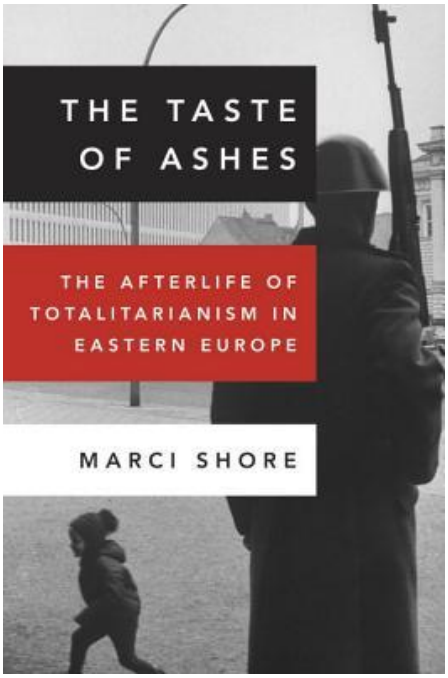

The Taste of Ashes: The Afterlife of Totalitarianism in Eastern Europe

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An inventive, wholly original look at the complex psyche of Eastern Europe in the wake of the revolutions of 1989 and the opening of the communist archives.

In the tradition of Timothy Garton Ash's *The File*, Yale historian and prize-winning author Marci Shore draws upon intimate understanding to illuminate the afterlife of totalitarianism. *The Taste of Ashes* spans from Berlin to Moscow, moving from Vienna in Europe's west through Prague, Bratislava, Warsaw and Bucharest to Vilnius and Kiev in the post-communist east. The result is a shimmering literary examination of the ghost of communism – no longer Marx's "specter to come" but a haunting presence of the past.

Marci Shore builds her history around people she came to know over the course of the two decades since communism came to an end in Eastern Europe: her colleagues and friends, once-communists and once-dissidents, the accusers and the accused, the interrogators and the interrogated, Zionists, Bundists, Stalinists and their children and grandchildren. For them, the post-communist moment has not closed but rather has summoned up the past: revolution in 1968, Stalinism, the Second World War, the Holocaust. The end of communism had a dark side. As Shore pulls the reader into her journey of discovery, reading the archival records of people who are themselves confronting the traumas of former lives, she reveals the intertwining of the personal and the political, of love and cruelty, of intimacy and betrayal. The result is a lyrical, touching, and sometimes heartbreaking, portrayal of how history moves and what history means.

The Taste of Ashes: The Afterlife of Totalitarianism in Eastern Europe Details

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From Reader Review The Taste of Ashes: The Afterlife of Totalitarianism in Eastern Europe for online ebook

Rayrumtum says

I have mixed feelings about this. The book is only slightly the afterlife of totalitarianism in Eastern Europe. The prime focus tends to be the Jewish situation there and the conflicts between Jews who emigrate to Israel and those who choose to say and live as Poles, Czechs, whatever. There is no structure to the book that I can tell. It is more ramblings in no particular order. There is a lot of name dropping of people with little background to explain who they are. You sort of have to piece it together. Also, I found some grammatical errors that any error should easily have found. I am no grammar nazi, so that I noticed them was particularly egregious.

The positive about this book is the sources to which she had access. This gave some unique insights. I particularly liked the part when she looked at someone's undercover police dossier. Many of the reports were illiterate or those of someone bored with the informant job. She also reiterated the point that anti-Semitism still is rampant in Eastern Europe. This is timely given some of the Ukrainian and Russian nationalist groups. Finally, I hadn't really thought much about "lustration," revealing the names of all those who collaborated with the Communists.

John says

Now an associate professor of intellectual history at Yale, Marci Shore spent the first two decades after the fall of Soviet bloc communism in Prague, Warsaw, Bucharest, Moscow, Jerusalem, Toronto, New York City, Stanford, Indiana University, Yale and other venues, always with a focus on Eastern Europe whether she was there or not. This book is hard to define: it's history, it's memoir, it's travel writing, it's not exactly a collection of essays but has that feel.
The travel aspects attracted me the most; Shore seems to have spent a great deal of time talking to people in cafes, and I kept wishing I had been there, too.
Eastern Europe had a traumatic 20th century, caught between Hitler and Stalin, fascism and communism, a rock and a hard place. What I drew from "The Taste of Ashes" is that the traumatic after effects continue to this day. But I got lost in the details, and the more I read the more lost I got. I'm glad I'm not going to have to take a test.
There is, nonetheless, something entrancing about Shore's writing style, and, I, too, am fascinated by Eastern Europe. I really wanted to like this book more than I did.

Luke says

Ultimately disappointing. This is more a travelogue reflecting on the Communist experience in Eastern Europe as the fall of Communism was taking place than a serious piece on the "afterlife of totalitarianism." Reading this work, it's hard to say if this "afterlife" exists at all, as Shore doesn't try to grapple with it. I'm inclined to say that it does, but I just don't know.

Yuliya Yurchuk says

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Betsy says

The NYTimes gave this book a not-great review but I still thought it might be a good up-to-date backgrounder to read as our trip to Eastern Europe approaches. And the author, a young Yale professor, did provide some salient history and insights about some of the countries I or my husband will visit (I came away thinking Romania: most weirdly violent and brutally anti-Semitic; Poland - most fundamentally anti-Semitic). But I wanted SO MUCH MORE and didn't get it. Instead I was frustrated by the author's rather unprofessional (or so it seemed, for a historian) focus on herself and her ramblings through Eastern Europe post 1989. I don't mind first person if it helps articulate points but many of Shore's first person vignettes provided no insights - and I quickly tired of trying to figure out which Polish friend was which that she was meeting for a drink and who cares anyway? I couldn't get a feel for where the book was going; there seemed to be no narrative arc. What chronology there was seemed loosely based solely on tracing her journeys and intellectual pursuits year-by-year not on the HISTORY year-by-year of the region. It's a shame because Shore has spent a lot of time in Eastern Europe and clearly knows it well but she didn't add much to my understanding of the region. She presented lots of vignettes and stories and historical details but didn't come on top of her material and attempt to make sense of Eastern Europe for readres(granted a difficult task). After reading the book, I went back to the NYTimes review and agreed with its criticisms, most keenly with its description of the book/author as "self-involved."

Margaret Sankey says

Although the politics and economy of Eastern Europe changed rapidly after 1989, the people...not so much. Marci Shore first went to Poland and Czechoslovakia in 1993 as an undergraduate student and over the last twenty years has cultivated a wide spectrum of people who trusted her to share their personal experiences. The resulting stories are profoundly sad--the pensioners who didn't particularly like the Communist government, but expected it to care for them and who are now left adrift by the new one, the parents who turned their rebellious teenager in to the secret police and are now begging her to return from America and forgive them, children of 1968 Jews expelled as political scapegoats who return to demand an accounting, neighbors who discovered who was spying on them all these years, elderly victims of Stalinism who want recognition from their time in prison but are ignored by a new generation of people who want to get on with politics, activists who became Catholic to link to Solidarity but who are now disillusioned with the church, underground writers who are upset that the new leaders don't listen to them and the resurgence of Antisemitism and arguments over memorials about the Holocaust. This is not an analysis of the experience as a whole, just individual people over a long trajectory dealing with having been through tumultuous history and come out the other side in a way none of them really expected.

Andrew Davis says

A great disappointment. This is neither a history book nor it covers the aftermath of totalitarianism. Instead, a quite a lot on the war and its aftermath and especially about Jewish people and their lives at that time. Despite the fact that the author travels a lot in Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Ukraine and Russia, and gets access to some archival materials nothing new has been revealed. This book should have been subtitled "A Personal Journey".

Most of the contents are derived from meetings with the relatives of some historical figures - granddaughter of Jan Broniewski, daughter of Wanda Wasilewska, people who knew Berman etc. There is absolutely nothing about changes that affected societies of those countries in nineties and post year 2000. Nothing about how the privatised national property got distributed, what happened to the communist elites, how the security apparatus placed their members in finance industry and made millions by moving "Capital" from their hearts to their pockets.

When talking about post-war communism the author did not mentioned that most of the security apparatus and people in power were jewish communists who came from Russia and imposed themselves on the poor Poles. She did not even mention that those people killed another 100 thousand of Poles to terrify the population to accept communist rule. Nothing about heroes such as Witold Pilecki and others who fought the oppression, people who could not return to their country or were left behind in Siberia. Instead, some peripheral stories about Berman brothers, Broniewski and Wasilewska - people who did nothing for Poland.

It is a shame that such a book can be published and its author being an associate professor of intellectual history. There was none of it in this book. One star for persevering till the very end in ill founded hope of finding something interesting.

Carla Hanna says

The Taste of Ashes is a great memoir from an American woman who wrote a controversial history of Poland and the Holocaust. Important contributions she offers are many: choices are complicated, judgement is hasty, evidence of intentionality lacking, and horrors definite. Humans are capable of genocide because fear trumps action.

What is lacking in the memoir is a clearly defined structure. I do understand why she wrote the memoir as she did, but coming off of reading Madeline Albright's Prague in Winter, I longed for a similar treatment.Madeline Albright

Is this any fault of Shore? I'm not certain. She traveled all over the world: from college studies to Prague, to Israel, to Poland, to Yale, to Slavakia, to Israel, to Russia, etc. etc. So of course her memoir would go all over the place, too, with the question of the role of the Polish Jew/Communist seeming to center the work.

So I thank Shore for her contribution to the study of Totalitarianism: its longevity and ultimately its failure. I am convinced that the Soviets willingly walked away from communism when the leaders embraced the riches of the West and that the efforts of the Eastern Europe dissidents had little impact on each country's

political freedom. Did we have an East European society of cowards and 'greengrocer' bystanders born from fear and compliance or one of survival and sacrifice? Shore focuses more on shaming those who survived although she is certainly empathetic. I tend to accept that 'normal' people just want to get by. Fear changes everything.

James says

I was expecting more of an academic/scholarly examination of the deep sociological/psychological changes among the populations of Central Europe after the collapse of the Communist regimes. Instead, one is presented with an often rambling, more of a personal blog/diary of the author from her student days. Though of interest, these anecdotal descriptions lack in a overall framework. The author jumps from theme to theme, often in the middle of one story. The material is somewhat based on some research she did in archives, but the bulk is based on either her own personal experience or her acquaintances. While perhaps interesting as a memoir of the times and her experiences (indeed often the story relates more around herself and her own reactions to events than the people of the region), the book does not really explore the region or its peoples. If you are looking for a scholarly study of the region and the changes forced upon the peoples by the rapidly changing tide of history, then this book is not for you. If you are looking for a memoir/blog view of those confusing years of hope, joy and disappointment in the early 1990s, you may enjoy this book.

Ryan Uyehara says

I did not expect what this book became. I was expecting a series of impartial vignettes, encounters in the post-Soviet Union. Instead, I found something else. History of a different sort, a more intimate sort, a mix of memoir and chronicle.

This, to me, is a companion piece to Tony Judt's great history, 'Postwar'. Judt sought to capture the entirety of the post-war period of Europe and amazingly, he succeeded. But Judt's is a chronicle, albeit, a moving one. It is deeply liberal and passionate but in the end, at least in my memory, it was a recounting.

Shore, in Taste of Ashes, brings to life the characters, the men, the women, that dotted some of the pages of Postwar. We begin to understand their motivations and more importantly, in the interactions Shore has with them, or their children, or their grandchildren, we begin to capture their legacies. We are witness to the cost that history brought to bear on entire generations, entire people, and entire nations.

I suppose this book mattered more to me than others might have because I read it in Prague, where much of the book is set. Shore visits Lviv, which I had just left, and Kyiv, where I had lived. She, herself, brings a first hand account of these nations, Ukraine, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and others, that were so devastated by totalitarianism. That is something I can relate to.

Indeed, if there's a flaw to this book, it's that Shore sometimes interjects herself too much into the narrative. I felt at times, it became less a story of these generations and these people and more a story of her.

But her lack of partiality, her lack of complete objectivity, is also what makes this such a fantastic book. She makes history human- and that is quite a feat.

Maciek says

The Taste of Ashes: The Afterlife of Totalitarianism in Eastern Europe holds the records for the most misleading title that I encountered this year. Marci Shore is an associate professor at Yale University, where she teaches European cultural and intellectual history. On the more personal note, she is married to a fellow Yale scholar and author of acclaimed books on the history of the region, professor Timothy Snyder. Basing on the title and the author's credentials, I was expecting a well-researched and scholarly work on the subject - the lingering ghost of various totalitarianisms which took shape in Eastern Europe during the 20th century.

I admit that the fault is largely mine for not reading the blurb and just diving right into the book, but even the blurb is misleading and does not prepare the reader for what lies behind the covers of the book. *The Taste of Ashes* is not a scholarly study of totalitarianism, Eastern Europe or pretty much anything, really - the closest comparison I can come up with is a travelogue. Basically, the author took several trips to Eastern Europe, where she was given access to several archives and browsed documents from the period, but mostly talked to people.

Although the book claims to to be about the experience of totalitarianism in Eastern Europe, it is mostly limited to Poland and former Czechoslovakia. The second half of the book focuses on Poland especially, and is the one which I hoped to find to be the most interesting: being Polish myself I wanted to learn what the author discovered in the dusty archives which held the murky past of Polish Stalinism, thankfully now long gone.

Instead, the author shifts focus to the experience of Polish Jews - during the war and in the post-war Stalinist years, and later in independent Poland. She talks to relatives of Polish Jews who became involved in post-war politics - such as Wanda Wasilewska, Jan Broniewski and Jakub Berman - and also to several Jews who have remained in Poland after the collapse of communism, and who struggle with finding their own identity. She also talks to several remarkable individuals, who have shaped Polish politics and culture - the World War II Auschwitz prisoner and resistance fighter W?adys?aw Bartoszewski, who later became the Minister of Foreign Affairs; Marek Edelman, who led the uprising in the Jewish Ghetto in Warsaw in 1943 and later became an author and cardiologist; and Adam Michnik, the son of Polish communists who would later became a major figure among anti-communist dissidents and eventually create and lead what would became Poland's largest newspaper, "Gazeta Wyborcza" (Electoral Newspaper).

Marci Shore has such fascinating interviewees, but the conversations that she has with them are very skin-deep, which is an incredibly missed opportunity to introduce these figures to a wider audience. The format of the book is at least partly to fault here - entire books have been written by, with or about each of these figures, and in a single, slim volume the reader will only get a glimpse of their lives. Shore presents vignettes, snippets and fragment, but the large picture of the afterlife of totalitarianism in Eastern Europe never emerges.

What is Eastern Europe, exactly? In her work Shore completely ignores countries which have also traditionally been seen as the "East", that is the European part of the former Soviet Union - Belarus, Ukraine and Russia. Like Poland and Czechoslovakia, all of these countries have suffered not one, but two totalitarianisms - yet they all are barely mentioned in this book. And these are the countries where, arguably, the afterlife of totalitarianism is most visibly and deeply felt - in Russia, where the initial embrace of democracy turned into disdain for it and the emergence of an autocratic leader; in Ukraine, where the desire

to eliminate the remains of a communist past clashes with the struggle for the national soul as an actual war takes place in the east of the country; and perhaps most in Belarus, which is often said to be "the last dictatorship in Europe", and which is ruled in an almost nostalgically Stalinist style by the same president since 1994 - down to keeping the name of the KGB and organizing a referendum to ditch the new flag and coat of arms, and returned the slightly changed Soviet symbols, and being the only country in Europe which still uses the death penalty.

The subject provides so much opportunity, and it is a real shame that the book delivers so little. Despite blurbs from celebrated and acclaimed authors such as Norman Davies and Anne Applebaum - who called it *"a personal, intellectual, literary and historical tour of contemporary central Europe"* - I honestly cannot recommend it in good faith to anyone interested in the subject, as ultimately the book is more about the author herself rather than the subject matter she choose for her title. It is too disorganized, too fragmented and ultimately too unfocused to match Applebaum's praise and to fully convey its eponymous premise.

???????? says

A really cool romance about falling in love (or at least fascination) with Eastern Europe in all its messed-up glory, and a bildungsdroman about growing into your skin as a scholar.

Sverre says

I had to ask myself several times “why am I reading this book?” But, still, I felt compelled to read it to its end. The author, an American historian specializing in 20th century East European ideological, military and racial conflicts, made numerous excursions to the Czech Republic, Poland and Russia from the mid-1990s to the late 2000s. Her special focus was on the strong connection between the Jewish diaspora and its members’ frequent involvement with communism as directed by Stalin and his Soviet puppet regimes. The persecution of the Jews by the German, the Russian, the Czech, the Slovak, and the Polish authorities, as well as the complicity of just plain common folk in those countries to participate in anti-Semitic behavior prior to, during and after World War II, describes the author’s thematic presentation. The divulging of generational (and sibling) discords and factionalizing in the Jewish population is prominent.

The list of historical figures provides about seventy names. It becomes not a small chore to keep track of them through the book because the author reports findings from historical archives and her own interviews in an anecdotally scattered format, with no chronological order. This is not a deliberate, cohesive, comprehensive study of “the afterlife of totalitarianism in Eastern Europe” as the book’s sub-title purports. For certain, the subject matter is often serious, dramatic and tragic but overall it lacks scholastic gravitas. I was disappointed.

Lada Moskalets says

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Ann says

I had read Shore's Caviar and Ashes for a class and hated it. This book I had gotten for free at a history conference and thought I would give it a shot. I didn't hate it but I didn't really enjoy it either. It was a book of superficial stories worked with with little from the archives. It bounced around Eastern Europe and topics like a pinball machine without much transition. At the end I felt like I hadn't learned anything other than maybe a fact or two here.
