

Review of: *Iron Curtain the Crushing of Eastern Europe 1944-1956* by Anne Applebaum

Courtney Sage

In *Iron Curtain the Crushing of Eastern Europe 1944-1956*, author Anne Applebaum examines the Soviet Union's use of totalitarianism and its effect on the shaping of 20th century Europe. Applebaum's post revisionist argument places the blame of the Cold War on the Soviet Union due to its intrinsic tendency towards destruction and its longing for total control. Applebaum's chronological narration constructs a factual story of destruction and failure within the communist system yet also studies the citizens' ability to reconstruct their countries after overcoming the occupation of the Soviet Union. Within *Iron Curtain*, the meaning of totalitarianism is clarified and the true destruction of the Cold War is defined.

She specifically focuses on Hungary, Poland, and Eastern Germany's reaction to the totalitarianism system. Applebaum wastes no time setting the scene for the reader to understand where Eastern Europe stood amongst the destruction of World War I. The first chapter, "Zero Hour", gives the reader a descriptive narration of the physical and psychological damage suffered by the citizens were experiencing. As a new beginning was developing, the communists planned to use the vulnerability of the citizens for their own advantage to gain control. Throughout the remaining first half of *Iron Curtain*, Applebaum explores the different tactics of the Communist parties used to obtain control of the Eastern European countries, while also asserting the fact that these tactics were short-term successes. Her ability to give descriptive discussion about the violence and propaganda used allows for a clear understanding of the totalitarianism Soviet Union ideals.

The strength of the first half of *Iron Curtain* is Applebaum's concise application of the term totalitarianism. She creates chapters surrounding the different forms of control, such as the police force, the youth, mass media, and the economy. While each of the chapters' central point is this idea of control, it allows the reader to obtain a new perspective of the environment. The descriptions of the police force and ethnic cleansing immerses the reader into the violence; following up with the mass media and youth chapters, she transports the reader into more of the daily routine of citizens. Finally, ending the first half of the book with chapters on politics and the economy, the reader enters the mindset of the institutions and the understanding of control on a broader scale.

While the first half of the book does explore the citizens' rebellious actions towards the communist control, it is most prominently found in the second half of the book. The structure of the book allows for the true definition of totalitarianism to be transformed and paves the way for the reader to enter the second half of *Iron Curtain* informed and curious. Applebaum chooses to first examine the different enemies the communist regimes faced. It is within these two chapters, she introduces the major problem of communism, which is the immense paranoia of change dismantling the party's ideals. As she sets the stage with this idea in forefront, she begins to explain the unraveling of the Soviet Union through cultural and political revolution. She asserts the citizens' disillusionment of the system and the party's failure at instilling communist pride led to the ultimate break up of the regime.

Applebaum's use of sources is commendable and contributes to the success of her book. Her use of interviews adds the personal touches to her narration to draw in the reader. She also includes immense detail that allows the reader to understand what is happening throughout this

confusing time period. Because the book was published recently, Applebaum had the ability to use sources from Soviet archives.⁶⁹⁴ Her concentration on three separate countries further solidifies her argument because it provides more support. A problem with this book is the lack of information regarding the Allies' involvement during this time period. There are brief mentions; however, for a majority of the book, the Allies' contributions are ignored.

Overall, *Iron Curtain* provides the reader with a well-rounded understanding of the Soviet Union occupation while maintaining an enjoyable narration. Applebaum's enthusiasm over this subject can be found within every page and leaves the reader engaged with the literature. Her argument is well researched and expressed creating an understanding of totalitarianism and its damaging effects on Eastern Europe.

⁶⁹⁴ Until recently, access to the Soviet archives has been limited.