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The Role of Discontent in Communism's Downfall: An Analysis of *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed*

by Harry Bodell

(History 2235)

After reading Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto*, the perks of communism may appear limitless. After listening to the declarations of Joseph Stalin, Mao Tse Tung, and other communist leaders, a communist society may seem like an ideal society. Indeed, many figures throughout history have attempted to spread a common belief- that communism is the correct path for a society to follow. However, just by reading the title of Slavenka Drakulic's memoir *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed*, one can begin to understand the different perspective held by those who lived under the tight grip of communism. Life under communism was not ideal, as Marx, Stalin, Mao, and others had claimed. Life under communism was something that needed to be survived. Drakulic's memoir opens a window into the realities of life for an average member of Soviet-controlled communist society. By considering the failures of communism pertaining to basic human needs, individual freedoms, jealousy toward other lifestyles, and the treatment of women, Drakulic's work paints a very clear picture of the downfall of communism- that the system pushed its people into a state of disapproval and ultimately destroyed their faith in communist society.

In order to begin to understand how communism pushed its followers away, one must consider the system's failure to provide for basic human needs. After all, individuals are unlikely to fall in love with a system that cannot provide them with food or economic stability. While supporters of the system claimed that communism provided a better standard of living for society, Drakulic's writing tells a very different story. Drakulic writes that members of communist society lived under "a poverty in which the whole country is deprived, everybody is poor, a poverty when to be poor and deprived is a state of life that hardly ever changes" (189). Economic prosperity was virtually impossible to achieve. Everybody was forced into a state of perpetual economic struggle. This struggle manifested itself in the availability of food. Food was not available in excess like it is in the aisles of an American grocery store today. It was unavailable to the extent that nobody thought in terms of food being good or bad. Drakulic explains that "the word 'like' is not the best way to explain the food situation (or any situation) in Poland" (13), as individuals had to prioritize finding and consuming food over enjoying food. The communist system itself seemed to prioritize the wrong products. Products like milk and water, two very important nutritional products, were not readily available to most people. However, "There may be neither milk nor water, but there is sure to be a bottle of Coke around" (13). Fundamentally, communist society placed its followers in a state where their basic needs were difficult to satisfy. This condition expanded beyond the availability of food, water, and milk. Drakulic points out that "Every mother in Bulgaria can point to where communism failed, from the failures of the planned economy (and the consequent lack of food, milk), to the lack of apartments, child-care facilities, clothes, disposable diapers, or toilet paper" (18). Not only does Drakulic list the other basic needs that were not provided for- the need for clothing, housing, and even bathroom products- but she also reminds the reader that these shortcomings were not hidden under the rug. Everybody knew about them. Everybody could point them out. As communist society failed to take care of its people, faith in the system was left to slowly corrode.

Not only does Drakulic's memoir illustrate how people were deprived of what they needed to live well, but it also illustrates how those same people were deprived of the individual freedoms they desired. Fundamentally, individual life choices were subject to the communist government's control.

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While politics may seem quite distant in capitalist societies, inside communist society "politics never becomes abstract. It remains a palpable, brutal force directing every aspect of our lives, from what we eat to how we live and where we work. Like a disease, a plague, an epidemic, it doesn't spare anybody" (17). Indeed, those living under communism had virtually no say in how they lived their lives. Individualism was essentially forced out of society, as "To be yourself, to cultivate individualism, to perceive yourself as an individual in a mass society is dangerous. You might become living proof that the system is failing" (26). Individuals did not have the freedom to be their own person. After all, communism was based upon the forced equality of people within a society in order to do away with social barriers. This forced equality was factored into everyday life, all the way down to an individual's appearance. As Drakulic explains that "everyone is wearing the same thing, not because they want to, but because there is nothing else to buy" (26), it becomes clear that communist society aimed to limit the ways in which people could be different. That meant limited clothing options. That meant that women would not be able to wear make-up. Indeed, "Without a choice of cosmetics and clothes, with bad food and hard work and no spare time, it wasn't at all hard to create the special kind of uniformity that comes out of an equal distribution of poverty and the neglect of people's real needs. There was no chance for individualism- for women or men" (23), as was seemingly the system's goal. The communist system appeared to be incredibly disheartening to those within its grip. Without providing for individual freedoms, Drakulic explains that "What communism instilled in us was precisely this immobility, this absence of a future, the absence of a dream, of the possibility of imagining our lives differently" (7). Under such conditions, it cannot come as a surprise that people would lose faith in communism. In reading Drakulic's words, it cannot come as a surprise that the communist system pushed people so far away that there would someday be a crisis.

Had those under communist control not been the only people suffering in these ways, perhaps the system would not have corroded as it did. If the Americans and Western European people were being deprived of their basic needs and freedoms as well, then at least communist society wouldn't seem uniquely unjust. However, that was simply not the case. Those living under the shadow of the Soviet Union were still able to see the light provided in other nations. Drakulic best demonstrates this in the case of *Vogue* Magazine. The beauty inside such a foreign magazine was difficult to understand for women like Drakulic. She writes that "Living under such conditions and holding *Vogue* magazine in your hands is a very particular experience- it's almost like holding a pebble from Mars" (27). The mere reality that such beauty was attainable elsewhere was heartbreaking. Drakulic goes on by writing, "I guess that the average Western woman... still feels a slight mixture of envy, frustration, jealousy, and desire while watching this world of images... But tomorrow she can at least go buy what she saw... Here, you can't. Here, the images make you hate the reality you live in" (28). Jealousy rendered life under communism even more unbearable. To know that what they were being deprived of was readily available and embraced in other nations- often nearby nations- was maddening. To know that seemingly the only factor standing in the way of living a similar lifestyle was the communist system made it even easier to turn against the claims and directions of the government.

While these troublesome conditions affected men and women alike, women in particular were pushed into disapproval of the communist system. Communist leadership and even Drakulic herself would be quick to point out that "women were equal under the law" (23). After all, communism's goal of universal equality would not be possible otherwise. However, this attempt to prove both genders equal was not always in women's interest. Drakulic points out that women "had to work like men, proving that they were equal even physically" (23), and many would even say that women were made to do most of the work in communist society. Furthermore, women were deprived of their natural character. Most women want to embrace at least some aspects of femininity. However, "the communist ideal was a robust woman who didn't look much different from a man. A

nicely dressed woman was subject to suspicion, sometimes even investigation" (23). Women were so masculinized that Drakulic remembers she heard "repeatedly from women in Warsaw, Budapest, Prague, Sofia, East Berlin: 'Look at us- we don't even look like women" (31). It became clear that women were not looked after in the communist system despite any claims of equality. After all, women lived under "a vision in which their needs- what with Ideology, Politics, and Economics- were nowhere near the top" (47). While women may not have been able to set the Soviet Union and its communist system on a path toward collapse all alone, the way that they were treated under communism certainly pushed public morale to newfound lows.

Ultimately, the Soviet Union would be destined to collapse- and with it, communism's grip on Eastern Europe. *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed* shines a spotlight on perhaps the most significant factor in that collapse. The communist system pushed away those it needed in order to function. By failing to provide for the people's basic needs, failing to recognize the common desire for individual freedom, failing to consider the people's jealousy toward other societies, and failing to change the treatment of women, the communist system forced society to lose faith and turn its back on the words of Marx, Stalin, Mao, and others who had declared communism to be the ideal system of living. In Drakulic's words, the communist system was "invented to make you believe that you- not the government or the party- are to blame... set up to internalize guilt, blame, failure, or fear, to teach you how you yourself should censor your thoughts and deeds" (6). Unfortunately for communist leadership, individuals do not enjoy living under such standards, and the collective discontent of the people would contribute greatly to the collapse of what was once a major world power.

Work Cited

Drakulic, Slavenka. *How We Survived Communism & Even Laughed*. New York: Perennial, 1993.