



„RECALL: A Study of Central European Places of Memory for Collective Remembrance”

2023-1-HU01-KA220-HED-000154286

Module Title: Culture against Communism - Cross-Border Countercultures in Central Europe 1945-1989 (*Topic 14*)

Target Duration: 29 minutes (video) + 15-20 minutes (e-learning tasks)

Target Audience: University students, researchers, and history enthusiasts

This module explores how culture in Central Europe became both the object of communist control and one of the most powerful tools of resistance between 1945 and 1989. It examines the paradox that while state socialism sought to engineer a “new socialist man” through ideological control of art, education, and media, culture ultimately undermined the system’s legitimacy.

The first part analyzes how communist regimes in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia subordinated culture to party control. Socialist realism became mandatory, censorship was institutionalized, and artistic life was expected to serve Marxist-Leninist ideology. Schools, state media, and nationalized cultural institutions were mobilized to reshape collective values. Avant-garde, religious, and independent movements were marginalized or silenced. Yet even within this tightly controlled system, artists began to test boundaries.

The second part traces how moments of political thaw—1956 in Poland and Hungary, the 1960s in Czechoslovakia—opened limited spaces for creative experimentation. Film movements such as the Polish Film School and the Czechoslovak New Wave used state studios to produce works that questioned Stalinism, heroism, and official narratives. Directors like Andrzej Wajda, Miloš Forman, and Jiří Menzel redefined cinema as a space of moral and existential inquiry. Even when repression returned—after 1968 in Czechoslovakia or during martial law in Poland—culture did not disappear. Instead, it moved underground.

The module then focuses on the growth of countercultures and independent networks from the mid-1970s onward. Samizdat publishing houses such as NOWA, independent journals, “flying universities,” underground theatre, punk and rock music, and alternative art scenes created parallel cultural spheres beyond state control. In Hungary, György Aczél’s “three T’s” policy (ban–tolerate–support) produced a system of negotiated compromise, but also allowed subtle forms of dissent. In Poland, the rise of Solidarity after 1980 catalyzed an unprecedented expansion of independent culture. In Czechoslovakia, the trial of The Plastic People of the Universe became one of the impulses behind Charter 77.

The final section highlights cross-border cultural cooperation. Wrocław became a hub of Polish–Czechoslovak solidarity, hosting the 1989 Festival of Independent Czechoslovak Culture—an event later described by Václav Havel as an overture to the Velvet Revolution. The anti-communist happenings of the Orange Alternative transformed satire and play into mass civic protest, turning dwarfs into symbols of dissent.





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Overall, the module demonstrates that culture did not merely reflect political change—it enabled it. From film studios to churches, from underground presses to rock festivals, Central European artists and intellectuals created spaces of civic imagination. Culture trained citizens in critical thinking, solidarity, and symbolic resistance long before political transformation became possible.

Primary Goals of the Module:

- Explain how communist regimes attempted to control culture as part of broader social engineering.
- Analyze socialist realism and censorship as tools of ideological enforcement.
- Examine moments of liberalization (1956, 1960s, 1980s) and their impact on artistic production.
- Explore underground publishing, samizdat, independent music, theatre, and film as forms of cultural resistance.
- Compare the Polish, Hungarian, and Czechoslovak trajectories of counterculture.
- Assess the role of cross-border cooperation in weakening communist legitimacy.
- Investigate how cultural memory preserves symbols of resistance (films, festivals, monuments).
- Connect cultural dissent to the emergence of civil society before 1989.

EU Key Competences Addressed in This Module:

- **Cultural awareness and expression** – Understanding art, music, film, and literature as vehicles of resistance and identity formation.
- **Critical thinking and digital literacy** – Evaluating censorship, propaganda, and artistic subversion in state-controlled systems.
- **Social and civic competence** – Recognizing how nonviolent cultural practices fostered solidarity, democratic habits, and civic courage.
- **Entrepreneurial and initiative competence** – Analyzing how independent publishing and underground networks functioned despite repression.

Learning Outcomes:

By the end of the session, learners will be able to:

- Describe how communist authorities sought to subordinate culture to socialist ideology.
- Define socialist realism and explain its political function.
- Compare cultural liberalization in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia during the post-1956 and 1960s periods.
Analyze selected films of the Polish Film School and Czechoslovak New Wave as critiques of Stalinism and conformity.



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- Explain the significance of underground movements such as samizdat publishing and independent music scenes.
 - Assess the role of the “three T’s” system in Hungarian cultural policy.
 - Interpret the political importance of rock music festivals, independent journals, and “flying universities.”
 - Evaluate the symbolic meaning of events such as the Festival of Independent Czechoslovak Culture (Wrocław 1989).
 - Distinguish between official, tolerated, and underground cultural spheres.
 - Reflect on how cultural resistance contributed to the emergence of civil society before 1989.
 - Connect cultural memory of resistance to contemporary democratic identities in Central Europe.
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