

CESTA

JEWS AND JUDAISM IN CENTRAL EUROPE

Lecturer: David Biernot, ThD.

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Consultations: by appointment

Class time: Mon 12.30 – 14:00; Thu 9.00-10.30

Course description:

Today, most Jews living in the U.S. (the largest Jewish community in the world) trace their descent to Central or Eastern Europe. The course explores Jewish presence primarily in the history of Central Europe and the ambiguous character of Jewish experience fated not only by prejudice, contempt, and suffering, which culminated in Holocaust but also rich in the undeniable contribution of Jews to the life and culture of the countries.

The course pursues the following objectives. First, the students acquaint themselves with the variety of the Jewish Diaspora identities, and then proceed to study the religious and cultural heritage accumulated by generations of Jews living in Germany, Austria, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and above all in Bohemia and Moravia. We dwell in the history of the Ashkenazi Jews from the Medieval to Modern Times, and study their social organization and position in medieval Christian society. We pay particular attention to Enlightenment and the impact it exerted on Central European Jews at the close of 18th century and thus launched significant social and culture transformation that culminated in the emancipation of Jews and their integration into the modern society. The course also analyzes various factors that led to Holocaust, among them anti-Semitism and nationalism, sustained by the 19th century philosophy of Romanticism. Students benefit from an excursion to the Jewish cemeteries of Prague and a three day trip to Cracow, once one of the most vibrant centers of Jewish life in Central Europe.

Course objectives:

By the end of the course the student will be able to find her or his way through Jewish history in Central Europe from Middle Ages until the postwar era; investigate and come to understand the Jewish experience in Bohemia and Prague, the most important centers of Jewish life throughout centuries; explore coexistence of Jewish population with nations of Central Europe nations; and appreciate Jewish existence before Auschwitz in the way the Jewish people used to live before the Holocaust.

Grading:

1. Attendance, class preparation and active participation are mandatory

(Please note that every absence will be reflected in the final grade. Since the course is conducted on an individual basis its objective is to encourage the student to enter into a creative discussion with the teacher. The student is required to come prepared for the sessions and, show basic acquaintance with discussed themes.)

2. Midterm and final exams, occasional class quizzes 30%

3. Portfolio 30%

4. Integrative project presented as power or poster, and a research paper 40%

Course Schedule:

I. Building up CESTA: Roads and Pathways, Transitions and Alternatives

Week 1

Thu Jan 27: Introduction and team-building: students' personal experience with Jewish life in the U.S.A. American Jews: the largest Jewish community in the world – its history and present.

II. European and Global Contexts

Week 2

Mon Jan 31: Historical variety of the Jewish Diaspora: Oriental, Sephardi, Ashkenazi Jews, and other minor Jewish communities; the variety of Jewish identities and its impact on the social and cultural environment in the present day State of Israel.

Thu Feb 3: Introduction to the history and culture of Central European countries; the Holy Roman Empire; the primary role of German language and culture in Central Europe to 1945; the beginnings of Ashkenazi settlement in Rhineland and its movement eastwards; Yiddish: the vernacular of Ashkenazi Jews; Yiddish literature and Yiddish authors in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Week 3

Mon Feb 7: Beyond the Diaspora diversity: the origins of the Jewish nation in Ancient Palestine; the Hebrew Bible as a foundational text of Jewish religion.

Thu Feb 10: Beyond the Diaspora diversity: the rise of Rabbinic Judaism after 70CE; the Talmud: another foundational text of Jewish religion.

III. Ideas and Ideologies: Church, Nation, State and Totalitarian systems, World Heritage Towns and Vanished Villages

Week 4

Mon Feb 14: The Jews of Andalusia – a vanished world of Muslim Spain.

Thu Feb 17: Maimonides a prominent Jewish philosopher of the Muslim world.

Week 5

Mon Feb 21: Jews in medieval Christian Europe: social and economic contexts.

Thu Feb 24: Christian medieval anti-Judaism: its social and religious basis.

IV. Central Europe in its Diversity: Transitions and Alternatives, Contacts and Conflicts; Czechs and their Neighbors

Week 6

Mon Feb 28: Jewish communities in Bohemia and Moravia up to the 19th century.

Thu March 2: *FILM – House of Life: The Old Jewish Cemetery in Prague .*

Week 7

Mon March 7: *EXCURSION – the Jewish cemeteries of Prague.*

Thu March 10: Czechs and Jews at the turn of the 20th century.

V. REVIEW: Basic concepts and boundaries; Planning integrative projects

Week 8

Mon March 14: MIDTERM EXAM; planning integrative projects.

Thu March 17: Spring break

Week 9

Mon March 21: The Jews of Poland: the Jewish past of Cracow.

Thu March 24: *FILM: Schindler`s List.*

VI. Revolution and Social Change

Week 10

Mon March 28: Chassidism: a religious and social revolution of East European Jewry.

Thu March 31: Jewish Enlightenment: between the general Enlightenment philosophy and Jewish accents; Moses Mendelssohn: his life and philosophy.

Week 11

Mon Apr 4: Emancipation of Jews in the Austrian Empire and Prussia; the French revolution and Jews.

Thu Apr 7: Jewish assimilationist tendencies in the 19th century; Heinrich Heine, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud: their relation to Judaism.

VII. Institutions and Legal Frameworks

Week 12

Mon Apr 11: Zionism: From Theodor Herzl to the rise of the State of Israel.

Thu Apr 14: Legal and social persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany between 1933 and 1941.

Cesta to Cracow April 15 – 17

VIII. Memory and Forgetting; Biographies and oral history

Week 13

Thu Apr 20: *EXCURSION: Franz Kafka Museum*

IX. Landscapes: Real and Imaginary

Week 14

Thu Apr 28: The Wannsee conference and the “Final solution of the Jewish question”.

X. CESTA at its End: What’s Next on the Road? Transitions and Alternatives of the Future

Week 15

Mon May 2: Contemporary right extremist scene in the Czech Republic: *FILM: The Beclouded Democracy*.

Thu May 5: Can Central Europe be a habitable place for Jews?: a discussion about matters of religious tolerance, racism, democracy and totalitarian regime.

Week 16

Mon May 9 and Thu May 12: Presenting students` integrative projects and FINAL EXAM.

Readings:

Encyclopedia Judaica, 26 volumes, MacMillan, 2006.

R. Chazan, *Medieval Stereotypes and Modern Antisemitism*, University of California Press, 1997.

A. Elon, *The Pity of it All: A Portrait of the German-Jewish Epoch 1743-1933*, Picador 2002.

P. Johnson, *A History of Jews*, Weiden & Nicolson, 1988.

M.A. Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany*, Oxford University Press 1999.

H. J. Kieval, *Languages of Community: The Jewish Experience in the Czech Lands*, University of California Press, 2000.

K. Seeskin, *The Cambridge Companion to Maimonides*, Cambridge University Press, 2005.