



## **The Haunted Land: Facing Europe's Ghosts After Communism**

*Tina Rosenberg*

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## **The Haunted Land: Facing Europe's Ghosts After Communism** Tina Rosenberg

Rosenberg's previous book, *Children of Cain*, dealt with the change from dictatorship to democracy in South America. Here, she approaches a similar theme in Eastern Europe after the fall of Communism, telling a series of riveting human stories to illuminate the paradox that rabid anti-Communism at times resembles Communism. In the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and the former East Germany, she talks to erstwhile dissidents now victimized because they are named in old police registers; to low-level agents accused of crimes that were not crimes when committed; and to high officials who now run things just like before. She convincingly suggests that the best antidote to Communism may be, not revenge, but "tolerance and the rule of law."

## **The Haunted Land: Facing Europe's Ghosts After Communism Details**

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Author : Tina Rosenberg

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## **Mohammadmreza Kavousi says**

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**Abhilasha Purwar says**

Through a geographical setting Czechoslovakia, Poland, and East Germany, Tina's book walks through human, political, legal aspect of communism; the human aspect being the most important, for it is the person who defines the "ism" they follow and not the other way around. Through the stories of the prisoners and the jailers, the spies and the spied, the communists and the dissidents, the shooters and the shot; Tina paints the beautiful grey spectrum of the right, wrong, and left.

In 2018, as the global liberal is leaning left, with a very good intention to solve the rising global inequality, it is worthwhile to look at the dangers if we tipped a little too left. And for my own, free market social-capitalist self, I hope the book saves me from tipping too much to the right.

Hope the history helps us find the right moderation, the balanced path: the middle road.

Russia's history, revolution, communism has always fascinated me. From my late teen years, I have seen the "coolest" of my friends and classmates incline towards left policies. In our early rebel years in liberal free-market capitalist societies, it is a very conforming thing to be moderate republican, a Miltonian capitalist, and hence the coolest amongst us are Socialist, Leftist, Liberal Left.

The "ism" trajectory of society has been feudalism -> imperialism -> fascism -> communism -> and now I guess is capitalism. We can either change it to solve the critical challenges of our times, or we can see it

deteriorate and be replaced by some other "ism". No "ism" is completely right or wrong, it is what we make of it.

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### **Pierre says**

A strong and off the fence opinionated view of 3 countries coming to terms with their communist past. For our menu I would recommend reading the Joke by Kundera for starter then a staunch and no quarter Orwell's 1984 for main dish followed by this book as a dish before dessert...

Then The Little Prince for dessert. To give you back hope after this heavy meal! This book deals with the past of 3 countries Poland, the Czech Republic and East Germany (part of Germany now; as info for the younger generation). Not so much a political book or a treatise on politics but more about moral responsibilities ... moral responsibilities of those who governed, those who were governed and those who dared to be neither. It gets more interesting when the oppressed became oppressors and the accused became accusers. And this on the scale of a whole nation!

Tina Rosenberg writes well and isn't afraid to be subjective. That is to avoid being objective and emit judgements and raises questions. A fantastic book!

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### **Zebardast Zebardast says**

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### **Lothe says**

When Communism came crashing down alongside the Iron Curtain at the turn of the 1990s, it left a changed Eastern Europe to sift through the debris. Former Soviet Bloc countries found themselves struggling to come to terms with the events of the last fifty years, and to establish new systems in the shadow of the old.

This is the conflict Tina Rosenberg portrays in "The Haunted Land." A journalistic veteran of the South American dictatorships, Rosenberg travels to Czechoslovakia, Poland, and the former East Germany, and tries to uncover and analyze the questions and problems they face after Communism. Czechoslovakia is attempting to cleanse itself of those who "collaborated" with the Communists, a task that proves difficult in a society in which complicity can mean being--not evil, but merely unwilling to risk one's life speaking out. In East Germany, Rosenberg covers the trial of the last Berlin Wall guards to shoot someone attempting to cross the border between East and West Germany, an act that was legal--even demanded--at the time. And in Poland, she follows the course of the man who instituted martial law in that country: did he condemn Poland, or save it?

Rosenberg's approach is to seek out issues at the personal level, whether that person be a former high official, an ex-resistance fighter, or an everyday citizen who may or may not have been co-opted as a secret police informant. She tells their stories, and through them, the stories of their countries. Though Rosenberg no doubt spent countless hours interviewing her subjects, the book rarely reads like an interview; Rosenberg's storytelling has more character, plot, suspense, and sheer narrative panache than many novels.

If the focus on the personal provides a unique perspective, it may also give rise to one of the book's shortcomings; viz., the "big picture" is sometimes ignored in the heady rush of the particular. Readers with no background in the convulsive politics of the Cold War era may occasionally find themselves wanting for context. This deficiency never really impedes the force of the reporting, but some information from another source might be ideal. (I read the book along with sections of Robert Paxton's "Europe in the Twentieth Century," a textbook that neatly covers the broader political sweep.)

My other qualm with the book is that by now it begs a sequel. Published in 1995, I wonder how these countries have changed thirteen years on; there might at least be another edition with an afterword to update us.

That being said, the broad questions that Rosenberg raises are the important ones, and they have not changed. In the orbit of a totalitarian system (both during and after it), we find challenged our ideas of personal responsibility, freedom, and legality. What is the difference, Rosenberg asks, between trying Nazi soldiers for crimes that didn't exist at the time, and trying East German border guards for crimes that didn't exist at the time? What do we do when we are asking who we can blame, and the answer may be "no one in particular"--may even be "ourselves"?

Rosenberg is singularly eloquent in discussing such questions. She has her own opinions, and is not afraid to voice them, but at the same time she leaves plenty of room for the reader to make his own judgments. The comments she does offer are articulate and insightful. Her answers may or may not satisfy every reader, but they will provoke thought, and they should. What Rosenberg has found in the problems of post-Communist Europe is a microcosm of problems everywhere, stunningly incisive particular examples of the most pressing universal dilemmas. She describes the former East Bloc as a "haunted land," and we discover--perhaps to our discomfort--that the ghosts of this place are the ghosts of us all.

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### **Louis says**

Tina Rosenberg's *The Haunted Land: Facing Europe's Ghosts After Communism* examines the aftermath of communism in Eastern Europe and Germany and how citizens and political leaders are attempting to reconcile and bring closure to a dark chapter in the history.

Although different countries have utilized different approaches, one of the most difficult problems in every country, is one of accountability. Who should be barred from public service temporarily or permanently? Who should be imprisoned or otherwise legally sanctioned and for what crimes? What restitution, if any, is owed to the victims, and what exactly constitutes being a victim of the regime? There are few easy answers to any of these questions.

*The Haunted Land* is well-researched, though a bit dry at times, and overall makes for a worthwhile read for anyone interested in history, especially the era of communism in Europe.

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## **Justin Whitlock says**

Not what I was looking for. Pretty subjective style. Section on Poland was most interesting.

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## **Ahmad Sharabiani says**

The Haunted Land: Facing Europe's Ghosts After Communism, Tina Rosenberg

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## **Scott Cox says**

This analysis of 3 post-communist European countries (Czech Republic, Poland, and Germany) focuses heavily on the difficulties in rebuilding countries long dominated by communist ideals and ethics. Some of the more interesting sections of Rosenberg's work deal with the decision to include into the new governments and societies those who were once spies and collaborators. Rosenberg explores the reasons for why informers would inform on their fellow citizens. One secret police minister, Lorenc, notes that "people jumped at the chance to become informers." He also noted that "some agreed out of fear, but the big reason people joined us was that we made them feel appreciated. The personal relationship was always more important than ideology." However many informers did so simply to maintain jobs and to protect themselves and their families. Another official, Pavel Bratinka noted, "Staying on the side of power doesn't require any particular personal malice or enduring evil, all it calls for is disinclination toward martyrdom, a very common human attribute indeed." Lastly, Polish Jaruzelski prophetically notes, "great empires don't always act according to moral principles." All very true! However I think that Alexandre Solzhenitsyn has already written much regarding this in "The Gulag Archipelago."

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## **Matt Mayevsky says**

Dobry, syntetyczny reportaż z trzech różnych demografii; Czechosłowacji, Polski i NRD. Mimo, że nie jest to podręcznik historyczny, systematyzuje wiedzę na temat głównych wydarzeń Europy Środkowej Wschodniej. Główną osią reportażu jest transformacji ustrojowej; jej przyczyny, oblicza i skutki. Rzecz do przeczytania nie tylko dla tych, dla których Europa Środkowa Wschodnia jest regionem egzotycznym.

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## **Chris "Stu" says**

So. Here's the problem. This is a very excellent book about the effects of Communism on people, even a dozen years after the Fall of the Berlin Wall. It's exhaustively researched, the author's biases and personal feelings on the subjects are expressed in a way that you can fully take them into account, and the human stories that this book relates are moving and important to wrestle with in this modern time.

However, it is 400 pages of bad news. Humans are weak, bureaucracy is strong and destructive, and people turn on each other all the time. Even the processes that people put into place to heal old wounds wind up creating new ones.

On the plus side, this book is gripping, a quick and engaging read, and, oddly, entertaining. It can be very dispiriting, however. I found myself repeatedly telling people around me that I'm very happy not to live in a Communist Country, because, in all likelihood, I'd betray them. That's just what people do, after all.

Not a very inspiring message, but it's good, at times, to be reminded that people who do horrible things are often just ordinary people, nonetheless.

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### **zltg says**

"Communism has left behind a poisonous residue. The people ... had forty-five years to accustom themselves to governments endowed with arbitrary and absolute power... No institutions existed that could check power of the Party. It has left citizens unaccustomed to searching for their own values and morals, more comfortable with simply accepting those supplied ready-made by the state... Unchecked power is the evil in communism, what transforms it from Pegasus to Gorgon. The opposite of communism is not anti-communism, which at times resembles it greatly. The opposite is tolerance and the rule of law."

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### **William2 says**

Author Tina Rosenberg never simplifies the immense complexity of the issues which inform her story. If anything, she dives right in, fully immersing her reader in the formidable challenges the three states—Czechoslovakia, Poland, and East Germany—faced in their rocky transition from communism to democracy just after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The question the book raises is who is to blame for the crimes of the communist era and who should be punished? Scenes of great political or legal or social complexity are described until the reader begins to feel the earth shifting underfoot, the tale is so dense, but then comes a gradually dawning clarity. In this sense the book reminds me—not in its diction or style so much as in its relentless intellectual rigor—of V.S. Naipaul at his best. This is the highest praise I can offer any writer. I particularly want to cite Naipaul's two Islam books and the three books on India. *The Haunted Land* is solid throughout but the penultimate chapter, "The Conversation," in which Stasi personnel and collaborators try to justify their spying on friends and associates, will set your hair on fire. These are absolutely astounding flights of Trumpian thinking. Good grief. Winner of the National Book Award for Nonfiction in 1995 and the Pulitzer Prize in 1996.

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## **Kes says**

I loved this book.

This is a book light on the references - mostly because all the sources seem to be the author's interviews with various people involved in communism in Eastern Europe. The theme is how to deal with communism - and the various forms that have been taken.

I loved the author's insights. In Czechoslovakia, the problem is dealt with by lustrace - preventing those who co-operated with communism from being part of the government. In Poland, something similar takes place. In Germany, the problem appears to be the complicity of everyone in the system.

It's easy to read the book and think of parallels to the modern world. For example, in the East German experience, the author observes that the problem was too much data, which prevented the spying apparatus from catching everything. With big data and technological advances, would that still be an issue today?

The only (minor) quibble I had was that I wondered how much the author's personal experiences or POV might have shaped the interviews and how much she pushed back on her interviewees. I wish that was clearer.

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