

The “Iron Curtain”: The Crushing of Eastern Europe (1944-1956)

Review of Anne Applebaum, *Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe 1944-1956*, USA: Doubleday, 2012.

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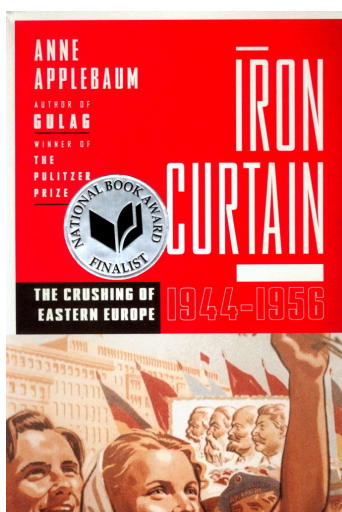
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Region: [Europe](#), [Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [History](#)

The period following WWII in eastern Europe is considered to be a black one, best forgotten. All the pre-war governments had been quasi-fascist dictatorships which either succumbed to the Nazi onslaught (Poland) or actively cooperated with the Germans (Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria). The Soviet liberation was greeted with trepidation by many – with good reason for the many collaborators. Within a few years of liberation, eastern Europe was ruled by austere regimes headed by little Stalins.

As in France and Italy, women who consorted with the Germans were treated with contempt. There was a rash of rape as millions of Soviet soldiers filled the vacuum left before the post-war occupation structures were established. The Soviet soldiers had been motivated by an intense hatred of the Nazis, and their revenge was worse than that of the American, British etc soldiers, none of whom at lost their loved ones and homes or had faced invasion of their homelands. The chaos did considerable damage to post-war relations and soured the prospect of building socialism to many who otherwise would have given the new order that was imposed on them a chance. ‘Imposed’ is certainly the operational word, as the Soviets gave security and policing to their local communist allies.



As in all wars, there were no winners (except those lucky soldiers who emerged unscathed with lots of booty). The east European communists had been decimated by Stalin’s pre-war purges. The liberal and rightwing forces were persecuted. War does not discriminate between good and bad property. As in all upheavals, farsighted bad guys step forward, play along on the winning side, and reap their rewards.

Given this deadly scenario and the subsequent Cold War, it is surprising just how much positive resulted from the Soviet occupation of eastern Europe, and despite author Anne Applebaum's unrelenting anti-communism (her *Gulag* won the Pulitzer Prize in 2003), it keeps peaking through her *Iron Curtain*.

Applebaum focuses on Poland, Hungary and East Germany, clearly because they experienced uprisings following Stalin's death in 1953 (sparked by liberal reforms that spun out of control instigated by – of all people – NKVD chief Lavrenti Beria). They are very different cultures and their post-war experiences are very different, despite following a scenario written in Moscow, including both the good (social welfare and anti-capitalism) and the bad ('red terror' and dogmatic imitation of Stalinism).

She drew on dozens of personal interviews of east Europeans who were either key figures in the period of 'high Stalinism' as she calls it or simply people who lived their lives, worked and supported (or didn't) the regime they lived under, and now in their waning years, were glad to reflect on what happened, how they functioned. Applebaum's husband is Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski, and her treatment of Poland is particularly detailed.

Yes, people were persecuted unjustly, though it was mostly leading political figures who suffered, or people who refused to read the writing on the wall and spoke out (heroically or foolishly, a judgment call) during the wave of purges which began in the late 1940s. Two cardinals' experiences are of interest: the Polish Stefan Wyszynski and the Hungarian Jozsef Mindszenty.

The former compromised with the communists, and only went to prison briefly in September 1953, telling a fellow priest: "Workers, peasants, intellectuals, all kinds of people from all over the nation are in prison, it's good that the primate and priests are in prison too, since our task is to be with the nation." He remained under house arrest until 1956.

Mindszenty refused any compromise with the authorities, instead firing off insults guaranteed to infuriate them. He demanded in that the Hungarian church receive US aid directly at a time when the gathering Cold War made this impossible. He publicly pontificated: "The American donations were a sign of the all-embracing solidarity of the world Church. World Bolshevism did not like them at all." As a result of one broadside after another, he was given a life sentence for treason in a 1949 show trial that generated worldwide condemnation, including a UN resolution. Freed in the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, he was granted political asylum and lived in the US embassy in Budapest for 15 years, and finally allowed to leave the country in 1971.

Wyszynski's 1950 secret agreement with the authorities allowed the Church to keep much of its property, separated church from politics, prohibited religious indoctrination in public schools, and allowed authorities to select a bishop from 3 candidates presented. This pact is arguably better than the agreement, say, the French church has. And Karol Wojtyla was selected by the communists as bishop.

What comes through in the interviews is just how positive the whole post-war period was for the majority of the people, how the communist program gave great opportunities to the vast majority in education, work and health care. How despite the 'high Stalin' show trials and inanities of the period, such as the slavish naming of a new socialist town Sztalinvaros in Hungary, a then-young worker on a woman's brigade now remembers trudging through the

mud and living in damp barracks “with immense nostalgia”, though she later became somewhat disillusioned as an activist. (She protested – and was chastised for it – against the campaign to convince workers to go into debt to buy ‘Peace Bonds’ which she saw as just a hidden tax.)

Just as the communists created myths and enshrined them in their history books at the time, the victors in the Cold War are now writing their own version of history. Yes, Warsaw’s wedding cake Palace of Culture, a ‘gift’ from Stalin, and nearby dreary apartment blocks, spoiled the skyline. But the communists also had the old city in Warsaw meticulously reconstructed.

And how to explain Alexander Dymshitz, head of the cultural division of the Soviet Military Administration in post-war Berlin, who insisted that artists get the coveted “first” ration card, a larger piece of bread and more meat and vegetables? Asked why, Dymshitz declared, “It is possible that there is a Gorki among you. Should his immortal books remain unwritten, only because he goes hungry?”

The whole socialist ‘experiment’ in eastern Europe lasted only four short decades, and considering the animosity of the West (and many locals), was a remarkable success in raising economic and cultural standards. Applebaum sneers at the trials of “wreckers” and saboteurs, but from day one, the US and its by-then subservient client states in western Europe repressed their own communists, and the CIA waged an undeclared war on the socialist bloc, parachuting in émigrés to blow up bridges, wreck equipment and even spread crop diseases.

Applebaum’s meticulous research stopped when it comes to any of this, though there is lots of documentation. For example, the CIA funded Ukrainian fascist leader Mykola Lebed (a Nazi collaborator and murderer of Jews and Poles) from 1949–91 to carry out black ops against the Soviet Union from his front organization Prolog in New York. According to CIA director Allen Dulles, he was “of inestimable value to this Agency and its operations”.

The most spectacular instance of US subversion in the Cold War was the 1980s CIA plan to sabotage the economy of the Soviet Union. A KGB turncoat gained access to Russian purchase orders and the CIA slipped in the flawed software, which triggered “the most monumental non-nuclear explosion and fire ever seen from space”. The KGB never practised this kind of black ops, despite hysterical propaganda to the contrary.

Neither does Applebaum admit the real state of opinion in eastern Europe about this whole period. An October 2010 poll in Berlin among former East Germans revealed that 57% defend the overall record of the former East Germany and 49% agreed that “the GDR had more good sides than bad sides. There were some problems, but life was good there.” Only 30% of Ukrainians approve of the change to democracy (vs 72% in 1991), 60% of Bulgarians believe the old system was better. The disastrous effects of the collapse of the Soviet Union on life expectancy, especially of men, which fell from 64 to 58, is well known.

Compare this with the 60% of Americans in 2010 who said they feel the country is on the wrong track (albeit down from 89% in 2008 during the closing days of Bush II rule).

Iron Curtain also ignores the devastating effect of the collapse of the socialist bloc had on the world at large. By unleashing the free market from the 1980s on, inequality between the richest and poorest nations increased from 88:1 (1970) to 267:1 (2000). The US was

henceforth able to invade countries everywhere at will, as indeed it has done, killing millions of innocent people and patriots now dismissed as the 'enemy'. But this is of no concern to Applebaum from her comfortable perch in Thatcherite London at the Legatum Institute, nor of her staunchly anti-communist hubbie in Warsaw. Nor of other rewriters, financed by the likes of Soros's Open Institutes.

What is most irritating in *Iron Curtain*, apart from its clichéd Churchillian title, is its assumption that all readers will accept that the term 'totalitarian' applies – uniquely – to the socialist bloc, that "totalitarian education would eliminate dissent; that civic institutions, once destroyed, could not be rebuilt; that history, once rewritten, would be forgotten." A 1956 US National Intelligence Estimate made just months before the collapse of the Hungarian communist order, predicted gloomily (and a tad enviously) that over time dissidence in eastern Europe would be worn down "by the gradual increase in the number of Communist-indoctrinated youth".

The alert reader, unburdened by "Intelligence", will find many such glaring hints that 'totalitarian' really has much more to do with the West, with its seductive materialist 'me' culture, fashioning people oblivious to the welfare of their society. Post-WWII western Europe was promised apple pie in the sky, and got it thanks to the Marshall Plan aimed at winning the new Cold War. Once the socialist bloc was no longer, the apple pie disappeared, as we see in the collapse of living standards across Europe (the US as well), there being no competition anymore to the real totalitarian system, where protests are easily absorbed.

Not so the dictatorships of eastern Europe, which were brittle, far from totalitarian. The spontaneous re-emergence of unsanctioned institutions in Hungary after the death of Stalin is particularly impressive. The "totalitarian personalities" that Applebaum conceives of are rather found every day in Walmart queues or on 4th of July celebrations.

While young Poles, Germans and Hungarians were at the forefront of their new socialist orders, they were also – just as in the West – at the forefront of rebellion against what many saw as the stifling status quo. For the most part, Polish bikiniarze or Hungarian jampecek, the counterparts of American rockers and British teddy boys, hadn't experienced the horrors of the war, had little sense of the 1930s as a period of communist ferment, and found western mass consumer culture much more appealing than the modest socialist one stressing personal responsibility and solidarity with the victims of imperialism around the world.

Jazz and western styles became ideological tools, especially in East Germany, with RIAS (Radio in the American Sector) broadcasting from West Berlin, and West Germany sheet music made available for the East's dance bands. At a German composers' conference in 1951, an East German musicologist denounced "American entertainment kitsch" as a "channel through which the poison of Americanism penetrates and threatens to anaesthetize the minds of workers", embodying "the degenerate ideology of American monopoly capital with its lack of culture, its empty sensationalism and above all its fury for war and destruction." We are supposed to laugh at this, but this critique sounds even more cogent today, and could be taken from a Salafist newspaper in Egypt or a leftist tract in the US.

When the baby boom hit especially Czechoslovakia in the 1960s, it resulted in an explosion of creative energy, and a delayed unraveling of the by-then tattered 'high Stalinism' there, but once again context intervened. In retrospect, if the Prague Spring had been allowed to

blossom, Czechoslovakia would have been quickly absorbed by the West, and the Cold War eastern dominoes would have fallen much sooner.

But 1968 was the high point of European social democracy, and who knows what might have resulted from a melding of the two systems at that time? That the fall came in 1990 at the height of neoliberalism meant that capitalism at its totalitarian worst called all the shots, and there is little to crow about by the 99% of us – East or West. Alas, this is far from the minds of the neoliberal victors as they churn out their history books.

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