

Intelligence in Public Media

Beyond the Wall: A History of East Germany

Katja Hoyer (Basic Books, 2023), 496 pages, bibliography, endnotes, photos, index.

Retracing the Iron Curtain: A 3,000-Mile Journey Through the End and Afterlife of the Cold War

Timothy Phillips (The Experiment, 2023) 464 pages, bibliography, endnotes, photos, index.

Reviewed by Graham Alexander

Katja Hoyer and Timothy Phillips have compiled separate Cold War histories that invite new interpretations of the decades-long conflict. Only children when the Soviet Union disintegrated, both recount memories of protests and sinister border crossings during the 1980s as the catalysts for lifelong fascination in a struggle traditionally framed as the showdown between market-oriented democracy and socialist dictatorship. Both Hoyer and Phillips have obviously combed through the available literature, but as thirty-something Europeans whose most formative years came after the fall of the Berlin Wall, their accounts wander wide from the ideological paradigms that often characterized the histories of previous generations. Terrorism, sectarian conflict, mass migration, demographic shifts, artificial intelligence, and new authoritarianism since 1989 all have laid to rest the proposition that the collapse of the Eastern Bloc also implied the end of history. Both volumes are a welcome harbinger of new historical perspectives on the last era of global conflict, and perhaps a means of understanding the next one.

Hoyer's *Behind the Wall* shines because of its willingness to reexamine many events long familiar to even amateur historians of Cold War and Eastern bloc history. Hoyer does not soft-pedal the grim realities of the Red Army's mass rapes, its use of former Nazi concentration camps for political prisoners, forced collectivization, mass emigration, and ubiquitous surveillance courtesy of the Ministerium for State Security (the Stasi). She is, however, not content to portray the German Democratic Republic (GDR) as an unremittingly bleak Orwellian hellscape. East Germany's leadership may have been the product of Stalinist paranoia and, until Mikhail Gorbachev arrived, shamelessly beholden to the Kremlin's dictates. Hoyer argues, however, that these men wanted prosperity and believed that socialism would supply it while sidestepping the cauldron of depression and war that had been their formative experience.

East Germany's living standards never outpaced those present in West Germany but many citizens lived well in comparison to the 1914–49 era: basic commodities were cheap, employment was guaranteed, and vacations to the Baltic and Black Seas were affordable. The collapse finally arrived not because of a mass movement that embraced abstract ideas such as freedom, justice, or liberty. Hoyer argues instead that the GDR's people abandoned the socialist experiment because they craved more tangible items like automobiles, Beatles records, and blue jeans visible on West German television or across the ramparts of East Berlin.

Phillips treads similar ground in *Retracing the Iron Curtain*, a kind of travelogue in which he journeys north to south across the former boundaries of Cold War Europe all the way from Kirkenes, Norway, to Nakhichevan, Azerbaijan. Along the way, he conducts revealing interviews with numerous eyewitnesses, all of whom recount fascinating Cold War vignettes not often mentioned in more boilerplate histories. There is, for example, a white-knuckle account of how 4,000 Soviet soldiers marched to the border in Kirkenes in 1968 as part of a feigned invasion to intimidate the Norwegian government. There is the 1961 defection of a submarine captain on the Swedish island of Gotland served as the inspiration for Tom Clancy's *The Hunt for Red October*. Readers are also treated to the tale of how an Italian countess lobbied successfully to move the border so it would keep her estate inside Gorizia, Italy, and outside of Communist Yugoslavia. Occupying authorities benevolently agreed to transfer just beyond her back door.

These and other stories are the selling point of *Retracing the Iron Curtain*, which falters only in the regrettably prevalent occasions when Phillips uses his experiences to segue into political sermons reflecting his often predictable, occasionally trite, perspectives. This is not to say that Phillips's desire to make the Cold War contemporary is mistaken, only that the places and people

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that populate his work are the best tools for this task. Each anecdote is part of a mosaic that captures an important truth also present in Hoyer's work: that history keeps moving at the behest of forces often difficult to define

with any ideological model but inevitably predicated upon the countless dreams, desires, and decisions of individual human beings.^a



The reviewer: Graham Alexander is the pen name of a CIA operations officer.

a. See also Lea Ypi, *Free: A Child and a Country at the End of History* (W.W. Norton & Co., 2021), reviewed in *Studies* 66, no. 2 (June 2022).