IRON CURTAIN - Introduction

'From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent. Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of Central and Eastern Europe. Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest and Sofi a, all these famous cities and the populations around them lie in what I must call the Soviet sphere, and all are subject in one form or another, not only to Soviet infl uence but to a very high and, in many cases, increasing measure of control from Moscow.' Winston Churchill, Fulton, Missouri, 5 March 1946

Among many other things, the year 1945 marked one of the most extraordinary population movements in European history. All across the continent, hundreds of thousands of people were returning from Soviet exile, from forced labour in Germany, from concentration camps and prisoner of war camps, from hiding places and refuges of all kinds. The roads, footpaths, tracks and trains were crammed full of ragged, hungry, dirty people.

The scenes in the railway stations were particularly horrific to behold. Starving mothers, sick children and sometimes entire families camped on filthy cement floors for days on end, waiting for the next available train. Epidemics and starvation threatened to engulf them. But in the city of Łodz, in central Poland, a group of women determined to prevent further tragedy. Led by former members of the Liga Kobiet, the Polish Women's League, a charitable and patriotic organization founded in 1913 , the women got to work. At the Łodz train station, Women's League activists set up a shelter for women and children, supplying them with hot food, medicine and blankets, as well as volunteers and nurses.

In the spring of 1945 , the motives of these women were the same as they would have been in 1925 or 1935 . They were witnesses to a social emergency. They organized themselves in order to help. No one asked them, ordered them, or paid them to do so. Janina Suska, in her late eighties when I met her, told me that she remembered these early efforts in Łodz as completely apolitical: 'No one received money for charitable work . . . everyone who had a free minute helped.' Beyond aiding desperate travellers, the Łodz Women's League, in its initial incarnation, had no political agenda.

Five years passed. By 1950 , the Polish Women's League had become something very different. It had a Warsaw headquarters. It had a centralized, national governing body, which could and did dissolve local branches that failed to follow orders. It had a General Secretary, Izolda Kowalska-Kiryluk, who described the League's primary tasks not in charitable, patriotic terms, but using political, ideological language: 'We must deepen our organizational work and mobilize a broad group of active women, educating and shaping them into conscious social activists. Every day we must raise the level of women's social consciousness and join the grand assignment of the social reconstruction of People's Poland into Socialist Poland.'

The Women's League also held national congresses, like the one in 1951 where Zofi a Wasilkowska, then the organization's vice-president, openly laid out a political agenda: 'The League's main, statutory form of activism is educational, enlightening work . . . increasing women's consciousness to an incomparably higher level and mobilizing women to the most complete realization of the goals of the Six-Year Plan.' By 1950, in other words, the Polish Women's League had effectively become the women's section of the Polish communist party. In this capacity, the League encouraged women to follow the party's line in matters of politics and international relations. It encouraged women to march in May Day parades and to sign petitions denouncing Western imperialism. It employed teams of agitators, who attended courses and learned how to spread the party's message further. Anyone who objected to any of this – anyone who refused, for example, to march in the May Day parades or attend the celebrations for Stalin's birthday – could be kicked out of the Women's League, and some were. Others resigned. Those who remained were no longer volunteers but bureaucrats, working in the service of the state and the communist party.

Five years had passed. In those five years, the Polish Women's League and countless organizations like it had undergone a total transformation. What had happened? Who had caused the changes? Why did anyone go along with them? The answers to those questions are the subject of this book. Although it has been most often used to describe Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union, the word 'totalitarian' – totalitarismo – was fi rst used in the context of Italian fascism. Invented by one of his critics, Benito Mussolini adopted the term with enthusiasm, and in one of his speeches offered what is still the best definition of the term: Everything within the state, nothing outside the state, nothing against the state. Strictly defined, a totalitarian regime is one which bans all institutions apart from those it has officially approved. A totalitarian regime thus has one political party, one educational system,

one artistic creed, one centrally planned economy, one unified media and one moral code. In a totalitarian state there are no independent schools, no private businesses, no grassroots organizations and no critical thought. Mussolini and his favourite philosopher, Giovanni Gentile, once wrote of a 'conception of the State' which is 'all-embracing; outside of it no human or spiritual values can exist, much less have value'.

From Italian, the word 'totalitarianism' spread into all the languages of Europe and the world. After Mussolini's demise the concept had few open advocates, however, and the word eventually came to be defi ned by its critics, many of whom number among the twentieth century's greatest thinkers. 5 Friedrich Hayek's Road to Serfdom is a philosophical response to the challenge of totalitarianism, as is Karl Popper's The Open Society and Its Enemies, George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four is a dystopian vision of a world entirely dominated by totalitarian regimes.

Probably the greatest student of totalitarian politics was Hannah Arendt, who defined totalitarianism in her 1949 book, The Origins of Totalitarianism, as a 'novel form of government' made possible by the onset of modernity. The destruction of traditional societies and ways of life had, she argued, created the conditions for the evolution of the 'totalitarian personality', men and women whose identities were entirely dependent on the state. Famously, Arendt argued that Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union were both totalitarian regimes, and as such were more similar than different. Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski pushed that argument further in Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy, published in 1956 , and also sought a more operational definition. Totalitarian regimes, they declared, all had at least five things in common: a dominant ideology, a single ruling party, a secret police force prepared to use terror, a monopoly on information and a planned economy. By those criteria, the Soviet and Nazi regimes were not the only totalitarian states. Others – Mao's China, for example – qualified too.

But in the late 1940 s and early 1950 s, 'totalitarianism' was more than just a theoretical concept. During the early years of the Cold War, the term acquired concrete political associations as well. In a pivotal speech in 1947 , President Harry Truman declared that Americans must be 'willing to help free peoples to maintain their free institutions and their national integrity against aggressive movements that seek to impose upon them totalitarian regimes'. This idea became known as 'the Truman Doctrine'. President Dwight Eisenhower also used the term during his 1952 presidential campaign, when he declared his intention to

go to Korea and bring an end to the war there: 'I know something of this totalitarian mind. Through the years of World War II , I carried a heavy burden of decision in the free world's crusade against the tyranny then threatening us all.'

Because American Cold Warriors openly positioned themselves as opponents of totalitarianism, Cold War sceptics naturally began to question the term, and to ask what it meant. Was 'totalitarianism' a real threat, or was it merely an exaggeration, a bogeyman, an invention of Senator Joseph McCarthy? Throughout the 1970 s and 1980s, revisionist historians of the USSR argued that even Stalin's Soviet Union had never really been totalitarian at all. They claimed that not all decisions in the Soviet Union were really taken in Moscow; that local police were just as likely to initiate terror as those at the top of the hierarchy; that central planners were not always successful in their attempts to control the economy; that mass terror had created 'opportunities' for many in society. Among some, the term 'totalitarian'came to be seen as crude, imprecise and overly ideological.

In fact, many of the 'orthodox' theorists of totalitarianism had made a number of the same points. Few had claimed that totalitarianism worked. On the contrary, 'because totalitarian rule strives for the impossible and wants to place at its disposal the personality of man and destiny, it can be realized only in a fragmentary manner,' wrote Friedrich: 'This is precisely why the consequences of the totalitarian claim to power are so dangerous and oppressive, because they are so hazy, so incalculable, and so difficult to demonstrate . . . This contortion follows from the unfulfillable aspiration to power: it characterizes life under such a regime and makes it so exceedingly difficult for all outsiders to grasp.'

Political theorists in more recent years have taken this revisionist argument further. Some have argued that the term 'totalitarian' is truly useful only in theory, as a negative template against which liberal democrats can defi ne themselves. Others find the word altogether meaningless, explaining that it has become a term which means nothing more than 'the theoretical antithesis of Western society', or else simply 'people we don't like'. A more sinister interpretation holds that the word 'totalitarianism' is self-serving: we use it only in order to enhance the legitimacy of Western democracy.

In popular speech, the word totalitarian isn't so much self-serving as overused. Democratically elected politicians are described as totalitarian (e.g. 'Rick Santorum's

Totalitarian Instincts'), as are governments or even companies (one can read of 'The US 's march towards totalitarianism' or learn that Apple has a 'totalitarian approach to its app store'). Libertarians, from Ayn Rand onwards, have used the word to describe progressive liberals. Progressive liberals (and indeed conservatives) have used the word to describe Ayn Rand. The word is nowadays applied to so many people and institutions that it can sometimes seem meaningless.

Yet although the very idea of 'total control' may now seem ludicrous, ridiculous, exaggerated or silly, and although the word itself may have lost its capacity to shock, it is important to remember that 'totalitarianism' is more than an ill-defined insult. Historically, there were regimes which aspired to total control. If we are to understand them – if we are to understand the history of the twentieth century – we need to understand how totalitarianism worked, in theory and in practice. Nor is the notion of total control completely old-fashioned. The North Korean regions set up along Stalinist lines, has changed little in seventy years. Though new technology now seems to make the notion of total control harder to aim for, let alone achieve, we can't be certain that mobile phones, the internet and satellite photographs won't eventually become tools of control in the hands of regimes which also aspire to be 'all embracing'. 'Totalitarianism' remains a useful and necessary empirical description. It is long overdue for a revival.

One regime in particular understood the methods and techniques of totalitarian control so well that it successfully exported them: following the end of the Second World War and the Red Army's march to Berlin, the leadership of the Soviet Union did try very hard to impose a totalitarian system of government on the very different European countries it then occupied, just as they had already tried to impose a totalitarian system on the many different regions of the USSR itself. Their efforts were in lethal earnest. Stalin, his military offi cers and his secret policemen – known from 1934 to 1946 as the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (Narodnyi Komisssariat Vnutrenikh Del or NKVD) and only later as the KGB – and his local allies were not trying to make a point about Ayn Rand or progressive liberals when they created the totalitarian states of Eastern Europe. To paraphrase Mussolini, they wanted very much to create societies where everything was within the state, nothing was outside the state and nothing was against the state – and they wanted to do it quickly.

True, the eight European countries which the Red Army occupied in 1945 , in whole or in part, had vastly different cultures, political traditions and economic structures. The new

territories included formerly democratic Czechoslovakia, formerly fascist Germany, as well as monarchies, autocracies and semi-feudal states. The inhabitants of the region were Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Jewish and Muslim. They spoke Slavic languages, Romance languages, Finno-Ugric languages and German. They included Russophiles and Russophobes; industrialized Bohemia and rural Albania; cosmopolitan Berlin and tiny wooden villages in the Carpathian mountains. Among them were former subjects of the Austro-Hungarian, Prussian and Ottoman empires, as well as the Russian empire.

Nevertheless, Americans and West Europeans in this period came to see the nations of communist-dominated but non-Soviet Europe – Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, eastern Germany, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania and Yugoslavia –as a 'bloc', which eventually became known as 'Eastern Europe'. This is a political and historical term, not a geographic one. It does not include 'eastern' countries such as Greece, which was never a communist country. Neither does it include the Baltic states or Moldova, which although historically and culturally similar to Eastern Europe were in this period actually incorporated into the Soviet Union. There are similarities between the experiences of the Baltic states and those of Poland in particular, but there were also important differences: Sovietization, for the Balts, meant the loss even of nominal sovereignty.

In the years following Stalin's death – since 1989 in particular – the eight nations of Eastern Europe took very different paths, and it has become routine to observe that they never really had much in common in the fi rst place. This is absolutely true: before 1945 , they had never previously been unifi ed in any way, and they have startlingly little in common now, aside from a common historical memory of communism. Yet for a time, between 1945 and 1989 , the eight nations of Eastern Europe did share a great deal. For the sake of simplicity, familiarity and historical accuracy I will therefore use the term 'Eastern Europe' to describe them throughout this book.

Very briefly, between 1945 and 1953 , it did seem as if the USSR would succeed in turning the widely varying nations of Eastern Europe into an ideologically and politically homogeneous region. From Hitler's enemies and Hitler's allies they did, during this period, create a clutch of apparently identical polities. 1By the early 1950s, all the grey, war-damaged capitals of the 'ancient states' of the region, to use Churchill's phrase, were patrolled by the same kinds of unsmiling policemen, designed by the same socialist realist architects and draped with the same kinds of propaganda posters. The cult of Stalin, whose

very name was venerated in the USSR as a 'symbol of the coming victory of communism', was observed across the region, along with very similar cults of local party leaders. Millions of people took part in state-orchestrated parades and celebrations of communist power. At the time, the phrase 'Iron Curtain' seemed much more than a metaphor: walls, fences and barbed wire literally separated Eastern Europe from the West. By 1961 , the year in which the Berlin Wall was built, it seemed as if these barriers could last for ever.

The speed with which this transformation took place was, in retrospect, nothing short of astonishing. In the Soviet Union itself, the evolution of a totalitarian state had taken two decades, and it had proceeded in fits and starts. The Bolsheviks did not begin with a blueprint. In the wake of the Russian Revolution, they pursued a zigzag course, sometimes harsher and sometimes more liberal, as one policy after another failed to deliver promised economic gains. The collectivist 'war communism' and 'red terror' policies of the Russian Civil War era were followed by Lenin's more liberal New Economic Policy, which permitted some private business and trade. The New Economic Policy was in turn abolished in 1928 and replaced by a Five Year Plan and a new set of policies which eventually became known as Stalinism: a push for faster industrialization, forced collectivization, centralized planning, draconian restrictions on speech, literature, the media and the arts, and the expansion of the Gulag, the system of mass forced labour camps. The phrases 'Stalinism' and 'totalitarianism' are often used interchangeably, and rightly so.

But by the late 1930s Stalinism was in crisis too. Standards of living were not improving as fast as the party had promised. Poorly planned investments were beginning to backfi re. Mass starvation in Ukraine and southern Russia in the early 1930 s, while of some political utility to the regime, had created fear rather than admiration. In 1937 , the Soviet secret police launched a public campaign of arrests, imprisonments and executions, initially directed at the saboteurs, spies and 'wreckers' who were allegedly blocking society's progress, and eventually spreading to include the highest circles of the Soviet communist party. The Great Terror was neither the first wave of arrests in the Soviet Union nor the largest – earlier bouts of terror had been largely aimed at peasants and ethnic minorities, especially those living near the Soviet border. But it was the first to be directed at the highest party leadership, and it caused profound disquiet, at home and among communists abroad. In due course, the Great Terror might have led to real disillusion.

Stalinism – and Stalin – was fortuitously rescued by the Second World War. Despite the

chaos and mistakes, despite mass deaths and vast destruction, victory bolstered the legitimacy of the system and its leader, 'proving' their worth. In the wake of the victory, the near-religious cult of Stalin reached new heights. Propaganda described the Soviet leader as 'the incarnation of their own heroism, their own patriotism, their own devotion to their socialist Motherland'.

At the same time, the war gave Stalin an unprecedented opportunity to impose his particular vision of communist society on his neighbours. The fi rst opportunity came at the very beginning, in 1939 , after the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany signed the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact and agreed to divide Poland, Romania, Finland and the Baltic states into Soviet and German spheres of infl uence. On 1 September, Hitler invaded Poland from the west. On 17 September, Stalin invaded Poland from the east. Within a few months, Soviet troops had occupied the Baltic states, parts of Romania and eastern Finland as well. Although Nazi-occupied Europe was eventually liberated, Stalin never gave back the territories he occupied in this fi rst phase of the war. Eastern Poland, eastern Finland, the Baltic nations, Bukovina and Bessarabia, now called Moldova, were incorporated into the Soviet Union. The eastern Polish territories remain part of Ukraine and Belarus today.

In their zone of occupation, Red Army officers and NKVD offi cers immediately began to impose their own system. From 1939 onwards, they used local collaborators, members of the international communist movement, mass violence and mass deportations to the concentration camps of the Gulag to 'Sovietize' the local population. Stalin learned valuable lessons from this experience, and gained valuable allies: the Soviet invasion of eastern Poland and the Baltic States in 1939 produced a cadre of NKVD offi cers ready and willing to repeat it. Immediately, even before the Nazi invasion of the USSR in 1941 , Soviet authorities began to prepare the ground for a similar transformation of Eastern Europe.

This last point is controversial. For in the standard historiography, the region's postwar history is usually divided into phases. 21 First there was genuine democracy, in 1944 – 5 ; then bogus democracy, as Hugh Seton-Watson once wrote; and then, in 1947 – 8 , an abrupt policy shift and a full-fledged takeover: political terror was stepped up, the media muzzled, elections manipulated. All pretence of national autonomy was abandoned.

Some historians and political scientists have since blamed this change in political

atmosphere on the onset of the Cold War, with which it coincided. Sometimes, this onset of Stalinism in Eastern Europe is even blamed on Western Cold Warriors, whose aggressive rhetoric allegedly 'forced' the Soviet leader to tighten his grip on the region. In 1959 , this general 'revisionist' argument was given its classic form by William Appleman Williams, who argued that the Cold War had been caused not by communist expansion but by the American drive for open international markets. More recently, a prominent German scholar has argued that the division of Germany was caused not by the Soviet pursuit of totalitarian policies in Eastern Germany after 1945, but by the Western powers' failure to take advantage of Stalin's peaceful overtures.

Any close examination of what was happening on the ground across the region between 1944 and 1947 reveals the deep fl aws of these arguments – and, thanks to the availability of Soviet as well as Eastern European archives, a close examination is now possible.

New sources have helped historians understand that this early 'liberal' period was, in reality, not quite so liberal as it sometimes appeared in retrospect. True, not every element of the Soviet political system was imported into the region as soon as the Red Army crossed the borders, and indeed there is no evidence that Stalin expected to create a communist 'bloc' very quickly. In 1944 , his Foreign Minister, Ivan Maiskii, wrote a note predicting that the nations of Europe would eventually all become communist states, but only after three or perhaps four decades. (He also foresaw that in the Europe of the future there should be only one land power, the USSR , and one sea power, Great Britain.) In the meantime, Maiskii thought the Soviet Union should not try to foment 'proletarian revolutions' in Eastern Europe and should try to maintain good relations with the Western democracies.

This long-term view was certainly in accordance with Marxist- Leninist ideology as Stalin understood it. Capitalists, he believed, would not be able to cooperate with one another for ever. Sooner or later their greedy imperialism would lead them into confl ict, and the Soviet Union would benefi t. 'The contradictions between England and America are still to be felt,' he told colleagues a few months after the war's end. 'The social confl icts in America are increasingly unfolding. The Labourites in England have promised the English workers so much concerning sociaism that it is hard for them now to step back. They will soon have confl icts not only with their bourgeoisie, but also with the American imperialists.'

If the USSR was not in a rush, neither were the Eastern European communist leaders, few of

whom expected to take power immediately. In the 1930 s, many had participated in 'national front' coalitions together with centrist and socialist parties – or had watched as national front coalitions were successful in a number of countries, most notably Spain and France. The historian Tony Judt has even described Spain as 'a dry run for the seizure of power in Eastern Europe after 1945 '. These original national front coalitions had been created to oppose Hitler. In the war's aftermath, many prepared to re-create them in order to oppose Western capitalism. Stalin took a long-term view: the protelarian revolution would take place in due course, but before that could happen, the region fi rst had to have a bourgeois revolution. According to the schematic Soviet interpretation of history, the necessary bourgeois revolution had not yet taken place.

Yet as Part One of this book will explain, the Soviet Union did import certain key elements of the Soviet system into every nation occupied by the Red Army, from the very beginning. First and foremost, the Soviet NKVD , in collaboration with local communist parties, immediately created a secret police force in its own image, often using people whom they had already trained in Moscow. Everywhere the Red Army went – even in Czechoslovakia, from which Soviet troops eventually withdrew – these newly minted secret policemen immediately began to use selective violence, carefully targeting their political enemies according to previously composed lists and criteria. In some cases, they targeted enemy ethnic groups as well. They also took control of the region's Interior Ministries, and in some cases the Defence Ministries as well, and participated in the immediate confi scation and redistribution of land.

Secondly, in every occupied nation, Soviet authorities placed trusted local communists in charge of the era's most powerful form of mass media: the radio. Although it was possible, in most of Eastern Europe, to publish non-communist newspapers or magazines in the initial months after the war, and although non-communists were allowed to run other state monopolies, the national radio stations, which could reach everyone from illiterate peasants to sophisticated intellectuals, were kept under fi rm communist party control. In the long term, the authorities hoped that the radio, together with other propaganda and changes to the educational system, would help bring mass numbers of people into the communist camp.

Thirdly, everywhere the Red Army went, Soviet and local communists harassed, persecuted and eventually banned many of the independent organizations of what we would now call civil society: the Polish Women's League, the German 'anti-fascist' groupings, church groups and schools. In particular, they were fi xated, from the very fi rst days of the occupation, on

youth groups: young social democrats, young Catholic or Protestant organizations, boy scouts and girl scouts. Even before they banned independent political parties for adults, and even before they outlawed church organizations and independent trade unions, they put young people's organizations under the strictest possible observation and restraint.

Finally, wherever it was possible, Soviet authorities, again in conjunction with local communist parties, carried out policies of mass ethnic cleansing, displacing millions of Germans, Poles, Ukrainians, Hungarians and others from towns and villages where they had lived for centuries. Trucks and trains moved people and a few scant possessions into refugee camps and new homes hundreds of miles away from where they had been born. Disoriented and displaced, the refugees were easier to manipulate and control than they might have been otherwise. To some degree, the United States and Britain were complicit in this policy – ethnic cleansing of the Germans would be written into the Potsdam treaty – but few in the West understood at the time how extensive and violent Soviet ethnic cleansing would turn out to be.

Other elements of capitalism and even liberalism did remain in place for a time. Private farming, private business and private trade persisted throughout 1945 and 1946 , and sometimes longer. Some independent newspapers and journals kept publishing and some churches remained open. In some places, non-communist political parties were also allowed to function, along with selected noncommunist politicians. But this is not because the Soviet communists and their Eastern European allies were liberal-minded democrats.

This is because they thought that these things were less important, in the short term, than the secret police, the radio, ethnic cleansing, and the domination of youth groups and other civic organizations. It was not a coincidence that ambitious young communists invariably went to work in one of these areas. Upon joining the party in 1945 , the communist writer Wiktor Woroszylski was offered three choices: the communist youth movement, the secret police and the propaganda department, which dealt with mass media.

Free elections held in some countries in 1945 and 1946 were not a sign of communist tolerance either. The Soviet and Eastern European communist parties allowed these elections to happen because they thought that with control over the secret police and the radio, and with heavy infl uence over young people, they would win. Communists everywhere believed in the power of their own propaganda, and in the fi rst years after the

war's end they had some good reasons for that belief. People did join the party after the war, whether out of despair, disorientation, pragmatism, cynicism or ideology, not only in Eastern Europe but in France, Italy and Britain. In Yugoslavia, Tito's communist party was genuinely popular, thanks to its role in the resistance. In Czechoslovakia – occupied by Hitler in 1938, thanks to the appeasement of the West – real hopes were at fi rst placed in the Soviet Union, which the Czechoslovaks hoped would be a more sympathetic power. Even in Poland and Germany, countries where suspicion of Soviet motives was strong, the psychological impact of the war also shaped many people's perceptions. Capitalism and liberal democracy had failed catastrophically in the 1930 s. Many believed it was now time to try something different.

Hard though it is sometimes for us to understand, communists also believed their own doctrine. Just because communist ideology now seems wrongheaded in retrospect, that doesn't mean it didn't inspire fervent belief at the time. The majority of communist leaders in Eastern Europe – and many of their followers – really did think that sooner or later the working-class majority would acquire class consciousness, understand its historical destiny, and vote for a communist regime. They were wrong. Despite intimidation, despite propaganda and despite even the real attraction communism held for some people devastated by the war, communist parties lost early elections in Germany, Austria and Hungary by large margins. In Poland, the communists tested the ground with a referendum, and when that went badly its leaders abandoned free elections altogether. In Czechoslovakia, the communist party did well in an initial set of elections, in 1946 , winning a third of the vote. But when it became clear that it would do much worse in subsequent elections in 1948 , party leaders staged a coup. The harsher policies imposed upon the Eastern bloc in 1947 and 1948 were therefore not merely, and certainly not only, a reaction to the Cold War. They were also a reaction to failure. The Soviet Union and its local allies had failed to win power peacefully. They had failed to achieve absolute or even adequate control. Despite their infl uence over the radio and the secret police, they were not popular or universally admired. The number of their followers was shrinking rapidly, even in countries like Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria, where they had initially had some genuine support.

As a result, the local communists, advised by their Soviet allies, resorted to harsher tactics which had been used previously – and successfully – in the USSR . The second part of this book describes those techniques: a new wave of arrests, the expansion of labour camps, much tighter control over the media, intellectuals and the arts. Certain patterns were followed

almost everywhere: fi rst the elimination of 'right-wing' or anti-communist parties, then the destruction of the non-communist left, then the elimination of opposition within the communist party itself. In some countries, communist authorities even conducted show trials very much along Soviet lines. Eventually the region's communist parties would attempt to eliminate all remaining independent organizations; to recruit followers into state-run mass organizations instead; to establish much harsher controls over education; to subvert the Catholic and Protestant churches. They created new, all-encompassing forms of educational propaganda, sponsored public parades and lectures, hung banners and posters, organized petition-signing campaigns and sporting events.

But they would fail again. Following Stalin's death in 1953, a series of minor and major rebellions broke out across the region. In 1953, East Berliners staged a protest which ended with Soviet tanks. Two major uprisings followed in 1956, in Poland and Hungary. In the wake of those uprisings the East European communists would moderate their tactics once again. They would continue to fail – and continue to change tactics – until they fi nally gave up power altogether in 1989 . Between 1945 and 1953, the Soviet Union radically transformed an entire region, from the Baltic to the Adriatic, from the heart of the European continent to its southern and eastern peripheries. But in this book, I will focus on Central Europe. Though referring to Czechoslovakia, Romania and Bulgaria as well as Yugoslavia, I will focus in particular on Hungary, Poland and Eastern Germany. I have chosen these three countries not because they were similar, but because they were so very different.

Above all, they had different experiences of war. Germany had, of course, been the main aggressor and then the biggest loser. Poland had fought hard against German occupation and was one of the Allies, although it did not share in the fruits of victory. Hungary had played a role somewhere in between, experimenting with authoritarianism, collaborating with Germany, trying to switch sides and then finding it was too late. These three countries also had very different historical experiences. Germany had been the dominant economic and political power in Central Europe for decades. Poland, although a continental empire through the seventeenth century, had been partitioned by three other empires in the eighteenth century and lost its sovereignty in 1795 , regaining it only in 1918 . Hungary's power and influence had meanwhile peaked in the early part of the twentieth century. After the First World War, Hungary lost two thirds of its territory, an experience so traumatic that it has echoes in Hungarian politics even today.

None of the three had been democratic, strictly speaking, in the period immediately preceding the war. But they all had experience of political liberalism, constitutional government and elections. All had stock markets, foreign investment, limited companies, and laws protecting property rights. All had civic institutions – churches, youth organizations, trade associations – dating back hundreds of years, as well as long traditions of press, printing and publication. Poland's fi rst newspaper had appeared in 1661 . Germans had produced an enormous array of competing media before Hitler's rise to power in 1933 . All had elaborate economic and cultural ties to Western Europe, far stronger in the 1930 s than their ties to Russia. Nothing in their history or their culture automatically destined them to become totalitarian dictatorships. Western Germany, although culturally identical to Eastern Germany, became a liberal democracy as did Austria, which had long been part of the Habsburg Empire alongside Czechoslovakia and Hungary.

History sometimes looks inevitable in retrospect, and in the decades following the imposition of communism some sought post-hoc rationales for the Eastern European communist regimes. The eastern half of the continent was said to be poorer than the western half (except, of course, that Germany wasn't); the nations of the region were said to be less developed (except that by comparison to Greece, Spain and Portugal, Hungary and Poland weren't) or less industrialized (except that the Czech lands were among the most industrialized in Europe). But from the perspective of 1945, no one looking forward foresaw that Hungary, with its long ties to the German-speaking lands in the West; Poland, with its fierce anti-Bolshevik tradition; or eastern Germany, with its Nazi past, would remain under Soviet political control for nearly half a century.

When they did fall under Soviet political control, few outside the region understood what happened and why. Even now, many continue to see Eastern Europe solely through the prism of the Cold War. With some exceptions, Western books about postwar Eastern Europe have most often focused on East–West confl ict; on Germany's division ('The German Question'); and on the creation of NATO and the Warsaw Pact. 29 Hannah Arendt herself dismissed the region's postwar history as uninteresting: 'It was as though the Russian rulers repeated in great haste all the stages of the October revolution up to the emergence of totalitarian dictatorship; the story, therefore, while unspeakably terrible, is without much interest of its own and varies very little.'

But Arendt was wrong: 'the Russian rulers' did not follow the convoluted stages of the

October Revolution in Eastern Europe. They applied only those techniques which they knew had a chance of success, and they undermined only those institutions which they believed it absolutely necessary to destroy. This is why their story is so full of interest: it tells us more about the totalitarian mindset, Soviet priorities and Soviet thinking than would any study of Soviet history on its own. More importantly, a study of the region tells us more about the ways in which human beings react to the imposition of totalitarianism than would a study of any one country on its own.

In more recent years, a wide range of scholars have begun to acknowledge this. In the two decades since the collapse of communism and the opening of archives across Central Europe, Germany and Russia, an enormous amount of academic work has been devoted to the region. Particularly well covered, in the Anglophone world, are the physical and human consequences of the Second World War – notably in the work of Jan Gross, Timothy Snyder and Bradley Abrams – as well as the history of ethnic cleansing in the region. 31 The international politics of the region are even better understood. Whole institutes now devote themselves to the study of the origins of the Cold War and the US –Soviet conflict. I have mostly relied on secondary sources when discussing these subjects.

The same is true of the political history of Eastern Europe, which has been very well told using archival sources in regional languages. I have not tried to replicate the work of excellent historians such as Andrzej Paczkowski and Krystyna Kersten, whose writings on the Polish communist leadership and secret police remain unsurpassed; Norman Naimark, whose book on the Soviet occupation of East Germany is the defi nitive work in English; Peter Kenez and László Borhi, who have written superb accounts of the political machinations in Hungary; Bradley Abrams, Mary Heimann and Karel Kaplan, who have described the period in Czechoslovakia. Certain more defined topics have also been the focus of excellent articles and full-length books. Among the best, again in English, I would include John Connelly on the Stalinization of Eastern European universities; Catherine Epstein and Marci Shore on communists and left-wing intellectuals; Mária Schmidt on the show trials; Martin Mevius on national symbolism in Hungary; Mark Kramer on de-Stalinization and the events of 1956.

General histories of the region as a whole are much rarer, if only because of the logistical difficulties. It's not easy to find a historian who reads three or four of the regional languages, let alone nine or ten. Anthologies are often the answer and there are at least two very good

recent ones: Stalinism Revisited: The Establishment of Communist Regimes in East-Central Europe and the Dynamic of the Soviet Bloc (New York and Budapest, 2009), edited by Vladimir Tismaneau, and The Establishment of Communist Regimes in Eastern Europe, 1944 – 1949 , edited by Norman Naimark and Leonid Gibianskii (Boulder, Colo., 1997). But though both volumes contain excellent essays, anthologies don't necessarily look for patterns or make comparisons. Since I wanted to do exactly that, I had the assistance of two superb researchers and translators, both writers in their own right, while working on this book, Regine Wosnitza in Berlin and Attila Mong in Budapest. I relied on my own knowledge of Polish and Russian.

Although much has been written about this period, there are still many, many untold stories. While preparing to write this book, I worked in former secret police archives – IPN in Warsaw, ÁBTL in Hungary, BstU (the Stasi archive) in Berlin – as well as the archives of government ministries, German art academies, the Hungarian fi lm institute, East German and Polish radio, just to name a few. I also made use of several new, or relatively new, collections of Soviet documents on the period. These include the two volumes of Vostochnaya Evropa v dokumentakh rossiskikh arkhivov, 1944 – 1953 (Eastern Europe in Documents from the Russian Archives 1944 – 1953), as well as the two volumes of Sovetskii faktor v vostochnoi evrope, 1944 – 1953 (The Soviet Factor in Eastern Europe 1944 – 1953) and a three-volume series on Soviet occupation policy in Eastern Germany, all published in Moscow with Russian editors, as well as a seven-volume series published by the Russian state archive, on the same topic. A joint commission of Polish and Ukrainian historians have now put together an imposing series of documents on their mutual history. In addition, the Polish Military Archive in Warsaw has a large collection of documents copied from Russian archives in the early 1990 s. The Central European University Press has also published two excellent document collections on the uprisings in Germany in 1953 and Hungary in 1956. A wide range of documents has been published in Polish, Hungarian and German as well.

In addition to consulting archives, I conducted a series of interviews in Poland, Hungary and Germany, in order to learn from people who actually lived through this period, and to hear them describe the events and the emotions of that time using their own language. I am very conscious that this may have been the last possible moment for such a project, and in the course of my writing this book several people whom I interviewed in the early stages passed away. I remain extremely grateful to them and to their families for allowing me to ask them

extensive questions at that stage in their lives.

The goals of this research were varied. In the documents of the period, I sought evidence of the deliberate destruction of civil society and small business. I investigated the phenomena of social realism and communist education. I gathered as much information as possible on the founding and early development of the region's secret police. Through both reading and conversations, I sought to understand how ordinary people learned to cope with the new regimes; how they collaborated, willingly or reluctantly; how and why they joined the party and other state institutions; how they resisted, actively or passively; how they came to make terrible choices that most of us in the West, nowadays, never have to face. Above all, I sought to gain an understanding of real totalitarianism – not totalitarianism in theory, but totalitarianism in practice – and how it shaped the lives of millions of Europeans in the twentieth century.