



Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe 1944-1956

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In the long-awaited follow-up to her Pulitzer Prize-winning *Gulag*, acclaimed journalist Anne Applebaum delivers a groundbreaking history of how Communism took over Eastern Europe after World War II and transformed in frightening fashion the individuals who came under its sway.

At the end of World War II, the Soviet Union to its surprise and delight found itself in control of a huge swath of territory in Eastern Europe. Stalin and his secret police set out to convert a dozen radically different countries to Communism, a completely new political and moral system. In *Iron Curtain*, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Anne Applebaum describes how the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe were created and what daily life was like once they were complete. She draws on newly opened East European archives, interviews, and personal accounts translated for the first time to portray in devastating detail the dilemmas faced by millions of individuals trying to adjust to a way of life that challenged their every belief and took away everything they had accumulated. Today the Soviet Bloc is a lost civilization, one whose cruelty, paranoia, bizarre morality, and strange aesthetics Applebaum captures in the electrifying pages of *Iron Curtain*.

Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe 1944-1956 Details

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From Reader Review Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe 1944-1956 for online ebook

Manray9 says

Anne Applebaum's *Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe, 1945-1956* is a thoroughly-researched and rewarding read. Although I approached the book with some skepticism, due to the author's association with prominent neoconservative organizations (The Legatum Institute and the American Enterprise Institute) and her husband's position as Foreign Minister of Poland (he is an AEI alumnus too), it was detailed and fair -- if vehemently anti-Russian. I noted with interest in the acknowledgements section at the book's end, a thank you to both the Scaife Foundations AND the National Endowment for the Humanities. Hmmm?

Jan-Maat says

Shortest Review

Read Ashes and Diamonds instead.

Short Review

This is a book which in its final pages, like a bad report or essay seeks to assert new ideas(and with them the books own value and importance) not in evidence in the bulk of the text during which *The Simpsons* provide the essential vocabulary of reader response with *Meh* and *Duh!* depending on which blatantly obvious point the author highlights.

Longer Review

My overwhelming response to this book is don't bother.

Life, we are told, is short and its pace fast, as a reader one can admit there is an argument that can be made that given the finite number of books that one will read one has good reason to be careful of what one chooses to read. And I can see no way in which this book would make the cut (view spoiler). In my opinion this book is sadly neither bad enough to read for amusement value, nor good enough (view spoiler) to be worthy of ones time.

Partly this is because she does have a specific ideological and historiographical point to make that Totalitarianism is a valid and useful concept for understanding the period, however she doesn't make that front and centre of her presentation or allow it to drive the book as though she lacks the courage of her convictions. I feel myself that this is a bit of a strawman or Aunt Sally as the opposite conviction seems to me too ridiculous to be taken seriously and five hundred pages of lobbing coconuts at poor aunt Sally is a bit much (view spoiler) - although having said that in the context of the USA, occasionally I do notice the idea that the universe orbits that country which is to be properly understood, depending on your ideological conviction, either as the instrument of a benevolent God in the world, or the Chomskyite view as the single source of all evil. As a non-US person I hold to the vile heresy that the USA is simply a country and a state like all others and that other parts of the world occasionally do act in accordance to their own internal dynamic - yea even unto a regional scale. And having said that I can't help but feel that an overly Totalitarian interpretation rather plays into the propaganda of the period, it leads me to think of Pushkin's The Bronze Horseman, we lose a lot of understanding by elevating leaders into idols.

Really I find that she needs to refine her core idea, then rewrite the book to actually support her argument, along the way it would help to reduce an indifferent *Meh* response or an amused *Duh!* if she thought about what she was writing. For example at one point in describing the new steel towns built in Poland (Nowa Huta), Germany (Eisenhüttenstadt) and Hungary (Dunaujvaros) she says that they were Gold Rush towns, perhaps I'm simply irritable but it seems to me the reader either has an understanding of what a Gold Rush town is like or that person ought not be reading grown up books, in which case we don't need a detailed point by point description - she could in theory cut to the chase and tell us the significance to her argument of these towns, and reduce the length of her book considerably - I feel she would struggle to do so, because what I observed reading her book is that she is not marshalling facts as a lawyer might before a judge and jury to build a case but simply dumping a pile of 'Soviet domination of Eastern Europe wasn't nice' in the readers lap which is true but not a particularly interesting (or shocking) observation.

A number of times I wondered if she had ever been to Europe, or while there had her eyes open, particularly when she discussed the built environment. Across Europe you can read the built environment backwards like a book - the scale and the type of building indicates the type of demand and urgency in meeting it at the time of construction. No doubt better quality housing than the Plattenbau could have been provided, but if you take the dominant styles reflected in cities across western Europe in to account then it is plainly only a variation on a type, not a unique demonstration of Stalinist inhumanity revealed in its provision of functional mass housing.

She has a blind eye for the ideology implicit or unconscious in society, seeing only the conformity that can be imposed from above, not that implied into or aspired towards in all societies. In fact she'd explicitly view my point as Marxist. But it seems to me that you can't for example view the boy scouts as non-ideological simply because one is used to them or likes them. There are a wealth of ideological assumptions simply underlying the idea that it is a desirable and good part of a child's socialisation to spend their leisure time marching, singing, putting up tents and burning food over open fires, and a range of sociological and economic assumptions underlying the presumption that children and their families won't or can't do those things without an external organisation, even before explicitly political issues enter into things such as who may and who may not be a member of such an organisation and what its stance on questions of ecology and gender might be. I reminded myself once or twice that in a US context to be non-partisan is good, and maybe such a consideration led her to ignore the politics of civil society.

Equally patriotism for her is simply good and non-controversial, yet the notion of Patria strikes me as quite complex - what are the limits to your Patria, who belongs and who doesn't. It is a pity that she doesn't explore this since the inter-war Eastern European states were generally 'imperial' in that one nation consisted the political majority which dominated over the state while minority groups were either marginalised or occupied distinct economic or social niches, while the states of the Soviet empire aspired to create a homo Sovieticus (a point she gives over a chapter to) and she gives over pages to the fierce partisan warfare between Poles and Ukrainians at the close of the war. Patriotism isn't simple what does it mean to be Polish or Ukrainian? What does it mean to assert that Vilnius was a historical Polish city, when for much of its recent history its population was mainly Jewish? Equally it is all well and good to make a song and dance about the westward shift of Poland's post 1945 borders but Appelbaum doesn't acknowledge that those western and eastern frontiers of 1918 were determined by men with guns and right of conquest, one could with varying amounts of justice and injustice have moved them further in or out.

The sub title "The crushing of Eastern Europe", is perhaps telling since after six years of war one might legitimately ask what was there to be crushed? Given her text and argument 'The rebuilding of Eastern Europe' would have made more sense but presumably might have been taken as too positive in its connotations. And with a little knowledge and peaking through the edges of her text in places one can say

that the inter-war states of eastern Europe weren't that great. It's a big assertion when she only discusses Poland, Hungary and east Germany in any case. She's a huge believer in civil society, but inter-war civil society wasn't always so civil, there was anti-Semitism, if there were elections, suffrage was limited, certain groups were excluded not necessarily through formal means - one might note that even though these countries had most peasant economies that peasant parties didn't dominate the political life of those inter-war states. She describes them as having been Capitalist, which I think stretches the definition of the word, they were market economies but with the exception of the Bohemian part of Czechoslovakia, mostly typified by small scale production and not deeply integrated into the world economy, and during the 1930s eastern Europe was increasingly tied into dependency on the German economy.

In the last couple of pages she mentions the disappearance of churches and entire religious groups under communism, and while I have no doubt that Poland and Hungary are less religious possibly that in the 1920s, that is probably also true of France. It is the position of the Churches in US life which is curious from a European perspective. Indeed in some countries the existence of the Church is not so much a marker of an independent civil society but instead one can see a continuity of ideology from church into state. To an extent Applebaum's book simply ends up reflecting issues that were widespread in the 1950s, ie that societies were conformist, repressive, and required self censorship, were rebuilding, that youth culture was regarded as suspicious and problematic, nervous and jittery, while not picking out much that was unique to Poland and Hungary beyond attempts to repress the Catholic Church, nor allowing that US perspectives are US perspectives rather than universal laws, nor does she draw out the nuances which counter her argument about Totalitarianism - ie when the subject states ended up at times more Stalinist than Stalin (view spoiler). Reading, events from the 1953 disturbances in East Germany to the Hungarian spring in 1956 came over as telescoped together with Stalin's death, rather than events spread out over almost two years - when as has been noticed - a week is a long time in politics.

She's completely soft on the role of the wartime allies, both in playing politics over which resistance groups they prepared to back and the Imperialist carve up at Yalta, and the whole business of the Suez Crisis. I think anybody could extrapolate the content of this book from *Ashes and Diamonds* and *"La Dolce Vita"* with an appreciation of Imperialism. Her final cri de coeur that we have to understand the destruction of Eastern Europe to be able to rebuild it, is apart from being late, I would say unproven. The more relevant question I fear is how far was the Second World war a complete caesura, and how far can the authoritarian politics dominant in Hungary for example, be seen as a continuity of the uneven political and social development since I don't know when.(view spoiler)

reading notes
(view spoiler)

Joseph says

It's really hard to believe that its been twenty-four years since the fall of communism in Eastern Europe. I remember following the news on CNN at the United States Mission in Geneva, Switzerland. A communist Eastern Europe seemed to be a permanent fixture just weeks before.

Applebaum does an excellent job describing the Eastern Europe after WWII. She brings some excellent points to history. Terrorized by the Nazi's then liberated by the Soviets. Why weren't people anxious to go to the West? People remembered that France and England did little to prevent the Nazism in Poland and Eastern Europe. The Soviets were liberators, or so it seemed for a short while.

Nationalism in stateless communism is compared to medieval Europe where there were nationalities, but first and foremost everyone was Catholic, much the same vision was planned for Communism in Eastern Europe.

Promising starts turn bad quickly for Eastern Europeans. Progress is slows to a stop. West Germany recovers and prospers while East Germany falls behind. Free elections end up as one party systems. Although official policy is not "one party system" but the consolidation of many parties to form an anti-fascist front.

Applebaum, once again, does an outstanding job. Not just repeating history but breaking the book into sections: Economy, High Stalinism, Homo Sovieticus, Youth, Radio, and other topics. Topic driven history works well to present a full picture of Eastern Europe in the dozen years after WWII. Extremely well documented with a copius amount source material. A very worthwhile read.

Bettie? says

[Bettie's Books (hide spoiler)]

Samir Rawas Sarayji says

I really struggled to get to the middle of the book and eventually gave up. There were lots of interesting facts, but the book tried to do too much, from too many angles at the expense of depth. The author's opinions and frustrations were too prominent in the writing, which at first I liked since my problem with most history books is the overly objective narrative, but this was really too much! At one point it felt like a rant, despite the well polished academic tone... a historian's rant...

Igor Efimov says

Insightful, well researched book. I grew up in a Siberian "closed" town, which was build by Gulag prisoners before I was born, i spent my childhood behind three rows of barbed wires. My small town produced refined plutonium, spy satellites and engines for intercontinental ballistic missiles. In nearly 30 years I lived in the USSR before moving to the USA, I had no idea what was happening outside USSR, not only in capitalist West, but even in socialist East. We just never had a chance to see the world, until Soviet Union collapsed and suddenly everything become possible.

It is sad that the responsibility for rape of Eastern Europe by Stalin's Soviet Union is not acknowledged by current Russian government, as it was by Germany. Without such a moral statement there will be no reconciliation.

Loring Wirbel says

If Anne Applebaum had written 'Iron Curtain' at the height of the revisionist '70s and '80s, she'd be dismissed as an acolyte of Richard Pipes. After two decades of opened files in the former Soviet Union and Eastern European satellite states, however, we know that the traditionalist Western view of 'High Stalinism' was more or less correct. Even giving post-war socialist striving its due, the Stalinist form of Central European consolidation was almost as depraved as the commie-hunters of the '50s claimed. The problem was not so much the brutality of late-period Stalinism - plenty of people died, to be sure, but only a shadow of the number during the famines and Great Terror of the 1930s. The problem was the constant lying to self and others in trying to believe in the type of state that could never really exist under centrally-planned socialism of the Stalinist variety.

Applebaum is at her best when she gives us the same kind of review of daily life under 1950s Eastern Europe Stalinism that Orlando Figes gave us in 'The Whisperers,' his excellent study of the USSR in the 1930s. There is a direct sense of clinging to the false as a desperate attempt to find something to believe in after the utter devastation of society in World War 2. And the supporters of centralist Stalinism appear at their most devious not in crushing political opponents or in controlling the workplace, but in their fervent desire to crush any type of civil society whatsoever - even chess clubs and YMCA outlets. This is why Stalinism was so similar to Falangist fascism - "All supporting the state, nothing against the state, nothing outside the state" is one of the most depraved concepts of modern government developed in the past century. The notion reaches its most absurd levels when Applebaum relays the lyrics to 'The Party is Always Right,' but of course there is no joke intended in this particular song.

Still, the book can drag a bit in those cultural-life reviews. There are times in the critiques of modern-art formalism and descriptions of 'Homo Sovieticus' when the attention can wander. In general, however, Applebaum is a great writer who makes her analyses come alive.

My bigger complaint is that the book cannot be comprehensive because it chooses to focus on Poland, East Germany, and Hungary. It's understandable that Applebaum wanted to make her subject manageable. Putting aside Yugoslavia may have been necessary because Tito was such a special case. But Romania and Bulgaria are unknowns to many in the West, and a better study of their cultural specifics would have been nice. The bigger loss, though, is Czechoslovakia. The brutal nature of the 1948 coup, and the special circumstances leading up to the 1968 Czech Spring, virtually demand a better coverage of that nation.

Other elements of the book seem hurried. Applebaum spends plenty of time in the 18 months of displaced hell following World War 2, which is very worthy considering the paucity of research in that period. But why breeze over the show trials of 1949-50 so quickly? Why spend so little time looking into the bizarre role played by U.S. citizen Noel Field? A little more balance in what was and was not covered would have made this a better book.

Still, this is a decent analysis about a terrible time in history that is not studied carefully and seriously enough. The holes in Applebaum's study might justify a sequel book to study the Southern European states of Romania, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia.

4triplezed says

"The best work of modern history I have ever read" says A N Wilson on the cover. The cover praise is gushing as we get "masterpiece" from Oliver Kamm and "at last the story can be told" by Orlando Figes. I have to say that I have come out of this book extremely disappointed and for many reasons.

The best work of modern history is as ridiculous a comment and as to Masterpiece? Evans Reich trilogy just kills this book for the sheer brilliance of the telling of the subject as opposed to a limited focus on 3 nations and a constant dose of wide eyed polemic mixed in. As to the story being finally being told the story has been told countless times and if it was all new why the extensive bibliography?

There is no denying the appalling struggles with totalitarian communist regimes that the masses were forced to endure in the eastern parts of Europe after the fall of Nazi Germany. The vast humanity that had endured Nazi suffering deserved better but that does not make this book with its wide eyed and bushy tailed presentation any better.

Lets take the chapter on Ethnic Cleansing as an example. Russian soldiers treated the German civilians appallingly no doubt but the author seems shocked at times. Why? Had not the Germans just committed atrocity after atrocity on Russian civilians, not only with the gun but by starvation and many other means? Did the author expect some charity? How naive!

The many examples of badly written prose is for me rather astonishing. Lets take this statement about travel. "According to the Interior Ministry statistics, only 9360 crossed the border for any reason in 1951, of whom only 1980 were travelling to capitalist countries" Well yes. We are reading about a country ravished by WW2 that not too far forward is a poverty stricken totalitarian regime with controls over the populace. But what we get a couple of aghast "only"s as if the then Polish government was going to conform to modern western freedom of travel.

The final chapter, Revolutions, finishes with a polemic on everyone being wrong. This is not a writing on history at all and is out of place as to what the chapter should have been about. And as to the Epilogue I just wonder the point. I want history, not another polemic aimed at a modern reader who still seems to think that there is a red menace out there. I mean do others who have praised this book really in their heart feel that the eastern European countries were particularly liberal prior to Nazi and Communist takeovers after 1939 as implied by the author? Free trade does not by itself make Poland, to use as an example, a liberal nation prior to 1939.

This book is as big a failure as I have read in a long time. The gushing praise just had me salivating but I am left very wanting. There must be better books on this subject than this, a book that to me is just a journalistic pursuit aimed at making a western audience reading the Murdoch Press and watching Fox News somehow think that their very way of life is till under attack.

Rob says

A well researched book but ultimately, a major disappointment. The author is connected with the neoconservative Legatum Institute as well as high ranking elements in the Polish establishment so if you are

looking for a balanced account of Europe behind the Iron Curtain, you shouldn't look for it here. Problems include:

- a narrow focus that concentrates only on the immediate postwar period as well as just three countries, East Germany, Hungary and Poland
- a failure to acknowledge that barmy as the communist system in central Europe was, its instigators weren't all cynical sociopaths like Stalin and that some of them were making an honest attempt to rectify society's inequalities
- a too cosy appraisal of the regimes' opposing forces - fine in the case of dissidents and intellectuals but not in the case of the highly conservative clergy nor the freemasons - both are portrayed as angelic forces and not since Boycey in *Only Fools and Horses* have the latter received such rave reviews
- the shooting down of easy targets such as Soviet realist architecture (has she ever been to Milton Keynes or Sarcelles?), societal malfunction (should we regard Detroit or Kinshasa as 'typical' of capitalism *per se*?) and the lack of 'freedom' (what about Guantanamo Bay?)
- little mention of the catastrophic shock therapy that followed on from the fall of the Berlin Wall - outside the scope of the book perhaps but it needs mentioning to put things in perspective

The sub-Hayekian hectoring quickly becomes tiring and one suspects that some gullible publisher was strong armed into releasing this as a trade book when what we need is an even handed view of the entire 40+ years of Communism in the Soviet client states of Eastern Europe.

FotisK says

Ενδιαφέρον βιβλίο σχετικό με την εγκαθίδρυση των σοβιετικού τύπου καθεστώτων στην Ανατολική Ευρώπη. Το γενικό πλαίσιο γνωστό, κποια απ' τα επιμέρους ?χι, τουλάχιστον σε εμ'να.

Ana says

An in depth review of the modes of repressing and molding the human psyche in Eastern European societies that have suffered under the Soviet-Stalinist hand. It touches on everything from the political, economic and social environments to the specific use of radio to either brainwash people or to help the permanent (even though small) resistance during the period of 1944-1956, as well as a beautiful dive into the architecture of oppression (which has quickly become one of my favorite subjects) and the way designing certain spaces, like the industrial cities of '49, '50 influences the way people live their lives. It mainly focuses on Hungary, Poland and the Cheks, but it also touches on my country, Romania, a few times, and makes some very good points about things that I have as well studied in school with regards to our communist years.

My favorite part of Applebaum's writing is her irony and dark humor - she manages to make you laugh with a well-placed remark about some politician's life, in the midst of a lecture on one of the worst things humans

have done to themselves. And the pages in this book that write specifically about the use of jokes under communism in order to kindle and keep alive the fire of resistance in people hit very close to home, because even I, born 6 years after the fall of communism in my country, still use some of them and still understand and in a weird way relate to this black, bleak humor.

I would recommend this to anyone with an interest in Eastern Europe in the 20th Century, but as always, be aware, this is a history book, not a piece of fiction, so you might have to read everything with a pen in hand and Wikipedia open, in order to check names, dates and facts. I think that's very important to do when you read historical works, as otherwise your brain tends to treat them as pure fiction or the more literary type of writing, and you don't retain as much information.

Pctrollbreath says

This is a moving description of the crushing of Eastern Europe by the Soviets.

The book is written in a dead pan matter of fact style with a grimly dry humour.

It is very easy to get very angry about communist and Soviet evil doing when you read about normal people doing normal things and being executed or sent to the Gulag for it. You need to read the authors book on the Gulag's to get the full impact of flat statements that someone went to the Gulag for several years.

As you get further on into the the book you begin to admire the strength of people living in these countries. There is a lot of information about communist slogans in this book, the bulk of which are patronising, stupid nonsense. We British have a slogan dating from the second world war which we are proud of; "Keep Calm and Carry On" which was originally intended for use if we were invaded. You don't have to read far into this book to realise that Eastern Europe lived the idea for several decades. It is clear that these countries may have been swallowed but they were never digested.

This book is well written and informative, giving insight into a little known period of both on the personal and the political level. Well worth the read.

Anastasia Fitzgerald-Beaumont says

The Hand of History

There are not many jokes in communism. Actually that's not quite true. A case could be made that communism itself was a massive joke, except those living under it dared not laugh, or laugh only at their personal peril. All humour in what used to be called the Eastern Bloc was inevitably of a subversive nature. For as George Orwell wrote, a thing is funny when it upsets the established order; that every joke is a tiny revolution. The revolutionaries did not want revolution; they wanted total conformity.

Have you ever been in a situation, or a place, say a church or a library, where something struck you as funny? It may not be all that funny on later reflection but just try to contain a laugh when it wants to explode!

I've been reading Anne Applebaum's masterly *Iron Curtain: the Crushing of Eastern Europe, 1944-56*, a follow up to her equally masterly *Gulag: a History of the Soviet Camps*. There are not many laughs in that, you may think. But you are wrong. I'm not at all sure I could have survived the dull curtain of monotony that descended on Eastern Europe after 1945 for one simple reason – I have an acute sense of humour.

You see, I would have been overcome with explosive fits of laughter over the sheer earnest pettiness of it all. Imagine going in to a bookshop and seeing children's titles like *Six-Year-Old Bronek and the Six Year Plan*. You leave quickly, only to have your senses assaulted by a propaganda hoarding. There it is, just across the street, boldly announcing "Every artificially inseminated pig is a blow to capitalist imperialism!" Your lips are tightly closed; the laughter is escaping like steam under pressure. You don't want to be seen so you turn away to look at the latest civic art, only to be confronted by a painting entitled "The technology and organisation of cattle slaughter." Was the Berlin Wall really brought down, I wonder, by a great outburst of laughter? Sorry, I should write the Anti-Fascist Protection Wall, to give its official title.

Yes, there is humour in the story but the bigger picture is altogether bleak. In picturing the history of communism in Eastern Europe I see a façade, eaten hollow from within by termites. In the end the whole thing simply collapsed under its inherent contradictions, to borrow a piece of cherished Marxist terminology.

Let's be absolutely clear about one thing: for people in places like Poland, particularly Poland, the Second World War did not end in 1945. The immediate joy of 'liberation' simply gave way to an understanding that a new occupation had taken hold, one that was to last for decades.

The expression 'Iron Curtain' did not originate with Winston Churchill but it was he who was to give it greatest resonance in speech delivered in Fulton, Missouri in March, 1946;

From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic an iron curtain has descended across the Continent. Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of Central and Eastern Europe. Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest and Sofia, all these famous cities and the populations around them lie in what I must call the Soviet sphere, and all are subject in one form or another, not only to Soviet influence but to a very high and, in some cases, increasing measure of control from Moscow.

Applebaum sets out her stall quickly. She refuses to entertain the revisionist view that the imposition of communism throughout Central and Eastern Europe after 1945 was a countermove to American policy at the start of what was to become the Cold War. No, the importation of a Soviet-style system was a deliberate ideological move, all part of the greater revolutionary good. As she quite rightly says, there was a template already in place for this in the Soviet occupation of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in 1940, states that had been consigned to Stalin under the terms of the Nazi-Soviet Pact.

So far as Stalin was concerned there were also foreign policy advantages. The new communist satrapies acted as a buffer zone in a period of growing East West tension. More specifically, an independent Poland would clearly have been a major political embarrassment to the Soviets, doubtless demanding the return of those territories in the east of the country seized by Stalin in 1939 as part of his satanic bargain with Hitler. For Poland it was a bleak choice between extinction and communism.

As always the road to hell begins with noble intentions. Alongside the cynical little Stalins, who had spent years licking the boots of their Master in Moscow, there were genuine idealists, people who believed in the lie. They came as self-perceived liberators, ready to free the working classes from capitalist exploitation. They expected to be welcomed in their establishment of a brave new world. Unfortunately for them it had real people in it.

The truth came quickly; the truth came in Poland. In 1946 the people decisively rejected a communist-backed referendum. Perplexed, the government rejected the people, concluding that they had acted in “some kind of incomprehensible spirit of resistance and complete ignorance.”

Here I immediately fast forwarded to the events of June, 1953 in East Berlin, the first serious uprising against imposed communist rule. Bertolt Brecht, the playwright, had hitherto served as the German Democratic Republic’s tame intellectual and court poet. But even he had enough, offering comment on the worker state’s suppression of the workers in his poem *The Solution*;

*After the uprising of the 17th of June
The Secretary of the Writers Union
Had leaflets distributed in the Stalinallee
Stating that the people
Had forfeited the confidence of the government
And could win it back only
By redoubled efforts. Would it not be easier
In that case for the government
To dissolve the people
And elect another?*

That would seem to serve as the very definition of the so-called People’s Democracies. In the place of real people came a hollow cardboard illusion.

Applebaum is splendid in her treatment of the high politics, in her description of the appalling stooges who reproduced the bleak apparatus of Stalinism in their respective spheres of influence: personality cults, purges, camps, bogus trials, the whole depressing paraphernalia. She also offers a description of the corrosive effects of communism on everyday life. Any kind of personal or free expression, even in the most minor forms of liberty, was excised. Popular consciousness was filled with the state and nothing but the state. One small example serves here. The scout movement was banned as were all other private societies. In 1950 in Poland a seventeen-year-old girl met with friends from a former troop. All were arrested and given jail sentences of two to five years.

Iron Curtain is a splendid piece of work, witty, perceptive, thoroughly researched and superbly written. I was impressed enough to consider it the most important book I’ve read this year, one that will make a lasting contribution to our understanding of this period in history, a tragedy on which the final curtain has thankfully fallen. My main criticism concerns the title. It’s not a comprehensive history of Eastern Europe between 1944 and 1956, as the title misleadingly suggests, but principally a history of three countries behind the Curtain – Poland, East Germany and Hungary. There is next to nothing on places like Romania, where the whole communist experiment eventually descended to the most degenerate form.

Don’t let that bother you. The history we are given is first class, a journey into a heart of darkness. *Iron Curtain* is a book that is scholarly and accessible, free of all condescension while losing nothing in the telling. It’s a commendable achievement. I felt both exhilarated and deflated at the end, especially after reading about the brutal suppression of the 1956 anti-communist rising in Hungary, which proved to all who were not blind that the liberation of 1945 was nothing but a lie. I was exhilarated by the narrative and deflated by the fate of some of our fellow Europeans, to whom history had dealt such a poor hand.

Hadrian says

Here is a brutal and uncompromising look at a challenging issue of history and memory. It investigates less of a 'why' totalitarian Communism took hold in Eastern Europe, but 'how' it was done.

Applebaum's focus was on the territorial acquisitions made by the Soviets in Eastern Europe after the Second World War, but her particular focus is on East Germany, Poland, and Hungary.

Eastern Europe was in terrible shape after the Second World War. Some countries lost up to 20% of their population, and their economies had shrunk to levels not seen since the 19th century (For further detail, see *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*). When the Red Army had acquired these territories, what was to be done with them?

Officially, the agreement at Yalta was to allow 'free and unfettered elections', but that simply would not do for Stalin. Elections were held, yes, but they were manipulated or controlled so that 'Little Stalins', as they were called, would come to power. All aspects of life became the dominion of the state. Aid organizations became politicized. Youth groups, the media, education, the radio, the cities themselves were rebuilt or named in Stalin's honor or his image, gifts from the benevolent marshal to his loving and obedient people. Although some aspects of economic recovery were accomplished in the years after the war, in some they remained almost permanently behind the Western European powers, particularly after the Soviet policy of 'reparations' led to large-scale pillaging of industrial equipment and sometimes workers to the Soviet Union.

All political organizations were brought under Stalin's thumb. In some instances, the churches might be allowed to exist for perhaps a year or two, but they were later forced into near-total submission. Almost all art was censored, save for the bland expressions of socialist realism, which could only ever hope to be taken one way, a bland simple message. Some of the prison camps which the Nazis left behind were turned over and run by the Soviet secret police. One tyranny was substituted by the other.

However, Applebaum does not speak solely in these broad strokes, but reflects individual details as well. Her collection of interviews is astounding, and provides an unprecedented level of personal detail, which collaborates and expands upon the archival research she has already undertaken.

One of Applebaum's more forceful assertions is Stalin's enforcement of his control over Eastern Europe was done with the naked complicity of the Western powers. At least Churchill had openly opposed Stalin during the Yalta conference, but little came of it. The massed Population transfers and 'ethnic cleansing' of Germans from East Prussia was also a large oversight.

There are few individual details which could bear improvement. Although the author draws similarities between life in East Germany, Poland and Hungary, it would be interesting to see the aspects of totalitarianism in the Czech Republic, which later rebelled, as well as in Yugoslavia and Albania. These countries' social circumstances could also be examined. Furthermore, it would be interesting to see exactly how parts of the West could be duped by Stalin into accepting this large-scale propaganda effort.

In recent years, there has been a wave of revisionist scholarship attempting to downplay the threat played by the Soviets and emphasize the culpability of the United States in the Cold War. I do not doubt that a significant part of this criticism is justified. However, it is important to remember, at least during the first years of the Cold War, not to forget that the Soviet Union in these years was a brutal and authoritarian state, and that it committed violent acts of persecution and mass murder to carve out a new empire in the East.

Maciek says

Anne Applebaum is a journalist and author of *Gulag: A History*, for which she won the Pulitzer Prize in 2004. She has written for many papers and publications, and was a foreign correspondent for *The Economist* in the late 1980's, when she covered the societal and political changes happening in Eastern Europe. She is married to Radosław Sikorski, Poland's former minister of foreign affairs, and is now a Polish citizen.

Iron Curtain is a well-researched and important book which seeks to answer the question: what happened in central and Eastern Europe immediately after World War 2? How did a number of countries, all ethnically and culturally very different, adopt the same, foreign ideology? How did communist parties - never very popular before the war - suddenly found themselves in position of unchallenged power?

The answer lies in the overwhelming presence of the Red Army. As the soldiers marched towards Berlin, the rest of the allies became aware that there would be no stopping them from eventually dominating the entire part of the continent east of the city. Although post-war agreements allowed only for free and unfettered elections, they were quickly proven to be worthless as elections and referendums were blatantly falsified, and pro-Soviet puppet governments were installed (sometimes without even pretending to hide the fact - Poland's Defence Minister was a Soviet General named Konstantin Rokossovsky). The allies did not want to challenge an overwhelming military presence and start another world war; in the words of president Roosevelt there was little point in opposing Stalin as he had the power to take what he wanted, and it was better to give in to him gracefully. This included not only placing Eastern Europe firmly under Soviet domination, but an enlargement of the Soviet Union itself at the expense of the Baltic States, Poland and Romania. *The European people will simply have to endure Russian domination*, he famously said in a private conversation with Cardinal Spellman of New York *before the conferences, in the hope that in ten or twenty years they will be able to live well with the Russians*.

Applebaum's book is divided into two parts. The first, *False Dawn*, covers the years of immediate post-war chaos - chaos which was greatly exploited by the Red Army. While it is undoubtedly true that it was the Red Army which provided crucial in defeating Nazi Germany and suffered the biggest losses, it also committed massive looting and rape as it moved westward - which Stalin famously dismissed as soldiers reacting to horrors of war by "having fun with wenches and taking some trifle". While there was no order to conduct sexual violence towards civilians or POWs, little was made to stop it; both Soviet officials and soldiers treated everything they could get their hands on as trophy which should rightfully be theirs. As they lay in ruins, Germany and other Axis countries were also made to pay war "reparations", which included taking resources and stripping both private and state property from anything valuable and transferring it to the Soviet Union. Entire industries have been dismantled and moved eastward; factories literally disappeared, sometimes along with workers. Not only Axis countries were affected: Poland, which has not only not been an Axis country but has never collaborated with Nazi Germany, was also made to pay "reparations" and had its factories, train tracks and trains dismantled and taken away - on the excuse of the factories and other property being "German property", despite them never having German owners. The Soviet Union did defeat Nazi Germany and suffered the worst loss of human life of all allied nations - but also asked a terrible price for its victory, which had to be paid and paid and paid.

The book's second part is titled *High Stalinism*, and covers institutional and societal changes and radical ideological transformation of entire nations in the newly formed Soviet bloc. These nations have been culturally and ethnically distinct before the war and have never been unified in any way previously; yet after

the war they found themselves being shaped into an ideologically and politically homogeneous region, with their national autonomy systematically dismantled, free flow of information and free expression suppressed, and their media, culture and education tightly controlled and moderated. Independent political opposition ceased to exist - anticommunist right-wing parties have been dismantled, as was the non-communist left; any potential opposition inside the communist party itself has been eliminated. Independent organizations have been dissolved and replaced by state-run mass organizations, which would serve at strengthening party propaganda, which would ideally encompass all aspects of society.

The theme of daily life in a world controlled by constant propaganda and its impact on human psyche is a topic of its own, and is explored in greater depth by Polish Nobel-winning poet and author Czesław Miłosz in his *The Captive Mind* - a must read for anyone interested in the subject.

The subtitle of *Iron Curtain* might be a bit misleading - while it refers to Eastern Europe, it focuses mainly on Germany, Poland and Hungary, with occasional references to Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Romania and Bulgaria. These three countries had very different histories and experiences, both before and during the war - but they all had much closer ties to Western Europe than they did to Soviet Russia, and there was little in their history or culture which would automatically destine them to become totalitarian states. Applebaum studies case after case of political and social repression which radically transformed these countries into Soviet satellites: the subjugation of churches and the clergy, the state takeover of youth organization and the media, the campaigns waged against private enterprise. There are many personal stories in this book - many coming from personal interviews conducted by the author.

This is by no means a definite work concerning the origins and development of communism in Europe - such a work would be numbered in volumes, not pages, and would require a comprehensive overview of history of the Soviet Union itself, about which we read very little. It would also be necessary to include a more comprehensive views of many other countries, most notably Yugoslavia (whose leader, Josip Broz Tito famously defied Stalin which resulted in sour relations until the latter's death), and Romania - whom history has cruelly given a leader so despotic that he might have outdone Stalin himself in his eccentricities. There is still much to write about this subject, and even more to read - but for anyone interested in the post-war development of Central Europe *Iron Curtain* will certainly prove a title worth reading.
