "The Power of the Powerless" and its influence in the world, particularly in Europe.

Havel's central concepts: post-totalitarian society, antipolitical politics, responsibility, living in truth.

Readings

'Charter 77 – Declaration' 1981 in: Skilling, H. Gordon. *Charter 77 and Human Rights in Czechoslovakia*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 209-212.

Patočka, Jan. 'What Charter 77 Is and What It Is Not' in: Skilling 1981, 217-219.

Havel, Václav 1991. 'The Power of the Powerless' in: Václav Havel. *Open Letters*. London: Faber and Faber, 125-214.

Week 10

Czech culture as the crossroads of international influences and cultural streams and schools of thought. Václav Havel's place in the wider context.

Reading

Bažant, Jan & Bažantová, Nina & Starn, Frances (eds.) 2010. *The Czech Reader: History, Culture, Politics*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Week 11

Modern Czech photography as the main medium of modern Czech art.

Readings

Fárová, Anna 2006. *Anna Fárová & Fotografie / Photography*. Prague: Langhans.

Birgus, Vladimír & Mlčoch, Jan 2010: *Czech Photography of the 20th Century*. Prague: Kant.

Week 12

Václav Havel and samizdat culture.

Václav Havel and Czech culture in exile. Czech culture behind the Iron Curtain.

Readings

Lopatka, Jan 1992. 'Bohumil Hrabal in 1989' in: Goetz-Stankiewicz, Markéta (ed.). *Good-Bye, Samizdat: Twenty Years of Czechoslovak Underground Writing*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Week 13

Final paper and research paper due.