

Eastern Europe Behind the Curtain

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Tito. The Warsaw Pact. Ceausescu. Comecon. Ulbricht. The Berlin Wall. And always the Iron Curtain.

There was a time, between 1945 and 1991, when these names and labels came freighted with meaning, evoking masses in Eastern Europe held hostage by “puppet governments” beholden to their “Soviet masters” in Moscow. Anne Applebaum’s new book is too subtle to succumb to a caricature of communist enslavement—but the takeaway message is that this was not far from the reality.

Iron Curtain is the story of the first few years after the termination of Nazi rule in the region at the end of World War II and the gradual imposition of communism on many of the countries squeezed between the western border of the Soviet Union and the eastern border of what was then a divided Germany. Applebaum’s goal is “to understand how ordinary people learned to cope with the new regimes; how they collaborated, willingly or reluctantly; how and why they joined the [Communist] party and other state institutions; how they resisted, actively or passively; how they came to make terrible choices that most of us in the West, nowadays, never have to face.”

It is this focus that sets the book apart from many that have looked at Eastern Europe from the top down, or with a singular focus on ethno-nationalist or regional political issues. It also sets it apart from books on the cold war in which Eastern Europe is treated as a field on which the superpowers played out their confrontation.

The virtue of *Iron Curtain* is that it does not explicitly concern itself with the US-Soviet rivalry; this is also its defect. By placing that rivalry outside the book’s boundaries, by making it something she only refers to rather than analyzes, Applebaum leaves aside an element of

Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe, 1944–1956
by Anne Applebaum.
Doubleday, 2012.

Eastern European history vital to understanding how Soviet domination arrived and, more important, how it stayed. For example, a Europe divided between East and West was not just a Soviet project but one, as George Kennan noted in the second volume of his *Memoirs*, that the West, especially the United States, considered essential to the continent’s postwar stability.

Applebaum’s narrative focuses on three nations: East Germany, Hungary, and Poland. It draws on primary and secondary sources and interviews with people who lived through the period of Soviet domination. The interweaving of these materials produces a rich and detailed (sometimes too detailed) account of Stalin’s designs on the region, but especially of the role played by the so-called “Moscow communists—” Eastern European party members who had lived in the Soviet Union and returned to their home countries after the war, becoming their new leaders.

Applebaum writes, engagingly and often movingly, in thematic chapters, about how the new political bosses of Eastern Europe established the means by which they would rule for the next four decades: through organized violence, and through control of the police, the state apparatus, and the economic system.

But back to the defect. Applebaum, a *Washington Post* columnist who won a Pulitzer Prize for her last book, *Gulag*, says she sought to gain, with her new work, “an understanding of real totalitarianism—not totalitarianism in theory but totalitarianism in practice—and how it shaped the lives of millions of Europeans in the twentieth century.”

Applebaum herself notes that the word totalitarian is laden with our own political sensibilities and prejudices. Yet she does not want to give it up. Had the author included a careful analysis of the US-Soviet rivalry in her book, it might have helped her shed some cold war conceptions that today obscure more than they clarify. ■

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