



Revolutionary Berlin: Riots, Rebellions, and Resistance

Summer Semester 2026: 13 April– 17 July 2026

CATEGORY

Society and Politics

COURSE STRUCTURE

2 contact hours à 45 min per week (summer semester: 14 weeks)

WEEKLY SCHEDULE

Time

Day: Wednesday, 16-18 c.t. (4:15-5.45pm)

Place

Hausvogteiplatz 5-7, Room 0323-26

COURSE LANGUAGE

This course is taught in English, including the readings. For the understanding of the texts and the discussions in class, language-level B2 is required. Students should be prepared to speak in class discussions, both in small groups and the larger class, to give presentations on assigned course readings to the class, and to write short- to mid-length academic essays.

Language requirements (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages)
English B2

TARGET GROUP

International exchange students of all subjects with a strong interest in the course topic. Berlin Perspectives courses are designed for undergraduate students. Master students may participate if their home university agrees. Regular degree-seeking students can select the course within the elective part of their study program (überfachlicher Wahlpflichtbereich üWP).

Students thinking of taking this course should be ready to:

- Approach the material with curiosity
- Commit to civil discussion, including disagreement
- Critically analyze complex primary and secondary texts
- Regularly participate in class discussions
- Complete course assignments in a timely manner

CREDITS = 5 ECTS

The Berlin Perspectives courses are offered by the Career Center as part of the elective program üWP. Registration takes place via Agnes.

All courses are accredited according to the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS).

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This interdisciplinary seminar examines Berlin as a crucible of revolutionary thought and action across two transformative centuries. Rather than simply surveying historical events, the course investigates how revolutionary ideas—about the state, freedom, justice, and human emancipation—have evolved, collided, and been reimagined from the Napoleonic era through contemporary social movements. Students will engage with canonical texts in philosophy and political theory (Hegel, Marx, Luxemburg, the Frankfurt School) alongside historical analysis and on-site exploration of Berlin's revolutionary landscapes—from the Berlin Wall Memorial to former Stasi prisons to sites of student uprising. Throughout, the course emphasizes critical connections between past and present, examining how Berlin's revolutionary traditions inform contemporary debates about surveillance, resistance, urban space, and democratic participation. Students will develop skills in comparative historical analysis, philosophical argumentation, and critical citizenship, learning to recognize how understanding revolutionary history can illuminate present-day struggles for social transformation.

COURSE OBJECTIVES AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

- **Trace the evolution of revolutionary thought and action** in Berlin from the Napoleonic era through the 21st century, identifying continuities and ruptures in revolutionary ideologies, tactics, and goals across two centuries.
- **Synthesize insights from multiple disciplines**—including history, philosophy, political theory, sociology, urban studies, and cultural studies—to develop nuanced interpretations of revolutionary movements that account for ideological, material, spatial, and human dimensions.
- **Compare and critically assess competing visions of the state and social organization**, engaging with philosophical frameworks from Hegel, Marx, Luxemburg, the Frankfurt School, and contemporary activists to evaluate debates about reform versus revolution, state power, and human liberation.
- **Articulate connections between historical analysis and contemporary political engagement**, recognizing how understanding Berlin's revolutionary past can inform critical citizenship and participation in ongoing struggles for justice and transformation.

READINGS

Adorno, Theodor and Herbert Marcuse. *Correspondence*. 1999.

Squatting Europe Collective. *Squatting in Europe: Radical Spaces, Urban Struggles*. 2013.

Fichte, Johann Gottlieb. "Address to the German Nation." 1808.

Funder, Anna. *Stasiland*. 2003.

Gieseke, Jens. *The History of the Stasi: East Germany's Secret Police 1945-1990*. 2015.

Haffner, Sebastian. *Failure of a Revolution: Germany 1918-1919*. 1973.

Hegel, G.W.F. *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. 1820.

—. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. 1807.

Liebknecht, Karl. "Militarism & Anti-Militarism." 1907.

Luxemburg, Rosa. "The Russian Revolution." 1918.

Maier, Charles S. *Dissolution: The Crisis of Communism and the End of East Germany*. 1997.

Marx, Karl. *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, trans. Annette Jolin and Joseph O'Malley.

1970.

—. "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte." 1852.

Oosterhuis, Harry. "The 'Jews' of the Anti-Fascist Left: Homosexuality & the Socialist Resistance to the Nazis," *Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 29, no. 2, 1995.

Ostermann, Christian F. *Uprising in East Germany 1953*. 2001.

Rosenhaft, Eve. *Beating the Fascists: The German Communists and Political Violence 1929-1933*. 1983.

Spartacist Manifesto. 1918.

Sperber, Jonathan. *The European Revolutions, 1848-1851*. 1994.

Von Dirke, Sabine. "'All Power to the Imagination!': The West German Counterculture from the Student Movement to the Greens." 1997.

ASSIGNMENT INFO

Workload and assignments

In order to be granted 5 ECTS, participants will be asked to

- actively attend all sessions (a minimum of 75% attendance is required for classroom and online sessions)
- prepare and revise the classroom/online sessions
- hand in the following **assignments**:
 - Group Presentation
 - Final Project
 - Site Visit Reflections (2/4)
 - Short Essays (3/6)

Failure to fulfil one of the mentioned components results in failure of the class.

Assessment Components

The final grade will be composed of the above-mentioned assignments.

YOUR INSTRUCTOR

Dr. Sasha Shapiro is a scholar of philosophy and literature, holding a PhD in Slavic Studies from the University of Virginia. Her research interests include the intersection of literature, philosophy, and anthropology. She is also the managing editor of *American Imago*, a peer-reviewed psychoanalysis journal started by Freud.

Dr. Felix Helbing is an interdisciplinary scholar who researches at the intersection of gender, labor, and the materiality of the body. He completed his PhD in Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of Pittsburgh. Additional research interests include silent cinema and Soviet philosophy. His work has appeared in journals like *Russian Literature*, *Studies in East European Thought*, and *Critical Quarterly*.

COURSE SCHEDULE

2 hours à 45 min per week (summer semester: 14 weeks)

Week 1: Foundations

What makes a revolution? How do we study two centuries of uprisings, failures, and resistance in one city? This week we set up the questions and methods that will guide us all semester.

Week 2: Forging A Nation

Napoleon's domination across Europe forces many to question and define their national identity. We will discuss Fichte's famous addresses while Napoleon occupies Berlin, questioning how occupation and humiliation produced a new kind of nationalist philosophy and ask what happens when philosophy becomes a tool for building collective identity.

Readings:

- Fichte, "Address to the German Nation" (1808) (excerpts)

Week 3: Dialectic of Freedom

Hegel's master-slave dialectic asks, "how does consciousness emerge through struggle?" We'll trace his argument about recognition, freedom, and the state—ideas that would haunt every revolutionary movement that followed.

Readings:

- Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), "Lordship & Bondage," "Civil Society & The State" (1820) (excerpts)

Week 4: Critique & Contradiction

Marx turns Hegel on his head, insisting that material conditions produce consciousness, not the other way around. This week we examine his foundational critique—the text that launched revolutionary materialism.

Readings:

- Marx, "Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right" (Introduction)

Week 5: 1848 & After

Revolution sweeps across Europe in 1848—and fails. This week, we will discuss the lead up to the unsuccessful 1848 revolution and its ramifications. We will also question what it takes for a revolution to be successful and what the recipe is for disaster.

Readings:

- Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte" (1852)
- Sperber, "The Midcentury Revolutions in European History," *The European Revolutions 1848-1851*

Week 6: Radical Visions

Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht articulate a revolutionary socialism that rejects both reformism and authoritarian communism. We'll examine their visions of international solidarity, anti-militarism, and spontaneous mass action—visions that would cost them their lives.

Readings:

- Luxemburg, "The Russian Revolution"
- Liebknecht, "Militarism & Anti-Militarism"

Week 7: Spartacist Uprising

Germany, November 1918: the Kaiser abdicates, workers and soldiers form councils, and revolution seems possible. Then the Social Democrats ally with the military to crush the uprising. Luxemburg and Liebknecht are murdered. We'll examine what died with them and question how their legacy endures in contemporary Berlin.

Readings:

- Spartacist Manifesto (1918)
- Haffner, "Between Revolution & Counterrevolution," *The Failure of a Revolution: Germany 1918-1919*

Week 8: Democracy Under Siege

The Weimar Republic collapses not through some inevitable process but through actual street violence between communists and fascists. This week, we'll look at the KPD's strategy of "beating the fascists" and ask why it failed.

Readings:

- Rosenhaft, *Beating the Fascists: The German Communists and Political Violence 1929-1933*

Week 9: Resistance and Repression

Who resisted the Nazis, and how? This week examines anti-fascist networks that operated underground, paying special attention to the marginalized groups—including gay men in the socialist resistance—whose stories were suppressed even after liberation.

Readings:

- Oosterhuis, "The 'Jews' of the Anti-Fascist Left: Homosexuality & the Socialist Resistance to the Nazis"

Week 10: Division & Dissent

Berlin 1953: East German workers strike against impossible production quotas and Soviet tanks roll in. We'll visit the Wall memorial and examine how this suppressed uprising shaped both German states for decades.

Site Visit:

- Berlin Mauer Memorial

Readings:

- Ostermann, *Uprising in East Germany 1953*

Week 11: Surveillance States

The Stasi perfected the art of surveillance, recruiting one in fifty East Germans as informers. But West Germany was watching its radicals too. We'll visit a former Stasi prison and ask: what does it mean to live under constant observation?

Site Visit:

- Stasi Prison Museum Hohenschönhausen

Readings:

- Funder, *Stasiland* (excerpts)
- Gieseke, "A New Type of Informer," *The History of the Stasi: East Germany's Secret Police 1945-1990*

Week 12: 1968 & Counterculture

As students occupy universities across West Berlin and West Germany. Marcuse and Adorno—the intellectual godfathers of the movement—argue bitterly about whether revolution is possible or desirable. We'll trace how 1968 spawned everything from the terrorist RAF to the Green Party. Site

Site Visit:

- Dorotheenstadt Cemetery

Readings:

- Von Dirke, "All Power to the Imagination!": *The West German Counterculture from the Student Movement to the Greens*

Week 13: Walls Come Down

November 1989: the Wall opens, people pour through, and the GDR collapses within a year. But what came next? We'll examine reunification's failures, squatter movements claiming space in the chaos, and how contemporary refugee activism continues Berlin's resistance traditions.

Site visit:

- Bornholmer Str. Nov. 9, 1989 Memorial

Readings:

- Squatting Europe Collective, "Squatting & Urban Renewal," *Squatting in Europe: Radical Spaces, Urban Struggles*
- Maier, *Dissolution: The Crisis of Communism and the End of East Germany*

Week 14: Unfinished Revolutions

We end by asking: what does revolutionary Berlin teach us about power, resistance, and change? Where are the unfinished struggles? What forms does resistance take now? Course synthesis and looking forward.

TECHNICAL REQUIREMENTS

- Registration on Moodle (HU's e-learning platform)

in case of online sessions

- Fully functional device (laptop, tablet, PC)
- Stable internet connection
- Software: Zoom (video/audio)
- *Recommended* hardware: external headset for better sound quality

EXPECTATIONS & POLICIES

Preparation for lively discussions: be on time, have at least the required readings completed, and points in mind for discussion or clarification.

Assignments: complete all assignments according to the specified requirements on the schedule including handing them over to the lecturer.

Commitment: pay particular attention to the lecturer and respect differences of opinions in this international classroom.

Academic guidelines: Comply with academic integrity policies. Plagiarism in even a small assignment will result in failing the entire course.

Attendance policy: Students must contact their class teachers to catch up on missed work – to excuse absence please contact the lecturer.

The course and its syllabus are subject to change. Last update: 16/02/2026