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Iron Curtain. The Crushing of Eastern Europe, 1944–1956. By Anne Applebaum. New York: Doubleday, 2012. xxxvi + 566 pp.

In 1983, during the Cold War, Milan Kundera coined a new definition of Central Europe as *Un occident kidnappé*—"the kidnapped West."[1] To the present day, his essay has remained an important contribution to studies of the mental mapping of Europe. This is due to his partly very emotional appeal to regard his Czech homeland as well as Poland and Hungary as a part of a western cultural sphere that is "under the Russian yoke" but nonetheless still belongs to the West. His article, published in the western press, was meant to draw attention to the lands inside the Iron Curtain and to show that they are not a homogeneous and gray *terra incognita*, but rather have a rich and variegated history and culture of their own.

Thirty years later, a study has appeared that describes and analyzes the act of "kidnapping" or "crushing" of Eastern Europe: *The Iron Curtain* by Anne Applebaum. The American historian and journalist, who is well known for her Pulitzer Prize winning study of the Gulag,[2] spent six years collecting archival materials and personal memories of contemporary witnesses. The result is impressive. The author manages not only to tell in clear words the general history of the region after the war,[3] but also to convey this history through the individual stories of ordinary people. Since the postwar generation is passing away, Applebaum's efforts can hardly be overestimated. She conducted a series of interviews in Hungary, Germany, and Poland, and studied the archives of secret police and government organizations. The book is very well researched and I have been able to discover only one factual error: Ivan Maiskii was never a foreign minister of the Soviet Union (Applebaum claims he was, p.XXVIII).

The author begins with the story of how the new socialist regimes were established in Poland, East Germany and Hungary, where socialism *à la* Moscow was experienced as foreign, if not downright hostile rule. According to Applebaum, one of the main reasons why the new rule of liberators could be

1 Kundera Milan, "'Un occident kidnappé' ou la tragédie de l'Europe centrale," *Le Débat* 27, no. 5 (1983): 3–23.

2 Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: a History* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).

3 There have been many studies devoted to the particular regions, but no study that takes up the challenge of providing a broader, more general perspective (p.XXXIV).

established in these countries was because the postwar suffering and distress of the people there caused them to yearn for "normality."

The imposition of Soviet priorities and Soviet thinking on all three countries (which had gone through a rather nationalistic period in the 1930's) presented a considerable challenge to the Soviet rulers.[4] The difficulty of this task was in turn responsible for the rather undemocratic, violent methods of its imposition, such as making the "Moscow Communists" Mátyás Rákosi, Bolesław Bierut, and Walter Ulbricht top leaders and carrying out acts of political repression in preparation for "elections." Although Soviet influence was carefully camouflaged, Applebaum manages to reconstruct the mechanisms of how the Soviet Union went about ruling and exerting political and social control in the satellite countries of Eastern Europe.

Applebaum chose the geographic frame of the study not so much to make comparisons between three countries, but to show the common mechanisms involved in how Soviet power was introduced and how interactions between Moscow and the politicians of Warsaw, Budapest and East Berlin took place. She makes clear, too, that there were other institutions throughout Eastern Europe that followed similar patterns: she describes the "class work" of Soviet-taught secret agents (p.68), the Soviet-style organization of loyal youth from kindergartens (p.151–73), and the total control exerted over mass media, where "soviet equipment, soviet transmitters, soviet advisers, [and the] soviet worldview" (p.181) were employed, as well as the construction of socialist cities such as Sztálinvaros, Stalinstadt and Nowa Huta, which were built in Soviet fashion like the Russian Magnitogorsk had been built in the 1930s. However, Applebaum also describes the differences peculiar to each of the regions. There were opponent players as well, such as the Catholic Church in Poland or the *Petőfi Circle* in Hungary. In the case of Poland, the ruling party officially tolerated regime opponents. The most moving example is that of Boleslaw Piasecki, who turned from the extreme right to the extreme left. As a former member of the Home Army, he wasn't punished by the regime, as were most of his comrades, and he was even able to found *Pax* in 1952 as a paradoxically loyal opposition Catholic Party (p.408). These kinds of "deviations" would have been impossible to imagine in Soviet Russia during the Stalinist era. It is therefore legitimate to ask if we can speak of political and social life in Eastern Europe in terms

4 The mental dispositions of the societies had been affected by the nationalist or even fascist values of the postwar societies of Eastern Europe. Applebaum mentions this example by referring to anti-Jewish pogroms in Poland and Hungary (p.138–39).

of totalitarianism, the conceptual approach that Applebaum uses in telling her story.

Applebaum claims to "gain an understanding of real totalitarianism—not totalitarianism in theory, but totalitarianism in practice, and how it shaped lives of millions of Europeans." (p.XXXVI). This is a crucial feature of Applebaum's study: for her, the conception of totalitarianism is a "useful and necessary empirical description" (p.XXIV) of postwar Eastern Europe. In her study, the understanding of the totalitarian state is that of a regime that aspires to total control: due to this, she uses the term *totalitarian* to analyze methods and techniques of total control that were exported from the Soviet Union after the war (p.XXIII–XXIV). According to the classic totalitarian school of the 1950s,[5] the totalitarianism model means excluding society and people from the analysis. The main topic of Applebaum's book is—quite the contrary—precisely the role personality played in the postwar socialist systems: she describes her book as being about "how ordinary people learned to cope with the new regimes, how they collaborated, how and why they joined a party, how they resisted, actively or passively […]" (p.XXXVI). The use of a totalitarian model is problematic even in the case of Soviet Russia,[6] and even more so in Central Europe—it should more properly be used to describe ideology. Regarding this period of history in Central Europe, it would be more precise to speak of authoritarian dictatorships rather than totalitarian societies. Apart from this theoretical problem, Anne Applebaum's study nonetheless remains an intelligently conceived work containing an encyclopedic wealth of details, and it is written with considerable empathy for those who lived through the period in question.

Applebaum levies a harsh verdict regarding the attitude of "ordinary people" towards the Soviet mentality: "human beings don't acquire 'totalitarian personalities' with such ease." (p.461). Her explanation of why "ordinary people coped with the new regime" is that they depended on the state and their "circumstances were not dramatic." (p.393). In this way, Applebaum raises a core question for historians and social-anthropologists, but also for those who lived through the period: did ordinary people really live "double lives" and become

5 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1958); Zbygniew Brzezinski and Carl Joachim Friedrich, "Die allgemeinen Merkmale der totalitären Diktatur," in *Wege der Totalitarismus-Forschung,* ed. Bruno Seidel and Siegfried Jenker (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1974), 600–17.

6 See the discussion by Stefan Plaggenborg, "Die wichtigsten Herangehensweisen an Stalinismus in der westlichen Forschung," in *Stalinismus. Neue Forschungen und Konzepte,* ed. Stefan Plaggenborg (Berlin: Berlin-Verlag Spitz, 1998), 13–33.

adjusted to a double way of thinking? Or did they adopt the rules of thinking and speaking, the rules of Foucauldian discourse? The answer is left to the reader.

The author gives us examples of people who consciously adopted the discourse of socialist reality. One women says of the Party Song, "that song, 'the party, the party,'—we thought it was really the truth, and we behaved that way." (p.387). Here Applebaum departs from totalitarianism as a theory and seems to share some of the views of revisionists regarding the "rapid social mobility" (p.392) that brought the possibility of social promotion for many young workers.[7]

One of the recurring themes in Applebaum's study is the way violence was used to establish loyal societies. Despite the large-scale expulsion of local populations from almost all regions of Eastern Europe (multiple migrations) and politically motivated purges, governments went about establishing Soviet-style camps, often at the sites of former Nazi concentration camps. According to the author, the aim of the Soviet camps was to frighten people and to prevent dissent, and not to punish (p.108). This point must be regarded critically. First, conditions in the Soviet Gulag were much more inhumane than they were in the German postwar camps. Applebaum's source, Wolfgang Lehman, maintains that the opposite was true (p.105), but as we know, human memory is not reliable. Second, the people in the *Speziallager* were not necessarily innocent: some of them had taken part in the mass murder programs of the Third Reich as lawyers or doctors, and many of them returned to their civilian professions after imprisonment, which lasted a number of years.[8] Denazification is of course not the topic of Applebaum's study, but this should have been mentioned in order to make her discussion more nuanced.

In the book one rarely finds the stories of convinced Communists, apart from the top leaders of the Communist Party, such as Bierut, Rákosi and Ulbricht. For some of them love and loyalty to Stalin was fatal: Bierut died of a stroke or

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7 Cf. in particular, Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union 1921–1934* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); idem, "*New Perspectives on Stalinism,*" *Russian Review* 45 (1986): 357–83; as well as Moshe Lewin, *Russian Peasants and Soviet Power: a study of collectivization* (New York: Norton, 1975 [1968]).

8 Cf. Bettina Greiner, "Der Preis der Anerkennung. Zur Debatte über den Erinnerungsort der Speziallager," in *Instrumentalisierung, Verdrängung, Aufarbeitung. Die sowjetischen Speziallager in der gesellschaftlichen Wahrnehmung 1945 bis heute*, ed. Petra Hausstein, Annette Kaminski, Volkharg Knigge, and Bodo Ritscher (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2006), 114–32; Petra Haustein, "Geschichte im Dissens. Die Auseinandersetzungen um die Gedenkstätte Sachsenhausen nach dem Ende der DDR," in *Instrumentalisierung, Verdrängung, Aufarbeitung*, ed. Hausstein et. al., 133–48.

a heart attack after he heard Khrushchev's destalinization-speech, while Rákosi was "rescued" by Moscow in the aftermath of the Hungarian Uprising and banned to Kyrgyzstan, from where he never returned to his homeland.

However, Applebaum describes a very striking phenomenon in the circles of the intellectual elite: some of them tried to "transform" themselves into "New Men." One such example was Max Lingner, the artist and painter of the mural *Aufbau der Republik*, the man who "wanted to conform [...] and went through a kind of psychological transformation." (p.342). His story seems to be typical of those who had sympathies for communism but despaired at the permanent feeling that the state had total control over the artist's work (while working on the mural Lingner was publically criticized by Otto Grotewohl, the prime minister of East Germany).[9] Nonetheless, Lingner tried to "transform" himself into the New Man who is a "thinking and acting Bolshevik" by engaging in the practices of self-criticism and self-discipline.[10] This point is remarkable because it demonstrates how people outside the borders of Soviet Russia, using the same practices of "soviet subjectivization" as the Russians, learned to "speak Bolshevik."[11]

All over Eastern Europe there were well-known, talented artists who praised Stalin: Wisława Szymborska in Poland, Salomea Neris in Lithuania, Konstantin Simonow in Russia and many others. Some of them were later ashamed of this and deleted these poems from their anthologies, some remained proud of it. Just what motivated them to do so remains a fascinating question.

Applebaum's study also touches on the important topic of the memory of the socialist period. Applebaum's sources not only demonstrate that people were often uncritical regarding the past, as indicated by the fact that they reproduced the official rules in their recollections, but that they even cherished feelings of nostalgia:

Julia Kollár remembers her stint at the construction site of Sztálinváros as "a happy time." In addition, the author describes a phenomenon that almost

9 "The painter had not understood the importance of industry to the development of socialism […]" (p.341).

10 As has been described by researchers of Soviet subjectivity, see Jochen Hellbeck, "Fashioning the Stalinist Soul: The diary of Stefan Podlubny (1931–1939)," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 44, no. 3 (1996): 344–73; Idem, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary Under Stalin* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006).

11 Cf. Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain, Stalinism as Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Oleg Kharkhordin, *Obličat' I licemerit'. Genealogija rossijskoj ličnosti* [Expose and Hypocrisy. Genealogy of Russian Identity] (Saint Petersburg: Evropejskij universitet v Sankt-Peterburge, 2002).

all researchers of communicative memory encounter: that the people who experience injustice and pain at the hands of a system avoid talking about these topics because they were taboo not only in public, but also in the private, family sphere. One such case is that of Elisabeth Brüning, who insisted at first that she didn't know about the violence perpetrated by Red Army soldiers, but after some time told the author what she had really experienced. This demonstrates clearly how traumatized people attempted to erase traumatic memories by forgetting, a strategy that has been described well by Aleida Assmann and Paul Ricoeur.[12]

Applebaum's book is structured around contrasts highlighting the discrepancy between propaganda and reality: the erection of "ideal socialist cities" at the industrial sites of Stalinstadt, Sztálinváros, Nowa Huta and the realities of alcohol abuse, venereal disease, political apathy and catastrophic housing; the drive to exceed quotas by using shock workers and the low quality of the production and the economic harm that ensues (p.319); the propagation of literacy and the massive emigration of many specialists to the West because of their unwillingness to take responsibility for teaching false ideals to their children (p.308).

Applebaum tells the story of socialist rule in Eastern Europe as *a story of failure*. The resistance to the system, the unwillingness to "live within a lie" (Václav Havel) resulted not only in such more or less harmless forms of opposition as wearing "jampi" [dandy]- shoes[13] or telling political jokes, but also in tragic ones, as for example exile for the East Germans or suicide (see, for example, the moving story of the Hungarian psychoanalyst Lili Hajdú Gimesné (Lily Haidu-Gimes in Applebaum's book) (p.394–96).

The socialist "brave new world" did not collapse until 1989, but the seeds for this collapse had already been planted in the crushing of Eastern Europe—a process that was violent, inhuman and full of failures. Applebaum's study documents the extent of this failure in a clear and compelling way.

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12 Cf. Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit. Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik* (Munich: Beck, 2006), 218; Paul Ricoeur, *La memoire, l'historie, l'oubli* (Paris: Seuil, 2000).

13 This form of protest through fashion was used to demonstrate unwillingness to conform to totalitarian reality. In Hungary this meant wearing shoes that resembled American sneakers (*jampec* shoes), in Poland there were *bikiniarze*, and the juvenile subculture in East Germany had so-called *Halbstarke*.