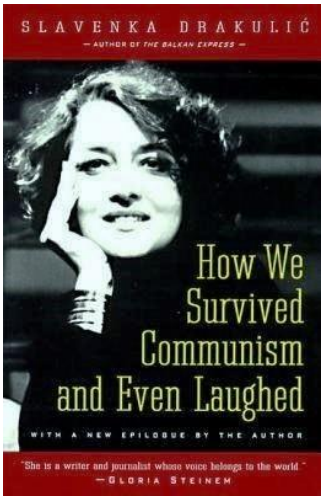
How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed

by Slavenka Drakulic



Pub Date:	June 7th, 2016	**Prepared by:**	Adult Services Team
ISBN:	9780060975401		Addison Public Library
Page Count:	197		
Publisher:	Harper Perennial		630-458-3323

***

Author Bio

Slavenka Drakulić, born in Croatia (former Yugoslavia) in 1949, is a journalist and a writer whose books have been translated into many languages. Her best-known book in the USA is *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed*. Her last collection of essays, *Café Europa Revisited: How to Survive Post-Communism,* was published by Penguin Random House in January 2021. In the USA, she has published eight non-fiction books and five novels.

***

Book Summary

This essay collection from renowned journalist and novelist Slavenka Drakulic, which quickly became a modern (and feminist) classic, draws back the Iron Curtain for a glimpse at the lives of Eastern European women under Communist regimes. Provocative, often witty, and always intensely personal, How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed cracks open a paradoxical world that through its rejection of capitalism and commoditization ends up fetishizing both.

Examining the relationship between material goods and expressions of happiness and individuality in a society where even bananas were an alien luxury, Drakulic homes in on the

eradication of female identity, drawing on her own experiences as well as broader cultural observations. Enforced communal housing that allowed for little privacy, the banishment of many time-saving devices, and a focus on manual labor left no room for such bourgeois affectations as cosmetics or clothes, but Drakulic's remarkable exploration of the reality behind the rhetoric reveals that women still went to desperate lengths to feel "feminine."

How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed also chronicles the lingering consequences of such regimes. The Berlin Wall may have fallen, but Drakulic's power pieces testify that ideology cannot be dismantled so quickly; a lifetime lived in fear cannot be so easily forgotten.

***

Book Reviews

Kirkus Reviews

A poignant and truthful look at what living under Communism was really like, by Croatian journalist and novelist Drakulic. The author, daughter of a former partisan who was a high-ranking Communist army officer, was never a member of the Party herself. Here, she conveys the reality of life under Communism through ordinary but telling detail: the wonder of a man who, for the first time in his life, was able to eat a banana—and ate it skin and all, marveling at its texture; Draculic's own bewilderment at finding fresh strawberries in N.Y.C. in December; the feel of the quality of the paper in an issue of Vogue; the desperate lengths to which women under the Communist regime would go to find cosmetics or clothes or something that would make them feel feminine in a society where such a feeling was regarded as a bourgeois affectation. Drakulic dismisses the argument that Western manufacturers have manipulated these needs: ``To tell us that they are making a profit by exploiting our needs is like warning a Bangladeshi about cholesterol." Though herself a feminist, she willingly turns amusing in describing the uncomprehending questions sent to her by a New York editor who asked about the role of feminism in political discourse in Eastern Europe, when there was no political discourse and when feminists were—and apparently still are—regarded as enemies of the people. ``We may have survived Communism," Drakulic writes, ``but we have not yet outlived it." To the author, Communism is more than an ideology or a method of government—it is a state of mind that is yet to be erased from the collective consciousness of those who have lived under it. A sometimes sad, sometimes witty book that conveys more about politics in Eastern Europe than any number of theoretical political analyses.

***

New York Times

IT is no longer a revelation that the essence of life under totalitarianism is contained not only in its extreme horrors -- the knock on the door, the gulags, the firing squads -- but also in the indignities of daily existence: the snooping neighbor, the cramped apartment, the smelly kitchen sink, the need to forage for food. These "trivial" aspects of life under the anciens regimes of the Eastern bloc are the focus of "How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed," a thoughtful, beautifully written collection of essays by the Croatian journalist Slavenka Drakulic.

For the people of the Communist world, the slogan "The personal is political" was true in its literal sense. "Growing up in Eastern Europe," Ms. Drakulic writes, "you learn very young that politics is not an abstract concept, but a powerful force influencing people's everyday lives." Unfortunately, the politicization of the personal was not liberating, as it was expected to be by many Western radicals, but the very opposite. "To survive, we had to divide the territory, to set a border between private and public. The state wants it all public. . . . What is public is of the enemy."

The banality of evil is personified by a "media surveillance inspector" ("A Chat With My Censor"). Affable, friendly, he tells Ms. Drakulic that journalists who go astray should be warned "tenderly," and that having studied her work, he knows "not only what but how " she thinks. Such "tender" treatment breeds chilling self-censorship: "I began to examine myself, to search for my errors, to look at my life through his eyes."

If fear is degrading, so is material deprivation -- something Westerners disgusted by the vulgarities of consumerism are apt to forget. In the essay "How We Survived Communism," which concludes the book, Ms. Drakulic paints a vivid picture of the compulsive recycling and collecting typical of Eastern European households, dictated not by environmental consciousness but by poverty and fear of shortages. "While leaders were accumulating words about a bright future, people were accumulating flour and sugar, jars, cups, pantyhose, old bread, corks, rope, nails, plastic bags," she writes. This desperate hoarding is, to her, the ultimate symbol of the failure of Communism -- this, and its inability to provide something so basic as feminine hygiene products.

One does not have to embrace stereotypes about some uniquely female sensibility attuned to the personal (as if men never write about the personal!) to acknowledge the particular burdens that scarcity in Eastern Europe has imposed on women. Not surprisingly, Ms. Drakulic concentrates primarily on women's lives. Her perspective is that of a feminist, but the Eastern European experience gives her feminism a special edge. She is acutely aware of a larger helplessness that unites women and men: "It's hard to see . . . men as a gender. . . . Perhaps because everyone's identity is denied, we want to see them as persons, not as a group, or a category, or a mass."

Though inspired by Western feminists, Ms. Drakulic is often exasperated by their blindness to the concerns of women who lack the basics of a decent life. When an American scholar writes to her asking such things as "Do the women in Yugoslavia argue for an 'essentialism,' i.e., that women are different from men, or is it a matter of choice?" she is amused but also saddened, even insulted, feeling "like a white mouse in an experimental laboratory."

Ms. Drakulic also knows that talk of an oppressive "beauty myth" rings hollow to women for whom getting good makeup or stylish clothes is a way of affirming their individuality and escaping the "uniformity that comes out of an equal distribution of poverty." She is keenly sensitive to what she sees as the quasi-totalitarian elements in feminism (and in other causes, like environmentalism and animal welfare).

Perhaps the greatest appeal of "How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed" lies in Ms. Drakulic's skill at blending provocative analysis with the texture of everyday life: a young girl's

awe before a luxurious foreign doll; an Eastern European's envious amazement at the workings of the American phone system and painful bewilderment at the vast poverty in New York.

This book was completed just as the first shots were being fired in Yugoslavia's civil war; the numbing fear of waiting for catastrophe, even as life with all its trivialities goes on, is captured in "The Day When They Say That War Will Begin." Though not quite able to foresee the devastation the war would bring, Ms. Drakulic already knew that it was far too early to celebrate the end of Communism. "The reality is that Communism persists in the way people behave, in the looks on their faces, in the way they think," she explains. "Life has the same wearying immobility; it is something to be endured, not enjoyed." What makes this observation even more sobering is Ms. Drakulic's conclusion that only the men and women of Eastern Europe themselves can change this -- and that change is not likely to come soon.

***

Tuesday Night Book Discussion Nov. 8, 2022

1. Do you think Slavenka's commitments to left-wing social ideas and relatively right-wing economic ideas are in tension with one another? Why or why not?

2. What is the communist mindset? How does Slavenka think one gets rid of it?

3. Why was Slavenka not optimistic about democratic government in Eastern Europe?

4. What was Slavenka's attitude about the treatment of women in Eastern Europe? What were some feminist complaints that resonated with her? What were some feminist complaints that did not?

5. What is the role of commodities in How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed? Do they have a spiritual dimension? If so, what is it?

6. What is the significance of the mink coat? Of make-up? Of Slavenka's doll? What do they all represent to Eastern European women like Slavenka?

7. Why do you think the vast majority of characters in the book are women?

***