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Subterfuge & Soviets

by *David Pryce-Jones*

A review of *Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe, 1944-1956* by Anne Applebaum

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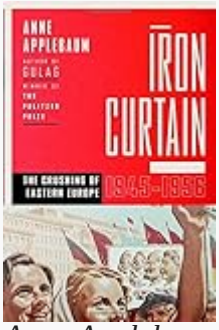

Anne Applebaum

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

Doubleday, 608 pages, $35.00

A high price was bound to be paid for the unnatural alliance between the Soviet Union and the United States and Britain in the war against Hitler. Sure enough, Josef Stalin, bent on his pound of flesh, made sure to incorporate the Baltic republics, Bessarabia and Finnish Karelia, to shift the borders of Ukraine and Poland to his advantage, and to get a grip on a divided Germany. Roughly fifty million people were uprooted and resettled in this redefinition of nations. About twelve million Germans, the Volksdeutsche, were expelled from Eastern Europe, many of them dying on the trek to the West. At the very moment when world war had deprived European powers, great and small, of the moral authority and the military means to continue ruling other peoples, the Soviet Union was setting about consolidating a much larger empire over many who were not Russian.

Conquest was the only right for this expansion. *Force majeure* was the sole law. For Stalin and his underlings, the revolutionary blueprint drawn up by Marx and Lenin was quite enough moral

authority for whatever they wanted to do. History was on their side. The Party was always right. So Communist brutality replaced Nazi brutality. Former Nazi concentration camps needed no alteration to serve as Soviet concentration camps. Renewal of the security organs of Buchenwald, Sachsenhausen, and even Auschwitz caused no crisis of conscience.

The new balance of power in the world was emerging before the war was over. Just as the Munich conference in 1938 set Hitler on the path to war, so too the wartime series of conferences between the Allies gave Stalin his opening more or less unopposed. He was busy installing a puppet government in Poland at the same time that President Roosevelt was telling Stanislaw Mikolaiczyk, the Polish leader in exile, "Stalin doesn't intend to take freedom from Poland. He wouldn't dare do that." This was the same Roosevelt who earlier had confidentially assured Winston Churchill that something had entered Stalin's nature "of the way in which a Christian gentleman should behave."

Iron Curtain is a study in reality. Revisionist historians have tried to place the blame for the Cold War on the United States and its allies. Sticking to facts and avoiding value judgments as far as possible, Anne Applebaum provides the evidence that throughout Eastern Europe the Communists took the initiative, and everyone else, including the realistic but increasingly despondent Churchill, was merely responding. The fate of Eastern Europe was settled with what she calls "amazing insouciance"—one among many of her careful and characteristic understatements. By the time that the transformation into Soviet clones of every country occupied by the Red Army had prevented those on one side of the Iron Curtain from having normal contact with those on the other, it was too late to find a remedy.

To the victims, Soviet intentions were immediately obvious. The Communist order seemed so overpowering that whole populations felt they had no choice except to submit. The Polish Home Army was an ally against the Germans. Instead of cooperating, the Red Army arrested and disarmed six thousand Home Army partisans, including 650 officers. Its commander, General Leopold Okulicki, was invited to a meeting in Warsaw with Ivan Serov, the Soviet general, only to be arrested and flown with sixteen others to Moscow. All were condemned to Gulag prison camps, where three of them, including Okulicki, were to die. During the Hungarian revolt of 1956, General Serov played the same trick of deception when he guaranteed safe conduct to the reformist government, but then had them arrested and executed.

The backing of the Red Army freed the leaders of the local Communist Parties in Eastern and Central Europe to do their work. Some had lived underground during the war and others had survived the politics of exile in Moscow. Boleslaw Bierut in Poland, Matyas Rakosi in Hungary, Otto Grotewohl in the Soviet zone of East Germany, were agents whose obedience Stalin could rely on unquestioningly, as though they had no will of their own. With them were senior Soviet officers and the secret police, known at the time as the NKVD. Somewhere between thirty-five and forty-five thousand people were arrested in the former territories of Poland alone. Patriots who had fought the Nazis were likely to face deportation and imprisonment in a Gulag because they had

shown themselves to be independent spirits. Although the Communists might make tactical retreats at some stages in their takeover, they insisted on having in their hands the secret police and the ministry responsible for it.

Arrest, imprisonment, and death were always options in dealing with troublemakers, but the Communists were quite intelligent enough to recognize that they could never be popular by arousing fear, and they preferred subterfuge. The strategy was to subvert from within whatever prop of civil society it might be. Anne Applebaum quotes the veteran East German Communist Walter Ulbricht: "it's got to look democratic, but we must have everything in our control." The skill was to put their supporters into broadcasting and the press, the arts, the unions, youth organizations, universities, and voluntary associations down to the level of chess clubs until the Party was in charge of a shell. All activities and channels of public opinion were thus centralized in the belief that this was how to create a new species, *Homo Sovieticus*—someone with neither the will nor the ability to be disobedient. Words such as "peace" and "democracy" and "freedom" came to have the special meanings reserved for them by the Soviets. Critics of any aspect of Communism were defined as fascists. The takeover of the social democratic political parties was managed with particular smoothness. Duly outnumbered and intimidated, leaders of these parties either fled for their lives, as Mikolajczyk and the Hungarian Prime minister did, or merged with the Communist Party as though of their own free will.

Three or four years of this were quite enough to install what Anne Applebaum categorizes as High Stalinism. Cities were swamped with low-quality architecture. Frescoes or posters in public spaces portrayed heroes of labor in the approved style of socialist realism. Ideology dictated the economy; rallies and peace parades replaced entertainment. By 1953, 150,000 people had been incarcerated in camps in eastern Germany. The number of political prisoners in Poland rose from 26,000 in 1948 to 84,200 by 1954. Tens of thousands of peasants and landowners were also arrested in Poland for failing to deliver grain as required. In the same period, 400,000 Hungarian peasants were arrested for the same reason. By then, with more than a tinge of anti-Semitism, show trials in the countries of the Soviet bloc had unmasked "spies" and "traitors," "Zionists" and "Trotskyites," all terms meaning that the accused had fallen foul of the Party line and would therefore face the death sentence. As Klement Gottwald, the Czech Party leader, said, things were organized "to best make use of the experience of the Soviet Union." (It was fitting that this toady suffered a heart attack after attending Stalin's funeral, and died soon afterwards.)

Every individual in these unfortunate countries had to decide how to plot their conduct. Anne Applebaum has interviewed about one hundred people whose stories reveal the difficulties of maintaining self-respect in the circumstances. The few who followed the example of wartime partisans and hid in the forest were soon eliminated. In all classes and among all ages, however, there was "a passive resistance, an opposition which sought outlets in jokes, graffiti, and unsigned letters." It was possible to contrive not to be noticed, like a teacher in the Polish countryside by the name of Halina Bortnowska who said of Communism, "A person gets used to it, you stop paying

attention." At the other end of the moral spectrum was collaboration, the course that appealed to opportunists like Rudolf Garasin. He rose through the secret police and modeled Hungarian camps on the Soviet Gulag. In East Germany, Herta Kuhrig, then twenty-three, typified those who knew how to profiteer from Communism. Told by her husband that some who had fled to the West might be coming back, she said, "Oh my god, if they return, we might have to leave our flat."

The Catholic Church, and the Protestants to a lesser extent, offered the one and only ideology that might rival Communism. First came suppression of Catholic youth organizations and publications in Hungary. Then 6,500 church schools were compelled to become state schools. The next stage was the closure of monasteries. In one instance in southern Hungary, 800 monks and some 700 nuns were removed in the middle of the night, allowed twenty-five kilos of books and clothes and forcibly placed in trucks. Finally Cardinal Mindszenty, primate of Hungary, was arrested, subjected to a ridiculous trial, and sent to prison.

The Polish primate, Cardinal Wyszynski, by nature was "inclined to seek compromise," in another of Anne Applebaum's guarded understatements; or again, his "more pliable tactics had the merit of flexibility." He signed an agreement that the church would not support anti-communism in any form. Not satisfied with this act of appeasement, the Communists resorted to the well-tried technique of subverting from within. Boleslaw Piasecki was a political priest who told the familiar Soviet General Serov that he could mobilize reluctant people to cooperate. Pax, the ambiguous pro-Communist Catholic party that he founded, attracted fellow travellers, among them Graham Greene. On the other hand Cardinal Sapieha, a more contentious personality, ordered progressive priests to resign from Pax. Cardinal Wyszynski in the end was almost relieved to be arrested, and it is arguable that his shillyshallying did more to extend the influence of the Church than any amount of angry hostility.

Uprisings in East Germany in 1953 and Hungary in 1956 signaled that the Soviet Empire would go the way of all empires. Communism aroused in those it oppressed the spirit of nationalism that was to destroy it and set them free. Stalin and those who did his bidding were monsters of wickedness and folly, *Homo Sovieticus* was an illusion, and Anne Applebaum says it all, loud and clear.

David Pryce-Jones is the author, most recently, of *Openings & Outings: An Anthology* (Criterion Books).

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