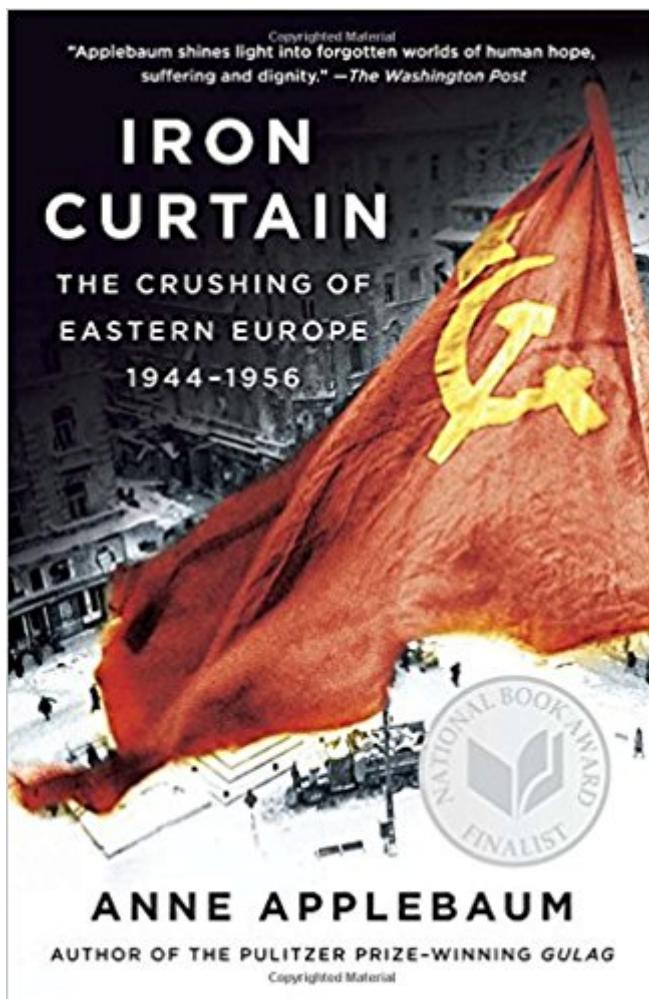


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Iron Curtain: The Crushing Of Eastern Europe, 1944-1956



Synopsis

National Book Award Finalist TIME Magazine's #1 Nonfiction Book of 2012A New York Times Notable BookA Washington Post Top Ten Book of 2012Best Nonfiction of 2012: The Wall Street Journal, The Plain Dealer In the much-anticipated 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. Iron Curtain describes how, spurred by Stalin and his secret police, the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe were created and what daily life was like once they were complete. Drawing on newly opened East European archives, interviews, and personal accounts translated for the first time, Applebaum portrays in chilling 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. As a result the Soviet Bloc became a lost civilization, one whose cruelty, paranoia, bizarre morality, and strange aesthetics Applebaum captures in these electrifying pages.

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Customer Reviews

Best Books of the Month, December 2012: The gulags. The show trials. The boot stamping on a human face. These trappings of postwar totalitarianism have stayed in our collective memory--brutal and terrifying, yes, but after more than 50 years, also so detached from their context that they've

almost become political bogeymen. Anne Applebaum's Iron Curtain is a powerful attempt to show that totalitarianism was more than just its most public excesses. A complement to such big-picture histories as Tony Judt's Postwar, this book is concerned with the details of totalitarian rule: the diaspora of party enforcers from the USSR to the rest of the Soviet Bloc; the sudden takeover of radio stations, universities, and youth groups by partisans; the conflicted response of Catholic leaders to Stalin's methods. Thanks to Applebaum's extensive interviews and archival research, Iron Curtain ensures that the everyday experiences of those in the Soviet Bloc will endure, even if they soon pass beyond living memory. --Darryl Campbell --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Applebaum's Gulag received a 2004 Pulitzer Prize, an accolade that accords prominence on her new, groundbreaking investigation of the history of communism. Examining Stalin's imposition of totalitarian regimes on Poland, Hungary, and the Soviet zone of Germany, Applebaum depicts Communist parties that were remorselessly successful in destroying opposition but that failed to win widespread popular support. An interesting motif in Applebaum's history is the awareness by Communist leaders of civil society's rejection of Stalinist socialism, demonstrated by the communists' losses in somewhat unfettered postwar elections. After redressing that problem with rigged polls and mini gulags, the regimes strove to improve communist ideology's attractiveness through propaganda, mass demonstrations, socialist realism in art, and model communist cities. Some people became convinced supporters, but most did not and survived through personal compromises with communism. The latter's individual stories, drawn from interviews and research into those suppressed by state security, infuse Applebaum's account with perplexing human interest. What made for a collaborator, a true believer, a dissident? A masterful chronicle and analysis, Applebaum's work is a history-shelf necessity. --Gilbert Taylor --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

As a child living in Romania, I remember that my parents used to do everything so that the infamous Securitate would pry into our lives as little as possible. In the sixties, the Romanian dictator Dej did everything in order to please his Russian masters. His menu included a variety of things, such as beatings, torture, incarcerations, threats, illegal deportations and the suppression of human rights. Mind you, I was not even allowed to take with me my violin, since it was considered "state property". During my university days, I decided to specialize in the history of the Cold War. Surprisingly, there were many revisionist books and other similar monographs which-up to the fall of

Communism-painted a very rosy picture of the Communist "paradise". In fact, some scholars were sure that Communism had its bad points, but capitalism and its ideology represented by America were worse. Enter Anne Applebaum's book, which totally destroys and naive theories of the revisionist scholars one by one. "Iron Curtain" explains in very simple words to what degree all the countries in Eastern Europe experienced the brutal process of becoming totalitarian states as ordered by Big Brother Stalin. As she claims, this process was a gradual one and did not happen overnight. Neither was it uniform everywhere. By writing about more than fifteen relevant topics, Ms. Applebaum describes in great detail how tens of millions of people experienced the most terrible regimes known in that geographical part of Europe. She explains how, for example, political parties, the church, the young people, the radio and the economy of those countries were doomed from the very end of World War 2. The book is divided into two parts: "False Dawn" and "High Stalinism". The first part is about the consolidation of the regimes. The second one is more interesting and focuses on the years 1948-1956. In general, the book is mainly about Central Europe and only three countries are broadly scrutinized: Hungary, Poland and East Germany, but the author makes sure to also write about the similar fate of other countries, such as Bulgaria, Romania, and to some extent Yugoslavia and the Czech nation. In a way, this book is an accusation against the West, because it fell into the trap of Stalin and his cronies, thus allowing the rulers of Eastern Europe to conduct policies of suppression, of ethnic cleansing, of mass rape and of nationalization-steps which destroyed the lives of many millions of innocent victims. All of this was possible after conducting mass and false propaganda with the help of the secret services established in order to smash any possible resistance in this process of the so-called "utopia". Take for example the crackdown on the church in Poland where priests were arrested en bloc. A similar pattern of harassment and arrests followed in Hungary, where hundreds of church schools were nationalized within months, followed by the closure of monasteries. Nuns in the city of Györ were given six hours to pack up and leave, while in Southern Hungary 800 monks and some 700 nuns were removed in the middle of the night, told they could only take 25 kilos of books, placed on a transport and deported to the Soviet Union. In the winter of 1952-53, senior figures in the church of Krakow underwent a trial featuring fabricated evidence and forged documents. In East Germany, many children were expelled from school for refusing publicly to renounce religion. It was Stalin who, at a Cominform meeting in Karlsbad in 1949, ordered the bloc's communist parties to adopt harsher policies, and it was imperative "to first isolate the Catholic hierarchy and drive a wedge between the Vatican and the believers". We will have to fight a systematic war against the hierarchy; churches should be under our full control by December 1949". The principle guiding these totalitarian regimes

was simple: The party is always right, hence the party cannot make any mistakes. A new term was invented: "Homo Sovieticus", which meant that this new species would never oppose communism, and would never even conceive of opposing it. No one was exempt from this ideological instruction-not even the very youngest citizens. Textbooks had to be rewritten to reflect and praise the new reality of Stalinism. Art in all of its forms was recruited to augment the false messianic credo of these dictatorships, thus the obliteration of free thought everywhere. Conspirators were to be found in many places and paranoia was the name of the game. Clerics, workers, intellectuals, rural landowners who were all classified under the rubric of "internal enemies" were sent to Gulags, after conducting mock trials which included made-up evidence and false witnesses. Soviet advisers both wrote the scripts of these "trials" and helped persuade victims to make the necessary confessions, after using torture, beatings, confinement in dark chambers, the inculcation of fear about the fate of the prisoner's family, subtly staged confrontations, the use of stool pigeons and many more techniques. Ms. Applebaum singles out the example of Geza Supka, who was the leader of the Freemasons in Hungary. In 1950 this organization no longer existed, since it was considered a threat to the regime. Supka was described (in a thick file declassified only now) as being a "representative of Anglo-Saxon interests in Hungary" and a traitor plotting to overthrow the regime. The file also contains many false testimonies rendered by some of his friends, but the most harrowing element of the file includes the daily reports on Supka by informers. Even the report about his death in 1956 was to be included in that file. Similar modi operandi against other "enemies" were to be found in other counties as well. Then some revolts in the fifties were immediately crushed in East Germany and Hungary in 1953 and 1956, respectively. In the end, the communist leaders asked themselves the same questions they had posed after Stalin's death. Why did the system produce such poor economic results? Why was the propaganda unconvincing? What was the source of ongoing dissent and what was the best way to quash it? In the end, as Ms. Applebaum concludes, "the gap between reality and ideology meant that the communist parties wound up spouting meaningless slogans which they themselves knew made no sense". Here the author comes, in my view, to the right conclusion that after Stalin's death none of the regimes were as cruel as they had been between 1945 and 1953, but "even post-Stalinist Eastern Europe could be harsh, arbitrary and formidably repressive". The Berlin Wall built in 1961 was just one example. Both Romania and Yugoslavia tried at different times to carve out individual roles in foreign policy, distancing themselves from the rest of the Soviet bloc, but not necessarily in very meaningful ways. By using a lot of new archival material, and after interviewing numerous citizens in Germany, Hungary and Poland, the result is a riveting and enthralling book which also offers deep and

extensive analysis of the various segments discussed in her book. This opus will become one of the best written on this topic and a classic of its kind. This in spite of the fact that it is not a comprehensive history of the whole Eastern communist bloc. Highly recommended.

A very well written scholastic work. I read this immediately before reading Child 44, and believe it added significantly to my appreciation of that novel. The thing I found most frightening was the state's imposition of "correct thinking" on the populace, and the similarities to the politically correct thinking in today's culture. Although not the point of the book, and no attempt was made by the author to make the correlation, I only had to read the news to get there.

Well worth reading for anyone, especially a student of history. The author concentrated on Poland, East Germany, and Hungary during this time period, showing just how the Soviets did their best to remake these nations in their own image. But the Soviets ultimately failed. This book is not just about the crushing of Eastern Europe, but also the eventual triumph of freedom and the human spirit there.

This book is an intelligent and very readable history of Central Europe after the second world war. Anne Applebaum carries together many aspects out of literature and witnesses of turning devastated countries into totalitarian states, i.e. jumping from the frying pan into the fire. The mechanisms how Communism finally destroyed civil societies and identities which were already maimed by German Nazism and war. It is a heavy topic but the book gives a short essay on totalitarianism which counters many revisionist arguments about Communism. Anne Applebaum writes lightly with a sense of humour and irony and produces a number of short and iconic sentences to bring issues to the point. A required reading for anybody trying to understand economic and social developments which impact Poland, Hungary and Eastern Germany until today.

In her exposition of how East Europe became Stalinist puppet states following the end of the Second World War and exploration of why East Europeans didn't resist more openly against the imposition of a Stalinist system, Applebaum provides a richly detailed, exhaustively researched and strong indictment of a critical period in European history. The only criticism I have of what is otherwise a magnificent book is its scope: the "Eastern Europe" examined here is limited to East Germany, Poland and Hungary, with only passing reference to Czechoslovakia; Romania and Bulgaria are virtually ignored. Her attention to the areas she does discuss is excellent; it is

disappointing, therefore that these other nations are not given equal consideration. The first section, "False Dawn" discusses the way in which the communists gained a toe-hold in Hungary, Poland and East Germany by exploiting the psychological shock of both the war and Nazi occupation while the Soviets simultaneously played up their roles as liberators. The massive displacement and movement of populations (what Applebaum calls "Ethnic Cleansing") further added to the disequilibrium experienced by the populations of East Europe. As Applebaum writes, "With time it became apparent that this particularly powerful combination of emotions - fear, shame, anger, silence - helped lay the psychological groundwork for the imposition of a new regime." This was exploited by the Moscow-trained native communists (Beirut, Rakosi, Ulbricht) who, along with their Soviet masters used the police forces to intimidate, kill or discredit any source of resistance while Soviet-modeled systems were gradually put in place: youth groups, state control of the media, a command (state-run) economy. Much of what is detailed here is not new - Hammond's *(Anatomy of Communist Takeovers)* was the first to show this pattern. The second half of the book "High Stalinism" is what warrants five stars. Here Applebaum shows how the secret police in East Europe were recruited and trained by the NKVD, how a gradual system of intimidation and observation of the populace was put in place, and how a direct mimicking of Soviet internal and external policies were put into place. What I found particularly compelling was Applebaum's evaluation of East Europe in the late 40s and early 50s and her answer to the question "why didn't East Europe resist more? Why were so many apolitical, allowing this system to exist?" The answer, of course is complex but in short, she argues it is a function of (1) the devastation of the war, (2) simple exhaustion by the populace, (3) the appeal of the language of the liberators (reconstruction did take place, and a society was being remade), (4) the systematic destruction of all alternative sources of authority, and (6) the fact that given all the above, most people simply wanted to get on with their lives. As she writes in the conclusion, "(Stalinism) excelled at creating large groups of people who disliked the regime and knew the propaganda was false, but who nevertheless felt compelled by circumstances to go along with it." It is a remarkable history not only for its detail (I have only touched on the broader points made here), but also for its exhaustive bibliography - any student of the period (or reader who wants to know more about a specific time, place or event during this time) has a rich and wide variety of sources for further reading. While the first half of the book covers well-trod ground, Applebaum does address some aspects of the immediate post-war occupation that is not often discussed: the mass rapes of German women in the Soviet occupation zone, the active and brutal hunt for any non-communist partisans in Poland, the great demographic shift of Germans, Ukrainians, Poles and Magyars, the dismantling of industry (what remained of it) and its

shipment east. I highly recommend this book.

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