Society, Politics, and Daily Life in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna

Richard Lein | February 2–13, 2026 | 4 ECTS

Course Description

The course examines Vienna's transformation into the cultural and scientific center of Europe at the beginning of the 20th century. It analyzes the political, social, and cultural conditions that led to Vienna's development into a metropolis, as well as the outstanding achievements in science and culture that made Vienna famous far beyond the borders of the Habsburg Monarchy. However, the dark sides of these developments are also addressed: severe social problems, anti-Semitism, and conflicts between the nationalities living within the boundaries of the city. The course aims at looking behind the common image of fin-de-siècle Vienna and paints a picture of an up-and-coming metropolis with all its bright and dark sides.

Requirements: The grading is based on **participation** during class (20 %), a **short paper** (40 %) and the **written final exam** (essay type) (40 %).

Course Topics

- Political and territorial structure of the Habsburg Monarchy
- Development of territory, demography and population in Vienna 1870-1918
- Administration and political parties in fin-de-siècle Vienna
- The social structure of Vienna and its impact on (everyday) culture
- Czechs, Jews, and other nationalities in Vienna between integration and discrimination
- Education and educational institutions in Vienna 1870-1918
- Food and (mal)nutrition in fin-de-siècle Vienna
- Housing as a social phenomenon

Syllabus

1st week	
Monday, February 2, 2026 08:30–10:30 AM HS 30	Course introduction. The territory, the state and the man in charge. The Habsburg Monarchy in 1900 *Required reading: Beller, A Concise History of Austria, 141-177.*
Tuesday, February 3, 2026 08:30–10:30 AM HS 30	Radicalism as a program. Politics and political parties in Vienna in the fin-de-siècle period *Recommended reading: Kann, History of the Habsburg Empire, 424-438.*
Tuesday, February 3, 2026 02:00–04:00 PM Austrian State Archive	Mandatory excursion to the Austrian State Archive Meeting point: 02:00 PM in front of the Archive
Wednesday, February 4, 2026 08:30–10:30 AM Austrian Parliament	Mandatory excursion to the Austrian Parliament Meeting point: 08:30 AM at the big fountain in front of Parliament *Recommended reading: Twain, Stirring times in Austria.*
Thursday, February 5, 2026 08:30–10:30 AM HS 30	Vienna becomes a metropolis. Development of territory, demography and population 1870-1918 *Recommended reading: Schorske, Fin-de-Siècle Vienna, 24-115.*
Friday, February 6, 2026 08:30–10:30 AM HS 30	Layers of society. Vienna around 1900 between aristocracy and working class, and between old and new citizens *Recommended reading: Judson, The Habsburg Empire, 333-384.*

2nd week	
Monday, February 9, 2026 08:30–10:30 AM HS 30	A center of knowledge. Education and educational institutions in Vienna 1870-1918. *Required reading: Boyer, Austria 1867-1955, 413-485.*
Tuesday, February 10, 2026 08:30–10:30 AM HS 30	Vienna as a melting pot. Czechs, Jews, and other nationalities between integration and discrimination. *Recommended reading: Beller, Vienna and the Jews, 165-206.*
Wednesday, February 11, 2026 08:30–10:30 AM HS 30	Feeding two million people. Food and (mal)nutrition in Vienna 1900-1918 *Recommended reading: Healy, Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire, 31-86.*
Thursday, February 12, 2026 08:30–10:30 AM HS 30	From the "Hofburg" to the "Brettldorf". Housing as a social phenomenon in 19th century Vienna. *Recommended reading: Banik-Schweitzer: Housing the Workers, 107-148.*
Friday, February 13, 2024 08:30–10:30 AM HS30	Final Exam

Required and Recommended Reading

Banik-Schweizer, Renate, Vienna. In: Daunton, Martin J., Housing the workers 1850-1914. A comparative perspective, Leicester 1990, 107-148.
Beller, Steven, A Concise History of Austria, Cambridge 2006.
Beller, Steven, Vienna and the Jews 1867-1938, Cambridge 1989.
Boyer, John W., Austria 1867-1955, Oxford 2022.
Healy, Maureen, Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire. Total War and Everyday Life in World War I., Cambridge 2004.
Judson, Pieter M., The Habsburg Empire. A new history, Cambridge 2016.
Kann, Robert A., A History of the Habsburg Empire 1526-1918, London 1974.
Schorske, Carl, Fin-de-Siècle Vienna. Politics and culture, Cambridge 1981.
Twain, Mark, Stirring times in Austria. In: Harper's New Monthly Magazine, Vol. 96 (1898), 530-540.

Further Reading

Anderson, Benedict, Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, 2nd edition, London/New York 2006.
Beller, Steven, Francis Joseph, London/New York 1996.
Bérenger, Jean, A History of the Habsburg Empire 1700-1918, London 1997.
Cockett, Richard: Vienna. How the city of ideas created the modern world, New Haven/London 2024.
Coen, Deborah R., Vienna in the age of uncertainty, Chicago 2007.
Cornwall, Marc (Ed.), The Last Years of Austria-Hungary, 2nd edition, Exeter 2003.
Good, David F., The economic rise of the Habsburg empire, 1750-1914, Berkeley 1984.
Jelavich, Barbara, Modern Austria. Empire and republic, Cambridge 1987.
Nielsen, Erika. Focus on Vienna 1900. Change and Continuity in Literature, Music, Art and Intellectual History. 1982.
Robertson, Angus, The crossroads of civilization. A history of Vienna, New York 2022.
Sked, Alan, The Decline and Fall of the Habsburg Monarchy, London/New York 1989.
Taylor, J.P., The Habsburg Monarchy 1809-1918, London 1955.

List of proposals for the final paper

Your essay should deal with one aspect of cultural life, preferably in comparison with the situation in your home country. The paper should be around two to three pages long (6.500-7.500 characters incl. spaces).

Some suggestions for topics:

- Nature in the surroundings of the city
- Gardens and parks
- Family structure
- Woman's role
- Sexuality
- Death and burial
- Behaviors and courtesy
- Clothes as a social indicator
- Living and furnishings
- Travel and holidays
- Books and libraries
- House music
- Cultural life (concerts, opera, theater, balls)
- Markets and their offer
- Shops in Vienna
- Piety

You are of course invited to suggest a topic yourself!