

Anne Applebaum. *Iron Curtain. The Crushing of Eastern Europe*. London: Penguin, 2012. Maps, illustrations, table of contents, footnotes, bibliography, appendices; xxxix, 498 pp. ISBN 978-0713998689. Price £8.99.

Anne Applebaum's *Iron Curtain* looks like a big book, in the style of her deservedly acclaimed 2004 offering, *Gulag*. Thick and imposing, its jacket is covered in lavish praise from noted authors, and the facts that it has been chosen sixteen times as a "book of the year" and was "the top non-fiction pick of 2012". As a work of history though, *Iron Curtain* simply does not measure up to *Gulag*, to the dust-cover hyperbole, or even to what it claims to be.

First, it is not, as the subtitle posits, about "the crushing of eastern Europe". Though Applebaum is at pains to define eastern Europe, she focuses on what she calls "Central Europe": Poland, Hungary, and East Germany (xxxv). How Czechoslovakia did not qualify is anyone's guess. Second, while Applebaum claims to have chosen those three states because they were so different, the book demonstrates how their experiences under Soviet domination were so similar. There's little analysis of how the different backgrounds or situations factored in—which they did. Further, Applebaum is not much interested in the political process most people would associate with "crushing eastern Europe"; as she notes, this story has already been well told, in English and in other languages (xxxvii). Her project is rather an investigation of "totalitarianism" as it was lived in these three states. Those stories have been told as well, separately, and often better than they are here. In the end, despite Applebaum's own archival research and that of her associates in Hungary and Germany, there isn't a great deal new in factual or interpretive terms—as a twenty-one-page "select bibliography" and the footnotes attest.

Still, *Iron Curtain* is a book worth reading, particularly for those new to the subject. Applebaum writes well, and she has an eye for a good and telling anecdote. She has conducted numerous interviews that add to the historical record, and scholars will be grateful for the broadening of the Hungarian side especially. Rather than following a chronological narrative, Applebaum breaks the book into themes (e.g., socialist realism, ethnic cleansing, youth) that introduce concepts without being weighed down by turgid scholarly caveats. This allows her to cover a much broader scope in her investigation of "daily life" than the average historical monograph, although one or two of the topics (e.g. radio) seem light and rather questionable as analytical categories.

Analysis is not what Applebaum is after, however; it is the experience of what Sheila Fitzpatrick has termed "everyday Stalinism" that she seeks, and here Applebaum succeeds in spades; it's thick description. Every chapter is replete with examples of how the Soviets (and base collaborators) systematically eliminated independent thought and action wherever they could. Every page shows how the Polish and Hungarian people—and to a lesser degree, the East Germans—struggled against the evils of Soviet-style totalitarianism. It is a compelling, if somewhat depressing story, told in a clear and comprehensible fashion. There are times—very few—where Applebaum over-simplifies or over-states her case, but it is hard to argue the realities. The majority of people in

eastern—not just central –Europe were crushed by the Soviet system; they were faced with dilemmas of cooperation or flight; they were coerced, beaten, jailed, and tortured; they were the subjects of a totalitarian experiment. Even if it's not new, it's a story worth reading and worth remembering, and *Iron Curtain* makes it more accessible.

TIMOTHY C. DOWLING
Virginia Military Institute