

# The Totalitarian Experience

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## Course description:

For a contemporary young Czech, let alone a young American, it is exceedingly hard to comprehend what life was like under the communist rule in the Soviet-dominated part of Europe. It is not only that they miss the direct experience of the place and times. Their parents' experience cannot be of much help either because it differed so radically from that of their contemporaries on the eastern side of the Iron Curtain. History books cannot fully convey the totalitarian experience which was unlike anything people in the West encountered in their everyday lives. What made the totalitarian system unique was its holistic nature. It was not a world that was in some respects different from the normal world; it was a world that was different in practically every respect. And yet it was a world in which people managed to have lives, families, friendships and loves like in any other world. Thanks to the ordinary people it was a world that kept refusing to become what it was intended to be. In its later incarnations it was called the world of "real socialism" and there was really something real in its dreary ugliness. At the same time it was a world of total fiction, absurdity and make believe. The proposed course is designed to reflect this contrast. While it was being conceived, the topic has acquired more than just a historical relevance. The Russian aggression in Ukraine has revealed the long-hidden totalitarian tendencies in Russian politics and society. Without accounting for them, it is impossible to explain either the seemingly universal support for the aggressive war or the astonishing indifference to human suffering, wholesale destruction and, worst of all, disregard for the value of human life. By the same token, however, past experience would suggest that underneath the totalitarian monolith there continue to exist seeds of humanity, resistance and aspirations for freedom and dignity. We shall attempt to apply the lessons of the totalitarian experience, both in its most brutal form and in the period of "real" socialism, to hypothesize about the limits, the durability and the eventual vulnerability of the Putin regime or for that matter, any other regime of this kind.

## Grading policy

Class participation/attendance:	20%
Presentation:	10%
CV assignment	5%
Exit permit assignment	5%
Mid-term paper:	25 %
Final paper:	35%

ASSIGNMENT 1 - PERSONAL CV FOR A PHD PROGRAM APPLICATION - WEEK 5  
 ASSIGNMENT 2 - APPLICATION FOR AN EXIT PERMIT - WEEK 9  
 MIDTERM PAPERS ARE DUE IN WEEK 8  
 FINAL PAPERS ARE DUE IN WEEK 12

Grading scale:

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.

*Week 1 - UPCES Orientation Lecture Series*

*Week 2*

**Topic I - The origins of totalitarianism**

*The dreams of a perfect world. Utopias, Heavens on Earth, Fascism, Nazism, Marxism, Bolshevism*

**Topic II - Totalitarianism and post-totalitarianism**

*Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Kim, Brezhnev, Deng, Husák, Jakeš*

**Readings:**

Muravchik, Joshua: Heaven on Earth, Chapters 1-6, Encounter Books, 2002

Marx, Karl, Engels Friedrich: The Communist Manifesto

<https://www.yorku.ca/comninel/courses/4090pdf/manifest.pdf>

Havel, Václav: The Power of the Powerless: Chapters 1-7

*Week 3*

*field trip to the Museum of Communism*

**Topic III - The Totalitarian Creed and The Totalitarian Catechism**

*The Core Beliefs: Historical determinism, The precedence of Being over Consciousness*

*The Articles of Faith: Class Struggle, the Inevitable Victory of the Working Class, the Party as the Vanguard of the Revolution*

*Dichtung und Wahrheit: The Changeable Face of History*

**Topic IV - The instruments of coercion and collaboration**

*The Party and Its Leading Role. The All-powerful State. The Iron Fist of the Working Class.*

**Readings**

Orwell, George: 1984, <https://www.planetebook.com/free-ebooks/1984.pdf>

Orwell, George: *The Prevention of Literature*, in: The Collected Essays No. 4, 1945-1950, Penguin Books, 1970, pp. 81-95

Week 4

### **Topic V - The Gearbox System**

*The National Fronts. The Front Organizations. The Trade Unions. The Neighborhood Committees*

### **Topic VI - Them**

*From Cheka to KGB to FSB, from Dzerzhinsky to Beria to Putin. The Agents and the Collaborators. The Army of Informers.*

### **Readings**

Kafka, Franz: The Trial [https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/7849/pg7849-images.html#THE TRIAL](https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/7849/pg7849-images.html#THE_TRIAL)

Koestler, Arthur: Darkness at Noon, [https://files.libcom.org/files/%5BArthur\\_Koestler%5D\\_Darkness\\_at\\_Noon.pdf](https://files.libcom.org/files/%5BArthur_Koestler%5D_Darkness_at_Noon.pdf)

**Film:** *Lives of Others*, 2006

Week 5

CV Assignment due

### **Topic VII - The “Social Contract”**

*How people pretended to work and the government pretended to pay them*

### **Topic VIII - The Economy of Planned Scarcity**

*The non-market economy. The Plan and the reality. The negative selection principle.*

### **Readings:**

Havel, Václav: Article 203, in: *Open Letters*, p. 117

Hayek, F.A. The Use of Knowledge in Society, *The American Economics Review*, September 1945, [www.kysq.org/docs/Hayek\\_45.pdf](http://www.kysq.org/docs/Hayek_45.pdf)

Week 6

### **Topic IX - The Two Faces of Exile**

*The emigrés, the exiles and the immigrants. The Cottage cottage industry.*

### **Topic X - The dropouts, the subversives and the dissidents**

*The enemies of the revolution. The traitors in our midst. The confused and the mistaken. The useful idiots.*

**Readings:**

Kundera, Milan: *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Harper Perennial, 2009

Declaration of the Charter 77

*For New Creative Actions in the Name of Socialism and Peace /The Anticharter/*

**Film:** *The Firemen's Ball*, 1967

Week 7

**Topic XI – The geopolitics of totalitarianism**

*The false equality of East and West. The inherent asymmetry. The front organizations: peace movements, youth movements, religious movements*

**Readings:**

Havel, Vaclav: Anatomy of a Reticence. Prague, 1985 (in: *Selected Writings*. 1965-1990. Vintage Books, 1992, pp. 291-323)

**Topic XII – Philosophical reflections of totalitarianism**

*Arendt, Levinas and Patočka*

**Readings**

Arendt, Hanna: *Ideology and Terror: A Novel form of Government*, 1953

(<https://virtuallaboratory.colorado.edu/Origins/class%20readings/Hannah%20Arendt%20-%20Ideology%20and%20Terror.pdf>)

Levinas, Emmanuel: *Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism*

Patočka, Jan: *The Obligation to Resist Injustice*, 1977

Week 8

**Topic XIII – Artistic reflections of totalitarianism**

MIDTERM PAPERS DUE

*Kafka, Orwell, Kundera, Havel*

**Topic XIV – Life under totalitarianism**

*The public self and the private self; Education and schooling; Work and rest; Travel and tourism; Food and drink; Sports and recreation; Love and sex; Literature, music and arts; The totalitarian and the underground media; The totalitarian humor*

## **Readings**

Kundera, Milan: *The Joke*. London: Faber and Faber, 1992

Havel, Václav: *Stories and Totalitarianism*, 1987,

<https://matiane.wordpress.com/2018/02/27/stories-and-totalitarianism-by-vaclav-havel/>

**Film:** *My Sweet Little Village*, dir. Jiří Menzel, 1985

*Week 9*

*Exit Permit Assignment due*

### **Topic XV – The collapse of real socialism**

*The Helsinki incursion. The human rights movement. The loss of competitiveness. The Gorbachev blunder.*

### **Topic XVI – Totalitarianism undead**

*The commissar turned nationalist. The war in Yugoslavia. The Yeltsin compromise. Orange revolution 2004, Georgia 2008, Majdan 2014, Crimea, Luhansk Donetsk 2014,*

## **Readings**

Havel, Václav: *Meeting Gorbachev*, In: *Open Letters*, p. 351

Albright, Madeleine: *Fascism: A Warning*, HarperCollins, 2018, Chapters 7, 8 and 12

*Week 10*

### **Topic XVII – The Dream of Revenge and the Benign Negligence**

*The failure of Reset, The Trump years chaos, The European inertia, Special military operation 2022*

### **Topic XVIII - No repression without aggression**

*The Myth of the External Threat. Ends justify the means. United against the enemy. The fifth column. The Orwellian transposition. The national myth. Away with the Nazis.*

## **Readings**

Lucas, Edward: *The New Cold War: Putin's Russia and the Threat to the West*, Palgrave Macmillan (19 February 2008), ISBN 978-0-230-60612-8.

Kagan, Robert: *A Free World, if You Can Keep It*. Foreign Affairs, January/February 2023  
*Vladimir Putin is in Thrall to a Distinctive Brand of Russian Fascism*, The Economist, 28 July 2022

## *Week 11*

### **Topic XIX - The existential character of the current conflict**

*The upturning of the international order. The quest for a new world order. The illiberal revolution. The Manichean dualism. The illusion of co-existence.*

### **Topic XX – Totalitarianism without and within**

*Conclusion. The appeasers and the mediators. The dealers and the peddlers. The useful idiots. The anguish of living in freedom. The eternal longing for order. The fear of globalization. The troublesomeness of moral thinking. The price of freedom.*

### **Readings**

Applebaum, Anne: *The twilight of democracy*, Penguin Random Books, 2021

Žantovský, Michael: *A War on Truth, The American Purpose*, February 23, 2023

## *Week 12*

### **Summary of the course**

FINAL PAPERS DUE

**Film:** *Cozy Dens*, dir. Jan Hřebejk, 1999

## *Week 13*

### **Wrap Up**

### **Recommended readings:**

Snyder, Timothy: *On Tyranny*, Penguin Random Books, 2017

Applebaum, Anne: *The Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe 1944-1956*,

Knopf Doubleday, 2013