



Women and Socialism. Gender, Identity, and Literature behind the Iron Curtain

Fall Term 2024: 2 September – 13 December 2024
(break: 21-25 October 2024)

CATEGORY

Literature and Art

COURSE STRUCTURE

3 contact hours à 45 min per week (14 weeks)

WEEKLY SCHEDULE

Time

Day: Monday, 09:00 am – 11:30 am

Place

Schönhauser Allee 10, 10119 Berlin
Room 1.23

COURSE LANGUAGE

English

Language requirements (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages)

English B2

TARGET GROUP

This course caters to students interested in gender studies, area studies, and/or literary studies, with a specific focus on exploring the political dimensions of being a woman. While a general interest in literature would be beneficial, it's not a strict requirement for participation. The course further encourages curiosity towards gender identity, Eastern European art, and politics, creating an interdisciplinary learning environment that delves into the multifaceted aspects of literature, gender dynamics, and the cultural and political landscape of Eastern Europe.

CREDITS = 6 ECTS

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

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course provides a multifaceted exploration of the evolving roles and experiences of women across diverse historical and cultural landscapes, primarily through the lens of literature. It begins by delving into foundational identity theories, namely constructivism and essentialism, and their application to different identity types. The journey spans pivotal moments in history, from the Russian Empire and Nazi Germany to the Soviet Union's Stalinist era and the post-Soviet transition. Throughout, the course examines how societal shifts manifest in the literary works of influential women writers, offering a nuanced understanding of the intersectionality of gender, identity, and cultural evolution.

Students engage in critical discussions on topics ranging from the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s to the impact of perestroika and the fall of the Iron Curtain. An excursion to the DDR Museum provides a tangible connection to historical contexts, complementing the theoretical foundation established through readings by key theorists and authors. The course culminates in student presentations, which will allow the students to synthesize what they have learnt and to explore the intricate relationship between literature, gender, and societal transformations throughout history.

COURSE OBJECTIVES AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

The twofold objective of this Bachelor-level course is to educate students on the historical and political dynamics behind the Iron Curtain while concurrently providing them with essential gender and identity theories. Through an exploration of these theories, societal movements, and women's literary contributions, students will develop a nuanced understanding of how these factors intersect. The ultimate aim is to enable students to critically analyze and contextualize the roles of women within diverse cultural and historical contexts, particularly those associated with the Iron Curtain.

Knowledge:

- Get acquainted with an overview over the history of womanhood in Eurasia and Germany, with a focus on the socialist period.
- Explore and discuss theories of gender and gender identity.

Academic/Transferable Skills

- Analyse literary texts on the basis of a historical, political and gender framework.
- Effectively communicate and engage in discussions concerning key concepts, theories, and historical contexts related to women's experiences and literature.

Competences:

- Read and comprehend research in the field of women's roles and literature.
- Apply acquired theories and concepts independently to analyze new texts.

READINGS

See Schedule below.

Complementary Reading:

A History of Women's Writing in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, ed. by Jo Caitlin (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

A History of Women's Writing in Russia, ed. by Adele Marie Barker and Jehanne M Gheith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

Burke, Peter J., Jan E. Stets, *Identity Theory, Identity Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2009).

Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

ASSIGNMENT INFO

Workload and assignments

In order to be granted 6 ECTS, participants will be asked to

- actively attend all sessions (a minimum of 80% attendance is required for classroom and online sessions)
- prepare and revise the classroom/online sessions
- hand in the following **assignments**:
 - Group oral presentation (15 mins, to be presented in Week 14). The presentation will be an analysis of a work by a pre-selected author which will allow the students to apply the knowledge acquired during the course to literary works.
 - Two short essays (300-400 words) reacting to the week's discussion to be handed in throughout the semester

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

Veselina Dzhumbeva is a fourth-year PhD candidate at the Queen Mary University of London whose work focuses on émigré women's writing in interwar Paris. Among her topics of interest are gender and national identity, motherhood and the relationship between self and the body.

Veselina is also Postgrad Representative for the British Association of Slavonic and East European Studies (BASEES), as well as a Fulbright Visiting Researcher at Columbia University, New York. In 2021/2022 AY, Veselina was a Teaching Fellow at Queen Mary University of London, where she taught a course on literature after the death of Stalin. Veselina holds a BA in Comparative Literature and Film as well as a MA in East European Studies from the Free University Berlin. Her further research interests include women's literature of the perestroika period, gender and film, Bulgarian cinema and Bulgarian modernist literature.

COURSE SCHEDULE

3 hours à 45 min per week

Week 1: Identity Theory: Constructivism, Essentialism and Types of Identity

The first session will present an overview over identity theory – main movements, its history as well as the types of identity as introduced by Peter J. Burke and Jan E. Stets. Beginning with a discussion on the two main theories of constructivism and essentialism with their most important proponents including Plato, William C. Bagley, Jean Piaget. Dangers of conservative theories of identity – racial, gender, sexual and religious discrimination. Types of identity – role identity, group identity and person identity.

Discuss: What are the relationships between the main movements and the types of identity? To which movement does this classification belong? Can you think of other fields apart from identity theory where constructivism and essentialism can be applied?

Reading: Burke, Peter J., Jan E. Stets, 'Introduction', in *Identity Theory, Identity Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2009), pp. 1-17.

Week 2: Gender Identity

We will explore the concepts of gender as essential and gender as performance, as well as roles typically assigned to women and their influence on identity building. I will introduce concepts of gender from some of the most prominent theorists of the 20th century, including Simone de Beauvoir, Hélène Cixous, Monique Wittig and Judith Butler.

Discuss: Explore examples of the two concepts of gender identity and the reading of Judith Butler's text. Also, go over the most frequent woman's role identity, including mother, wife, homemaker, lover, sister, daughter, etc.

Reading: Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 11-33.

Week 3: Before the Revolution: Women's Writing in the Russian Empire and Maxim Gorky's *Mother*

I will provide a brief overview of the history of women's writing in the Russian Empire, spanning from Medieval times to the early 20th century, focusing on the role of women in literature, prevalent themes, and significant movements. Also, draw a brief comparison between the image of the mother in the East and in the West (e.g. in religion, the focus in the Orthodox falls on the motherhood rather than the purity of Mary: Virgin Mary vs Mother of God). Additionally, we will discuss Maxim Gorky's *Mother*, a novel pivotal in depicting the revolution and the roles of women and the older generation in it.

Discuss: How do the new information compares to what the students already knew of women writers as well as famous female literary characters in the Russian Empire? Think of examples of maternal figures from other literary works and compare them to Gorky's titular mother.

Reading: Rosenholm, Arja and Irina Savkina, "How Women Should Write": Russian Women's Writing in the Nineteenth Century', in *Women in Nineteenth-Century Russia: Lives and Culture*, ed. by Wendy Rosslyn and Alessandra Tosi (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2012), pp. 161-208.

Week 4: Women in Germany before WW2

We will look at the position of women in Germany from Medieval times until the Second World War, including in the German Empire and the Weimar Republic. This will include an overview of German history, as well as women's rights in Germany. We will discuss the social changes that occurred during the Weimar Republic, including the emergence of new social problems, the rise of crime, and the changing sexual norms, which led to women working outside the home in large numbers and gaining the right to vote. We will also discuss the position of the woman writer both in the German Empire and in the Weimar Republic.

Discuss: We will have a comparison between what we have so far discussed about the Russian Empire and German women. Also, we will compare the importance of motherhood both in everyday life but also in the nation building process – Vaterland (fatherland) in German vs. Матушка Россия (Mother Russia).

Reading: Diethel, Carol, 'Introduction', in *Towards Emancipation: German Women Writers of the Nineteenth Century* (Berghahn Books, 1998), pp. 1-16.
Boak, Helen, 'Introduction', in *Women in the Weimar Republic* (Manchester University Press, 2013), pp. 1-12.

Week 5: After the Revolution: Alexandra Kollontai and the Women's Committee

We will discuss the major changes that occurred in the roles of women during and after the October revolution that sought to equalize the differences between genders and classes. We will look at how women had begun a slow integration into the workforce before the revolution, and how the Bolshevik party had consciously worked to win the most advanced women and

organize them within the ranks of the party. We will also discuss the role of Alexandra Kollontai, the first woman in the Bolshevik Government, in improving women's rights and advocating for sexual liberation. Finally, we will explore how the early Communist vision of women's equality and liberation was never fully realized, and how the reforms to improve women's lives were short-lived, with public and party attitudes towards family policy becoming more conservative by the mid- to late-1920s. Also we will look at how the position of the woman writer changed from the preceding Silver Age to the post-revolutionary period.

Discuss: What were the highest priorities for the New Woman? How does the position of her compare to the woman of the Russian Empire?

Readings: Kollontai, Alexandra, 'Communism and the Family, in *Selected Writings of Alexandra Kollontai* (Westport: Lawrence Hill and Co., 1977), pp. 250-260.

Week 6: Women in the Third Reich and Mother of the Volk

In this session on the women's position during the Third Reich, we will be discussing the Nazi regime's family ideology and policy. We will also talk about the role of women during the Third Reich, including the creation of the Nazi Women's League, which aimed to teach women about the importance of their roles in the family and society. Additionally, we will explore how women writers during the Third Reich were affected by the regime. The position of the woman writer, as well as the metaphor of the mother will also be discussed.

Discuss: How does the Third Reich woman compare to the woman described by Kollontai? How does the role of the woman in the family compare?

Reading: Cardinal, Agnès, 'Women's Writing under National Socialism', in *A History of Women's Writing in Germany, Austria and Switzerland*, ed. by Jo Caitlin (Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 146-56.

Gupta, Charu, 'Politics of Gender: Women in Nazi Germany', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 26, no. 17, 1991, pp. WS40-48.

Week 7: The Woman at the Time of Stalinism and Mother as Propaganda

We will be discussing the role of women in the Soviet Union during the Stalinist era. I will talk about Stalin's "New Soviet Woman" concept, which emphasized women's roles as workers and mothers, and how he used the emancipation of women as a pretense to mobilize women mainly for economic development. We will also explore how Stalin's policies and use of propaganda violated both the principles of equality and freedom of feminism, and how the reforms to improve women's lives were short-lived. Additionally, we will discuss how women writers during the Stalinist era were affected by the regime's censorship and propaganda, and how some women writers used their work to resist the regime's ideology.

Discuss: Compare the propagandic ideas of the woman brought forth by Nazism and Stalinist governments. How does this 'New Soviet Woman' compare to the 'New Woman' of pre-Stalin USSR?

Reading: Liu, Caimiao, 'Stalin's "New Soviet Woman"', *Sociology Mind*, 09 (2019), 247-57.

BREAK: 21 – 25 October 2024

Week 8: A Time of Uncertainty – 1960s and 1970s and the Women of Central Europe

We will start by discussing the major changes that occurred in the roles of women in both the West and the Eastern Block during the 1960s and 1970s. We will have a quick overview over the process of de-Stalinization in the Soviet Union. I will talk about the feminist movement in the West, which aimed to achieve gender equality and challenged traditional gender roles. Additionally, I will explore the role of women and women writers during the so-called Thaw and Stagnation periods of Soviet history, as well as their equivalents in the rest of the Eastern Block with a special focus on Central Europe – Czechoslovakia and Hungary in particular.

Discuss: How did the de-Stalinization process affect gender and familial roles? What do you know about the position of women in the 60s and 70s in your own country? Are there similarities between the development of gender rights in the West and in the Eastern Bloc in this period? Compare the 60s and 70s in terms of general freedom and of the freedom of women.

Reading: Ferge, Zsuzsa, ‘Women and Social Transformation in Central-Eastern Europe: The “Old Left” and the “New Right.”’, *Czech Sociological Review* 5, no. 2 (1997), pp. 159–78.

Week 9: Excursion to GDR Museum: What Was the East German Home Like?

We will go to the DDR Museum, where we will have a chance to explore what the DDR home looked like.

Discuss: How did the interior displayed in the museum compare to similar homes seen either in person or in the media? How does it compare to the home you grew up in, your grandparents’ home or even what you imagined? We will discuss also the reading and see how women’s situations compare in the GDR and FRG.

Week 10: Perestroika and the Fall of the Iron Curtain

I will provide a historic and literary overview of this important period. During this time, women played a significant role in the political and social changes that were taking place in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Most importantly, we will focus on the revival of women’s writing in the 80s and 90s and the open criticism of the Soviet regime present in literature.

Discuss: What was the position of women writers in relation to the domestic until now

Reading: Molyneux, Maxine, ‘The “Women Question” in the Age of Perestroika’, *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, 10 (1991), pp. 89–108.

Week 11: Ukrainian Women Before and After the War

We will look at the position of Ukrainian women starting from the Russian Empire, through the Soviet period and ending with the role of women in Maidan and the current invasion. We will also discuss the famous Ukrainian poet Lesya Ukrainka and her influence on both Ukrainian literature but also on how women were viewed. We will also read and discuss poems by women written after the 2022 Russian invasion.

Discuss: We will analyze the themes of poems Lesya Ukrainka and by current authors to see how they compare. We will also look at art, film and literature bases on the experience of women since the escalation of the war.

Reading: Mitsuyoshi, Yoshie, 'Women in Western Ukraine and in the Soviet Union prior to 1945', in *Gender, Nationality, and Socialism: Women in Soviet Western Ukraine* (Heritage Branch, 2004), pp. 18-44.

Week 12: Women in Poland

We will explore the position of women in Polish history and literature with a specific focus on its Socialist period. We will do so keeping in mind what we have learnt so far about women in East Germany, Soviet Russia and Soviet Ukraine. We will also have a brief look at the changes that occurred in Central Europe – from socialism to far right governments and what these changes mean for women, especially in terms of body autonomy.

Discuss: We will ask ourselves whether geographic location and religion influence the way women are perceived both in the family, in society and in literature.

Reading: Czermińska, Małgorzata, 'Women Writers in Polish Literature, 1945–95: From 'Equal Rights for Women' to Feminist Self-Awareness', in *A History of Central European Women's Writing* (Palgrave Macmillan: 2001), pp. 220-239.

Week 13: Post-Soviet Women

We will discuss the transition from socialism to capitalism and the consequences of this transition on women. Most importantly, we will focus on the persistence of traditional gender roles, domestic violence and discrimination still prevalent in many places. In terms of literature, we will discuss the expanding variety of genres which are accessible to the authors, as well as their presence in the West (e.g. as Nobel laureates).

Discuss: We will discuss the changes that occur both in terms of the position of women in society, as well as in the themes and genres chosen by writers and poets.

Reading: Funk, Nanette, 'Introduction: Women and Post-Communism', in *Gender Politics and Post-Communism: Reflections from Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union* (Routledge: 1993).

Week 14: Presentations

In this session we will have everyone present in groups on a pre-selected woman author. These presentations, whose length will depend on the number of people in each group, will explore the position of women in the chosen literary work as well as will contextualize the work and its author. We will also have a concluding discussion to summarize what we have learnt in the past three months.

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, especially the academic honor code and the student code of conduct. 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: 10/01/2024