

Politics and Culture in European Short Fiction
ENG 429/598; SLC 429/598

Designations: Humanities (HU) and Global Awareness (G)

The lines of difference marking the diverse and fascinating discourses of East Central European cultures before and after the end of Soviet hegemony animate and legitimize the Other Europe. It is no longer possible today to speak of Czechoslovak or Serbo-Croatian literature. Political changes of the past decade, specifically the memorable events of 1988-1991, have revealed not only the unresolved variations and contradictions within a region once viewed as monolithic; they have also generated the emerging field of Post-Totalitarian Cultural Studies. In recent years Slovaks have decided to create an independent cultural identity, while the present divisions in the former Yugoslavia have a much longer history. Most Serbs are Greek Orthodox and use the Cyrillic script, whereas Croats are Roman Catholic and use the Latin alphabet. Although the languages of the two nations are closely related, any story by Ivo Andrić (the 1975 Nobel Prize recipient) will quickly show just how much their cultural traditions differ. My point, of course, is that while embroiled in the transitional period after the collapse of communism in Central Eastern Europe, these nations and cultures (Albanians, Bulgarians, Czechs, Croats, Hungarians, Macedonians, Poles, Romanians, Russians, Slovaks, Slovenes) have emerged as vibrant and independent states, which define themselves within and beyond traditional dichotomies of cultural otherness and whose traditions and cultures do not match up with those of the West, particularly because of the long absence of interregional and cross-disciplinary studies in those regions.

There are of course other problems closely linked to the dangerous temptation to ignore the cultural diversity of the smallest continent. In the not so distant past, György Lukács, one of the most influential Marxists, wrote only in Hungarian or in German. His most ambitious work, *Die Eigenart des Aesthetischen* (1963), is still not available in English, although it would be indispensable to those who represent Marxist theory in literary scholarship. The much anticipated European Parliament, occupying center stage in the new Europe, will soon submerge all national differences under the unification of all national identities. The interruption of differences (a Hungarian writing in a language of limited circulation) will not be tolerated, and the forgotten lesson of colonization will not be allowed to awaken our consciousness to the painful memory that cultures can be both assimilated and ignored. As Goethe wrote to Herder in 1796, "strangers have a

strange life which we cannot assimilate if we are interested in it merely as guests.”

At the dawn of the “New World Order” in a fragmented Europe, East and West find themselves strange bedfellows, still divided by the anachronistic rhetoric of binary opposition yet thrust together, at once self and other, at once European and post-colonial. The purpose of my courses, then, is to reach out toward a new theory for understanding the region of the former Soviet bloc, the still mysterious Other Europe, by escaping simplistic definitions and provoking innovative cross-disciplinary interrogations of the very concepts of culture, national identity, tradition, politics, and dialogue. Refusing to fold unproblematically into a margin of Europe or into the respected fields of post-colonialism and multiculturalism, Central Eastern European cultures interrogate the different constructions of class and race provided by the former communist countries. Thus, my courses will further enhance discussions about the invention of ethnicity, those issues about which we all became so painfully aware in the aftermath of the recent conflicts in former Yugoslavia.

READINGS:

TEXT MANUALS 1 & 2 available at Alternative Print & Copy (alttempe@alternativeprintandcopy.com). There will also be handouts and writers’ mini-bios, which I will provide for our classroom discussions.

Week one: Eugene Ionesco: *The Chairs* (Romania and France).
(Bookstore)

Week two and three: (Russia): Arkandi Averchenko: "The Young Man Who Flew Past"; Isaak Babel: "In the Basement"; Mikhail Sholokov: "The Fate of a Man." (manual)

Week four: War stories (cont.): Aleksandr Sholzhenitsyn: "An Incident at Krechetovka Station"; (Yugoslavia) Milovan Djilas: "War"; (Montenegro) Dusan Ivanovici: "Military Secrets." (manual)

Week five and six: (Hungary): Istvan Orkeny: "Down the Danube"; (Croatia) (manual) Dubravka Ugresic: "Stefi Graff in the Jaws of Life." (Bookstore) (Romania): Alexandru Vlad: "Raccourci"; Mihail Sadoveanu: "The Well Among the Poplars." (manual)

MIDTERM

Week seven and eight: (Poland): Jerzy Kosinski : "The Painted Bird."
(manual)

Week nine: SPRING BREAK

Week ten and eleven: (Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia): Bora Kovic: "Russians by Trade"; "The Balkan Express" (film); "Big Business"; "A Bulgarian Pigeon Talks to An English Tourist." (manual)

Week twelve and thirteen: (Yugoslavia) Ivo Andric: "Ali-Pasha"; "The Damned Yard," "Letter from 1920." (Bookstore)

Week fourteen: (Albania) Ishmail Kadare: "Twilight of the Steppe Gods."(Bookstore)