Rationale: This course discusses “political fiction” in twentieth-century Europe. Although there was a long and illustrious tradition of politically oriented fiction in Europe before 1900, such literary invention took on new poignancy with the coming of the world wars, the Communist revolution, the rise of fascism, the Holocaust, the Cold War, and the bitter social and economic conflicts of the late modern era. Stuart Scheingold argues that both European and American novels of the time evinced a stronger sense of “political estrangement” than earlier fiction had. We’ll use that argument to orient our discussion. But there are many other questions. What exactly qualifies as political fiction? It is often said that historians explain how and why historical events occurred whereas fiction writers evoke how history felt. Can the novelist tell us how something called “political” felt at specific moments in the past? If so, then how is that done? And by what criteria do we measure success or failure? Yet other questions follow. Is the work of fiction mainly a primary source for historians—and therefore studied for the way it reflects its time? Or can it also help us to “re-imagine” history? In other words, can it offer alternative historical narratives—in this case, alternative political narratives—that are legitimate in their own right? In considering such issues, our reading will include classic novels such as George Orwell’s 1984 as well as lesser-known works (to English-speaking audiences) like Heinrich Böll’s The Train was on Time and Ismail Kadaré’s The General of the Dead Army. We cast our net broadly, including German, British, Italian, French, and Albanian literature.

Requirements and Grading: Beside weekly readings and discussion, seminar requirements include a short, in-class research presentation and a research paper of roughly 15-18 pages. This paper may include discussion of one or several of the novels already covered in the course. Or students may choose to write on a novel or novels we haven’t considered. We’ll discuss the research projects at length in the course of the semester. Roughly half your grade is based on participation (including sessions in which several students will serve as “lead discussants”) and the in-class presentation; the other half is based on the final paper.

Required Reading:
Stuart A. Scheingold, *The Political Novel: Re-Imagining the Twentieth Century* (2010)
Ignazio Silone, *Bread and Wine* (1936)
George Orwell, *1984* (1949)
Heinrich Böll, *The Train Was on Time* (1949)
Ismail Kadaré, *The General of the Dead Army* (1963)
Christa Wolf, *The Quest for Christa T.* (1968)
Albert Cossery, *Proud Beggars* (1955)
Optional Background Reading on Learn@UW Course Site


Optional Background Reading on College Library Reserve:

Mary Fulbrook, *The People’s State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker*

William W. Hagen, *German History in Modern Times: Four Lives of the Nation*

Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945*

Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe’s Twentieth Century*


Joseph Rothschild and Nancy Wingfield, *Return to Diversity: A Political History of East Central Europe since World War II*

Bernard Wasserstein, *Barbarism and Civilization: A History of Europe in Our Time*

Course Schedule

1. Themes and Concepts
- Sept. 4  Course Introduction
- Sept. 11 No Class: Reading Week
- Sept. 18 Twentieth Century History—as a Novel? Reading: Scheingold, *The Political Novel*

2. World War I
- Sept. 25 Solidarity in the Trenches? Barbusse, *Under Fire*

3. Leviathan-State
- Oct. 2 Communist Resistance as Twentieth Century Christianity? Silone, *Bread and Wine*
- Oct. 9 Was Orwell Anti-Political? Orwell, *1984*

4. War and Genocide, Made in Germany
- Oct. 16 “Being-unto-Death” and World War II Böll, *The Train Was on Time*
- Oct. 23 Victimizer as Victims? Schlink, *The Reader*

5. Memory and Subjectivity under Communism
- Oct. 30 Albanian Troubles with the Past Kadaré, *General of the Dead Army*
- Nov. 6 East German Troubles with Personality Wolf, *Quest for Christa T.*

6. Contemporary History as Western Failure
- Nov. 13 Joys of Poverty? Cossery, *Proud Beggars*
- Nov. 20 Emptiness of Prosperity? McEwen, *Saturday*

7. Student Research
- Nov. 27 Student Presentations
- Dec. 4 Student Presentations
- Dec. 11 Student Presentations
- Dec. 18 Papers Due by Noon