

Central Europe between the Wars: A Light Extinguished
A Course in Four Sessions
UCB-OLLI
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Introduction

Central Europe is a concept and as such it is subject to a variety of interpretations. Memory and the idea of Central Europe differ for different peoples, for example, Germans, Austrians, Czechs, Poles, and Jews, over time. Central European history is characterized by a multi-ethnicity, or a multi-nationality, or diversity of populations. Often, peoples of different languages and ethnic backgrounds lived in the same states. The Jewish communities played a role in the vibrancy of what we now think of as interwar Central European culture. Economic dislocation, notably hyperinflation in Germany, and political instability under the Weimar Republic there, followed the First World War and led to the rise of Nazism in Germany and right-wing dictatorships in many of the successor states as well during the interwar years. Many of those who had enriched culture of Central Europe, for example Sigmund Freud and Albert Einstein, to name two of the better-known examples, fled into exile. The division of Europe into East and West following the Second World War rendered meaningless the concept of Central Europe. With the end of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the ideal of Central Europe was reborn, only to be challenged again with the rise of right-wing nationalist regimes in Hungary, Poland, and elsewhere in recent years.



Above: Interwar Housing – Karl-Marx-Hof, Vienna (1927–1930)

Session 1: The First World War and the Creation of Interwar Central Europe

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Part 1A: Setting the Stage. Central Europe and the 1914–1918 War. There are different meanings given to the idea of “Central Europe.” To some it refers to German-speaking Europe dating back to the Middle Ages but to others it includes many non-German areas as well, in particular, the non-German speaking parts of the old Habsburg Empire that included the Czechs, Hungarians, Poles, and others. Situated geographically between Germany and Russia they are also included as part of Central Europe. Berlin and Vienna emerged as culture and imperial capitals at the beginning of the 20th century, along with the rise of Prague and Budapest. The assassination of Austrian Archduke Francis Ferdinand produced a crisis and the coming of war in 1914. The German concept of *Mitteleuropa* [Middle Europe] was linked to Central Europe as a military goal. Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) described many of the horrors experienced by the ordinary German soldiers in the trenches and Jaroslav Hašek’s *The Good Soldier Schweik* (1921–1923) satirized the actions of a Czech soldier in the Austro-Hungarian army, avoiding fighting for an apparently alien cause.

Part 1B: Reordering Central Europe – 1918–1923. Defeat in 1918 was followed by disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the reordering of Central Europe between 1918 and 1923. The dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire gave rise to successor states in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and a much smaller Austrian republic with its capital in Vienna. The Peace Treaty of Versailles in 1919 assigned parts of eastern Germany to a newly reborn independent Poland that had not existed since the late 18th century, creating lasting antagonisms within the German Right, and ultimately handicapping the new German republic established in Weimar, the city of Goethe and Schiller. A new Yugoslav state consisting of Serbia and parts of the former Austrian empire, including Croatia and Slovenia, created new problems of ethnic tensions that continue to the present.

Session 2: Crisis Followed by Apparent Stability in the 1920s

Part 2A: The peace that followed the First World War was marked by economic turbulence and political unrest into the early 1920s. Signed in 1919, the peace treaty of Versailles ended hostilities but imposed on the Germans a war guilt clause that obliged them to take the blame for all the destruction caused by the war and pay reparations to the Western powers. A new republic, established at Weimar, the city of Goethe and Schiller, was blamed by many Germans for accepting the war guilt clause.

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Paying the reparations contributed to a devastating inflation culminating with a nearly worthless currency in 1923 and the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazis. (Germany paid its last World War I reparations in October 2010.) The German mark, valued at four to the dollar in 1914, fell to 4.2 trillion in November 1923. Especially hard hit were many on fixed incomes among the middle classes, some of whom turned to Hitler's new Nazi movement. The new Hungary experienced social revolution with a brief Communist government headed by Béla Kun in 1919, only to fall under the right-wing dictatorial rule of Admiral Nicholas Horthy in 1920. Many in Hungary felt embittered by the loss of Transylvania, a multi-ethnic region, to Romania, which had been on the winning side in the First World War.

Part 2B: Apparent Stability after 1923 through the 1929 Depression. With loans from the United States and the issuance of a new Mark, the German economy was stabilized in late 1923, leading to a period of apparent stability from 1923 through the Depression of 1929. The American government lent money to the German government, which paid reparations to the Allies, who then repaid their World War I loans to the United States. The German economy became highly concentrated with companies such as IG Farben, which produced synthetic dyes and other chemicals. In 1928, German industrial production reached the pre-war level of 1913. Greatly reduced in size, the new Austrian republic fell into civil war in 1934, but the Social Democrats, in charge of Vienna, built housing projects including the Karl Marx Hof, designed for a population of some 5,000 people, with amenities such as laundromats, baths, kindergartens, a library, and doctors' offices. Poland fell under the dictatorship of Josef Pilsudski in 1926.

Session 3: Modernist Culture and Its Critics

Part 3A: In spite of – or perhaps in part because of – the political and social dislocations that followed the war, the arts and sciences flourished in Central Europe between the wars. Following the end of the First World War, Berlin became a hotbed of political activity with democratization and the “New Woman,” now given the right to vote, and the arrival of émigrés fleeing Communism in Russia. Expressionist film was exemplified by “Das Kabinett des Doktor Caligari” [The Cabinet of Dr Caligari], making Berlin a center of cinematic innovation in 1920. Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, published in 1929, was a window into the lives of the working classes and underworld in the city during the 1920s,

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and the paintings of Otto Dix depicted the cabaret scene there. The Bauhaus movement modernized architecture and Marlene Dietrich and Leni Riefenstahl became internationally known in the world of film. Wassily Kandinsky painted in Munich. Arnold Schönberg developed the twelve-tone music compositional technique in Vienna. Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, published in 1915, became internationally known during the interwar years.

Part 3B: Under Siege from Left and Right. Critics of "Weimar" and Central European Culture included Bertolt Brecht, whose "Threepenny Opera" used drama as a social and ideological forum for leftist causes. Käthe Kollwitz created drawings, etchings, woodcuts, and paintings focusing on poverty, hunger, and war, as well as the lives of the working classes. Erich Maria Remarque's "All Quiet on the Western Front" (1929) exposed the horror experienced by average soldiers during the First World War. Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*, written in Vienna and published in 1930, dissected the struggles of humans to create and live within civilized society. Critics on the Right included Oswald Spengler, who advocated a form of aristocratic Prussian Socialism, and Alfred Rosenberg, whose *The Myth of the 20th Century* in 1930 outlined much of the racial argumentation later used by the Nazis.

Part 4: The Nazi Onslaught on Central European Culture

Session 4A: The Rise of the Nazis 1919–1933. Embittered by the Treaty of Versailles and blaming democrats, Communists, and Jews, many nationalist splinter groups emerged in Germany during the immediate aftermath of the First World War. One was Anton Drexler's *Deutsche Arbeiter Partei* [German Workers Party] in 1919, which Hitler joined. By 1921 he had taken it over and renamed it the *National-Sozialistische Deutsche Arbeiter Partei* [National Socialist German Workers Party (or Nazi), popularly known by its German initials, NSDAP]. With the inflation of the early 1920s, Hitler launched an attempt at a coup d'état [*Putsch*] in Munich in late 1923 but failed and spent several months in prison, during which time he wrote *Mein Kampf*. The 1929 depression drove up unemployment and led directly to Hitler's and the Nazis' rise to power, as they became the largest party in the German *Reichstag*. In January 1933 the Nazis were invited by a clique surrounding President Paul von Hindenburg to form a government. By 1934, they had turned Germany into a one-party dictatorship.

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Session 4B: The Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft* [Folk or ethnic community] and a reordering in Central Europe, 1933–1939. Within months of coming to power, Hitler established a one-party state with concentration camps. Jews, Homosexuals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Gypsies, and others deemed “unworthy” were excluded from the *Volksgemeinschaft*. While the Nazis extolled and romanticized the German peasant, their economic policies focused on preparation for war, in reality pushing many farmers into the cities for urban industrial jobs. The ideal woman was to be a mother at home but economic exigencies, especially during the war, pushed many women into factory jobs. During peacetime, the Nazis were careful to maintain a relatively decent standard of living for “Aryan” Germans, with inexpensive radios, tourism promotions, and the promise of inexpensive automobiles, such as the *Volkswagen*, or peoples’ car. A camp-like atmosphere with party rallies prevailed, such as the one at Nuremberg in 1934 filmed in Leni Riefenstahl’s “Triumph des Willens” [Triumph of the Will], their purpose to socialize all private life and keep everyone “moving toward the Führer,” who would lead Germany into another destructive war, this one ultimately destroying “Central Europe.” While the Cold War divided Europe into East and West, rendering the concept of Central Europe irrelevant, its end gave a rebirth to the ideal. As in the interwar years, however, Central Europe is now again challenged by the rise of populist right-wing movements.