NOnfiction: "Iron Curtain," by Anne Applebaum

Article by: GLENN C. ALTSCHELER
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In the late 1940s and early '50s, hundreds of high school and college students in East Germany were arrested and sentenced to hard labor. Several young boys received 10 years for throwing stink bombs at school officials. Others were held because they made faces during a lecture about Joseph Stalin or scribbled an "F" (for freihheit, or freedom) on city walls.

These detentions, of course, were part of an effort by the Soviet Union to impose total control over virtually every aspect of human activity. In "Iron Curtain," Anne Applebaum, the author of "Gulag," which won the Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction, provides a meticulously researched and riveting account of the totalitarian mind-set and its impact on the citizens of East Germany, Poland and Hungary. Although the Stalinist regimes in these countries did not succeed, Applebaum takes the toll of the devastating damage they did to political, economic, educational, legal and religious institutions.

In order to survive, ordinary people had to make compromises small and large -- from singing a song or signing a peace petition to joining the Communist Party. But they also knew that Iron Curtain bureaucracies were arbitrary, capricious and callous. As part of Poland's Five Year Plan, for example, Jo Langer was told by her supervisor to submit a table with the precise number of toothbrushes (specifying colors and types of bristles) to be sold to Switzerland, England, Malta and Madagascar. She understood the consequences of failure to comply -- and her invented statistics, "mated with similar creations from other branches," made their way up the chain of command. Nonetheless, when her husband, a prominent Communist, was arrested, Langer lost her job, her apartment and most of her friends.

The history of postwar Eastern Europe, Applebaum concludes, "proves just how fragile human institutions and organizations really are." Even as it documents the consequences of force, fear and intimidation, however, "Iron Curtain" also provides evidence of resistance and resilience. Designed to be a propaganda exercise, the Warsaw Youth Festival of 1955, she writes, became an occasion for spontaneity. As young Poles jitterbugged to jazz alongside their new Swiss friends, paying no attention to their surroundings or their handlers, "the totalitarian dream suddenly seemed far away."

The "dream" -- it was, of course, a nightmare -- lasted a few years beyond 1984 before the Berlin Wall came crashing down. And it is taking decades to rebuild structures, cultures and trust. But even during the darkest days, the days of secret police, "socialist realism" and re-education camps, there were reasons to believe that George Orwell was wrong.

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.