# How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed Study Guide

## How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed by Slavenka Drakulić

BOOKRAGS

# Contents

# Plot Summary

How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed was written by author and main character Slavenka Drakulic. Drakulic is a renowned Croatian journalist, novelist and non-fiction writer who, in this book, writes about her experiences under communism and with Eastern European women who lived and suffered under communism. Eastern Europe was ruled by communist regimes, mostly by the Soviets but also by Tito, the dictator of Yugoslavia, for decades. During this time, communism reformed the mindset of many Eastern Europeans. It deprived them of hope, of the ability to expect that things would get better in life, of the will to resist arbitrary and tyrannical power, and of knowledge of the far better material circumstances in the Western world. A theme throughout the book is that communism is not merely a political system but a mindset and that the mindset outlived the regimes that produced it.

Slavenka is born in Croatia in 1949 and goes to school in Zagreb where she studies comparative literature and sociology. She becomes a well-known journalist between 1982 and 1992, writing often about women's issues but from time to time criticizing the communist regime. She becomes internationally known amongst the feminist community and writes about the treatment of women in Eastern Europe, which she views as a true horror. However, Eastern European women are not merely the victims of sexism, but of regimes that prevent them from having even the most basic material means by which to express themselves—make-up, dresses, and even tampons. Further, they make Eastern European women so poor that there are not enough houses for privacy or enough appliances to prevent women from being slaves to their chores.

The book contains nineteen chapters which do not proceed in chronological order. Instead, they are brief character and event sketches meant to illustrate the broader themes of the book. Throughout these chapters we are introduced to many characters, practically all of them women who suffer, live and often die under Eastern European tyrannies. However, few of these women are main characters. The only constant personal presence besides Slavenka is the communitist party, regime and mentality which pervades Eastern European life, mental and physical. The stories and events often focus on the intense connection Slavenka discovers between material things and expressing one's spirit, individuality and femininity. Many chapters cover the significance of particular commodities—soup, washing machines, coffee, pizza, glass jars, make-up, and even a mink coat. The material deprivations of the communist regimes of Eastern Europe repress individuality not only directly through tyranny and forced equalization, but through the mass impoverishment of Eastern European societies. While Slavenka maintains many leftist political positions—feminism, animal rights, environmentalism and a strong sense of social justice, she finds communism a nightmare and freely acknowledges the great benefits of liberal capitalism, not only for the body but for the soul.

# Introduction: The Trivial is Political and Chapter 1: You Can't Drink Your Coffee Alone

## Introduction: The Trivial is Political and Chapter 1: You Can't Drink Your Coffee Alone Summary and Analysis

How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed is inaptly named. The author, Slavenka Drakulic, opens the book considering this as she flies to London on Thursday, June 27th, 1991. On this day, Slovenia and Croatia secede from Yugoslavia, only a year after holding their first free elections in fifty years. War breaks out. Things do not change as much as she had hoped after the fall of Communism. Politicians change, as do names of streets, anthems, etc. But the collective memory and cultural impact of communism cannot be so easily erased.

When communism begins to collapse in 1989, everyone is excited but disoriented with the rapid change. Many are left out of the media presentations of the change, most notably the women who helped their countries to survive. They are not left alone under communism to tend to their own affairs and neither are they under new regimes. Communism becomes a way of thinking, a way of thinking that will linger on long after the regime falls. Democracy and prosperity will not come easily to Eastern Europe. The people will have to create their own bright future.

Slavenka's friend Tanja dies in August 1985. Her death is absurd; she is poisoned by the gas from her own stove in her new apartment at age 36, having trapped herself inside. She is depressed, for her lover died during heart surgery. She was pregnant, but so was her lover's wife, and so he stopped seeing her. She had an abortion. Tanja took 'capitalist' reforms seriously, attempting to start her own private business and criticizing socialism. Her article on these matters upset many. The communist party later forced the newspaper to apologize for printing Tanja's article. Tanja is devastated; the apology makes her feel rejected as a person. She is no longer allowed to publish. The associated depression causes her to commit suicide.

Many in the regime fear instability. After Tito's death in 1980, many are worried that Yugoslavia will splinter, but the regime holds things together. Tanja, however, has no hope. And this is because communism taught her not to hope. Slavenka sees her the day before she commits suicide; she sees Tanja's depression. She later visits Tanja's apartment and cries when she finds Tanja, an atheist, with a Bible, the passages concerning life after death outlined.

# Chapter 2: Pizza in Warsaw, Torte in Prague and Chapter 3: Make-up and other Crucial Questions

## Chapter 2: Pizza in Warsaw, Torte in Prague and Chapter 3: Make-up and other Crucial Questions Summary and Analysis

Jolanta, a Polish-English translator, accompanies Slavenka to a pizza place in Warsaw, a new sort of establishment in Poland. Things have changed and products from America are streaming in. Many respond by elevating their tastes, rather than eating more food. America brings the possibility of sophistication. Resisting food is also a luxury, as Slavenka learns as a child to eat everything placed in front of her as quickly as possible, because it will be taken away.

Slavenka travels to Prague and buys torte before dinner. Torte is not always to be found in Prague. A similar event occurs in Sofia, the Bulgarian capital, with Slavenka's friend Evelina, as an assistant professor at the university there. They have a potato party, with potatoes prepared "one hundred" ways. At dinner, Slavenka, Evelina and Evelina's dinner guests discuss the first opposition newspaper and the first upcoming democratic elections. What amazes them most is that they actually own something. Totalitarian governments insert themselves into all aspects of life; they politicize everything. Slavenka covers these forms of control and the constant food shortages communism brings about—shortages of meat, cheese, and strawberries. In New York, Slavenka goes shopping in a marketplace and thinks of her mother, Zofia, and her friend Jasmina, who both love Swiss chocolates. Slavenka loves cheese and does not know what to do when she is confronted by thirty types in New York.

Slavenka recalls her mother's routine to beautify herself, with the meager make-up supplies available under communism—a few drops of cologne, a single facial cream. Communist governments focus on electrification and industrialization, not make-up. The state, by failing to produce make-up, generates a uniform appearance of those uniformly poor. Slavenka marvels in the United States when Cosmopolitan magazine speaks of using 'natural' make-up; that is all they have in Yugoslavia and they despise it. There is a desperation to express one's uniqueness, but communism makes this difficult, particularly for women. The very presence of a Western magazine like Vogue makes one woman "feel so miserable I could almost cry." Slavenka recounts how happy small amounts of trinkets and make-up she received as a child made her, including sanitary napkins. A movie director, Rumiana, would often take cotton batting to girls at a reform school near Sofia; the girls were grateful, even for objects to which they were entitled.

# Chapter 4: I think of Ulrike this night in November and Chapter 5: On Doing Laundry

## Chapter 4: I think of Ulrike this night in November and Chapter 5: On Doing Laundry Summary and Analysis

Chapter 4 introduces Ulrike, a twenty-seven year old East German woman. She is uninterested in discussing her escape from East Germany with Slavenka. Slavenka asks whether one can ever really escape the communist mindset. Before continuing, Slavenka relates Ulrike's story as told by their mutual friend, a Western German woman named Christianne. Ulrike and a friend try to escape but are caught and sent to prison at the Romanian-Yugoslav border; Ulrike spends a year there and loses all of her hair. Deported eventually to East Germany, Ulrike is again sent to prison; her family is forced to renounce her. But West Germany brings her out of East Germany and Ulrike starts to live in West Berlin. She meets an American professor in India; they get married and come to live in Iowa City.

Slavenka meets Ulrike in 1988; they watch the Berlin Wall fall together. A year later they enjoy a united city together. Slavenka regrets how quickly integration is pursued because it lets many forget what communism did to the minds of the East German people. They require time to change and heal. The place where Ulrike was imprisoned is turned into a museum; Slavenka notes the oddity and sadness that a place where such suffering took place is now a tourist trap; the horror will not be commemorated.

Slavenka recalls the wear and tear of her grandmother's hands from constantly washing dishes, laundry and everything else when Slavenka is a child. She once encounters a Time report about how women in the Eastern bloc still do laundry as they did in the United States fifty years ago. This is true. No cleaning services are allowed, because this is seen as inequality. Slavenka is disturbed that American women cannot even imagine this form of life. Slavenka recounts her first experience with a washing machine. They later wonder about the possibility of a dryer, which her friend Blaga is not even aware of. When Slavenka comes to American she is stunned by how much better American washing machines are than European ones. But when Slavenka is in Eastern Europe, she keeps her washing tub because even under the new democracies, power might go out at any time. The mindset of communism lingers.

# Chapter 6: A Doll that Grew Old and Chapter 7: Forward to the Past

## Chapter 6: A Doll that Grew Old and Chapter 7: Forward to the Past Summary and Analysis

Slavenka visits East Berlin early in the morning to buy various products from Poles. She sees a doll that reminds her of one she received decades ago. Slavenka buys the doll and recalls the past, thirty years ago, when she had the same doll. In her memory, she is traveling on a boat to Italy and is seasick. With a new coat, Slavenka becomes popular when she returns to school. She leaves her doll at home and misses her. The girls of Eastern Europe try to play with dolls to the best of their ability, to imagine a world in which they could be beautiful.

As Slavenka grows up, the doll grows old. Her own daughter, whom Slavenka has taught to be a proud feminist, desires a Barbie for herself. This upsets Slavenka but she realizes the Barbie is a symbol of American freedom and wealth to her daughter. She realizes that imposing her ideology on her daughter would be a small version of what the communists did to them all.

Slavenka finds herself telling her daughter she must use rough toilet paper. Her daughter revolts. Slavenka tells her daughter that she grew up without all the amenities of a more developed economy and that the people were still happy. However, she realizes she is merely repeating a lie the communists told them. As communism falls, eventually the old rough, Golub toilet paper leaves the shelves. Before Golub, Slavenka's family often steals newspapers for toilet paper. Even Golub is a step up for them. In those times, the 1970s, they do not even have deodorant and are only getting used to regular hand-washing, brushing one's teeth and taking a bath. Democracy does not immediately bring new toilet paper either.

# Chapter 8: A Chat with my Censor and Chapter 9: The Strange Ability of Apartments to Divide and Multiply

## Chapter 8: A Chat with my Censor and Chapter 9: The Strange Ability of Apartments to Divide and Multiply Summary and Analysis

Slavenka is a journalist who has to regularly meet with her Censor, Comrade "Inspector M. Officially" from State Security Police. She has become important enough to be assigned a Censor and needs to be controlled. Slavenka has developed many connections with people outside the country, knows philosophers who criticize the state and is a feminist. Her chat with him is unnecessary save to make her question which ideas she will express and which she will not.

Andrea, a thirty-year old university professor lives with her father and his second wife. She is often depressed. She has no hope of living anywhere but in the small flat she currently occupies. The same is true of thirty-one year old Alemka, a journalist, Masa, an economist, Katalin, Jadwiga, and many others. All are trapped in tiny rooms. Apartments do not expand or grow as they do in the United States; they are in constant shortage. The young and unemployed never protest and are constantly cared for by their parents; there is no hope for change. Under communism, apartments begin to divide; people trade spaces in their apartments with one another. Apartments are "mythical objects of worship" because they represent something that one owns.

# Chapter 10: Our Little Stasi and Chapter 11: The Language of Soup

## Chapter 10: Our Little Stasi and Chapter 11: The Language of Soup Summary and Analysis

Slavenka rushes to the telephone bill payment office (the post office), only to find it closing up yet again. When the Berlin wall falls, democracy comes to Croatia. In 1990, the people are notified that paying their telephone bills can occur in private booths. The new president, a former general, remembers the frustrations he experienced at the post office and changes things. Private space becomes increasingly important. Other reforms occur in other new Democracies. Slavenka is stunned at the American telephone system—particularly with the fact that one can change phone companies. The system even works. For Croatia, the phone system is a spy system for state police and rarely works effectively.

Zsuzsa is making soup in a kitchen, where Slavenka is visiting. They are connected by a friend. Zsuzsa and her husband Istvan marry young and have recently graduated, he a teacher and she a translator. They are together for thirteen years and have two children. However, they divorce and Zsuzsa is resigned to the fact that his life will be happier than hers. This is life in Eastern Europe, lives resigned to unhappiness. They cook soup, for instance, because they have little meat; this too is a fact of life, with no hope for change. Slavenka tells us a similar story about a woman, Danuta and her husband Tadeusz. Tadeusz fights for the solidarity movement in Poland but he has to leave the country and she works as a sociologist to support him. Danuta is also hopeless and she also cooks soup. Women in Eastern Europe rarely blame anyone for their troubles. Veronika has a similar story. All three women have husbands who take advantage of them, but they simply take it, not fighting back, because there is no hope in their lives. Communism has taught them never to expect a better life.

# Chapter 12, A Communist Eye or What did I see in New York?

## Chapter 12, A Communist Eye or What did I see in New York? Summary and Analysis

One day at the Subway in New York, Slavenka sees a good muffin on the ground. She instinctively reaches to pick it up. While she restrains herself, she is still baffled that she reacted in that way. Communism programmed her to grab food whenever she could and the instinct had kicked in.

Slavenka starts to notice the homeless on the street and wonders if they lie about their need. Poverty sticks out in America; at home, it is ubiquitous and few are beggars. Americans struggle to solve the beggar problem, but they cannot. Under socialism, there is no charity, so this is not an issue. Her friend Evelina from Bulgaria mentions the same shock at seeing the poor. They also notice the perfect people that appear in advertisements. They notice these things because they have a "communist eye," or the expectation of justice and equality. Communist streets have no beggars because there are no handouts save from the state. Further, prosperity is a kind of absurdity to the community eye. It is overwhelmed by so many choices.

# Chapter 13: A Letter from the United States - The Critical Theory Approach

## Chapter 13: A Letter from the United States - The Critical Theory Approach Summary and Analysis

Slavenka receives a letter from the United States. She is asked to speak about how women have fared in the "velvet revolution." B approaches her before she gives her talk. When Slavenka gives her talk she holds up a sanitary napkin and one Tampax and argues that these are things communist women never had and why communism failed. Some are shocked; Slavenka is not surprised—most in the room are men and leftists. Slavenka always feels right-wing next to them, despite considering herself an honest social democrat. The letter Slavenka receives speaks of the talk. The author wants to write a book about women and democracy from a "Critical Theory" perspective. Slavenka has been invited to contribute an article on women's role in public discourse; the problem is that there is no public discourse and women have no influence. No one argues; no one talks.

Slavenka often finds Western feminists shocking and radical. She does not feel oppressed by the same things as they do. The picture of feminism in Eastern Europe is dramatically bleaker. Slavenka communicates the shocking differences in her reply to B.

# Chapter 14: Some Doubts about Fur Coats and Chapter 15: That Sunday like an Empty Red Balloon

## Chapter 14: Some Doubts about Fur Coats and Chapter 15: That Sunday like an Empty Red Balloon Summary and Analysis

Slavenka decides to buy a fur coat. It looks wonderful on her. However, her conscience reminds her that she is a vegetarian, animal lover and ecologist. She ignores her inner voice from her Eastern European background, urging her to take what she can get. Slavenka recounts a story where a young girl wearing a mink coat in Beograd is chased out of a public bus due to resentment of the coat. A mob forms and tries to burn her coat off. To Slavenka, this illustrates the awful "egalitarian syndrome" that often sparks up due to communist propaganda. The glory of the fur coat is not the fur, but the ability to "buy an image" that will protect you from the gray you must wear under communism.

Slavenka recalls hearing a Castro speech in 1987 in which he declares that the Cuban people cannot even have one car per person. It hurts the environment. In that moment, Slavenka sees the totalitarian impulse in ecology. To force post-consumer norms on a pre-consumer society is simply totalitarian. The fur coat represents freedom. Under communism, people are an endangered species and their interests should be protected as well.

Many of the democratic revolutions in Eastern Europe are joyful, but not the one in Zagreb, Croatia. The people do not much believe in voting, since the communists used it only as a formality. However, this is a genuine vote between multiple parties, the first since the end of World War II. Slavenka recalls her first election at age 18, a complete farce. Only the communists could be voted for and only the communists could win. Photos of Tito were everywhere and all were to be devoted to him. Given this, it is hard to trust the new democratic system.

When the communists lose, no one rejoices. The winning parties do not jump in the streets. Slavenka sees sadness in this but also wonders if it does not meet the arrival of democracy with the appropriate lack of hope in impracticable change.

# Chapter 16: My First Midnight Mass and Chapter 17: On the Quality of Wall Paint in Eastern Europe

## Chapter 16: My First Midnight Mass and Chapter 17: On the Quality of Wall Paint in Eastern Europe Summary and Analysis

Slavenka is taught to be an atheist, like any other good communist child. Her family never celebrates Christmas or Easter. However, sometimes they have a special dinner on those days. She and her brother sometimes receive presents, but they know not to ask why. When her father dies, no priest presides over his funeral. He makes his peace with the Church before he died, however. In 1989, the first public celebration of Christmas in decades is permitted. When his son dies, he wants a religious funeral. Her mother goes to midnight mass for the first time in forty-three years after her husband dies. Slavenka goes with her. The church is packed and most of the people are young. Slavenka is moved by the fact that her mother remembers the liturgy. The priest declares in his sermon that God had liberated them, but Slavenka feels that the people are wondering what took him so long. Slavenka cannot listen anymore and leaves.

In 1987, Slavenka returns to the United States. Things look different. The city is being renewed by the powers that be—new paint, new buildings. However, the improvements only highlight the dilapidation of the city. Slavenka thinks it is shame that Zagreb city officials think that Zagreb has to be made to look like "the rest of the world." Slavenka goes to Budapest and in the morning, their new façade is falling apart. Pollution and bad paint contribute to this image. Slavenka hopes that under democracy, the people of Eastern Europe will be able to reclaim their cities, to "re-privatize them." But the changes to Eastern Europe are coming too quickly and the historical culture and face of Eastern Europe continues to peer through with its sad, solemn spirit.

# Chapter 18: The Day When They Say That War Will Begin

## Chapter 18: The Day When They Say That War Will Begin Summary and Analysis

Slavenka watches CNN from her house, watching the eighth day of the Gulf War. In her country, the presidency has issued an ultimatum to surrender all illegal arms, which many believe will lead to a revolt. Slavenka believes that war will be small and insignificant in the world's eyes. Nationalism is reasserting itself after communist repression; Tito's death has brought it on. In 1990, Croatia and Slovenia split from Yugoslavia. The Serbs want to remain in control politically, however, and they already are militarily. Slavenka is surprised that revolution has brought the possibility of nationalist war. When she goes to the grocery store, she finds that people are clearing out the stores in preparation for the coming onslaught. Slavenka listens to the radio, hearing that the army is on alert; she is terrified, anticipating mass death. However, eventually Slavenka conquers her fear by realizing that the war is already a reality; the fear comes in waiting for it to begin.

# Chapter 19: How We Survived Communism

## Chapter 19: How We Survived Communism Summary and Analysis

Vesna, the daughter of Slavenka's friend, finds that a pair of her stockings has a leg that is ripped. She wants to throw the pair away, but her mother wants her to save it, reflecting the scarcity mentality of communism. Vesna's mother anticipates war. She mentions that this method of saving is how the people survived communism. In fact, Eastern European households became adept at collecting and recycling anything and everything. The Eastern European poor do not recycle as a luxury; they are forced to recycle. They have to stockpile even items meant to be thrown away—like juice bottles. Cans are collected as well, but glass jars are the most valuable. Vesna still cannot break the habit of washing plastic yogurt cups. They also learn to adore the intricacies of foreign products.

Slavenka argues that communism failed because it bred distrust and fear of the future. People live in poverty as an entire country, and this poverty never changes. People collect everything because they do not believe that a regime can provide for people for more than forty years.

# Characters

## Slavenka Drakulic

Slavenka Drakulic is the book's main character; it is written almost exclusively from her perspective. Slavenka is currently a world-renowned Croatian writer and feminist. She is born in Rijeka, Croatia in 1949, under communism in Yugoslavia and earns her degrees in comparative literature and sociology from the University in Zagreb. She then goes to work for ten years at a Croatian political magazine known as Start—a bi-weekly newspaper where she writes news stories and editorials. She always writes for a weekly newspaper, Danas. In both papers, she focuses on feminist issues.

In How We Survived Communism, Slavenka discusses the cultural and economic effects of communism on the women of Eastern Europe. The book consists of her character sketches of different Eastern European women, their struggles and their circumstances. We see Slavenka as a child with her mother, as a mother herself with her own daughter, as a friend and shopper in the United States and as a potential political problem for the Croatian communists due to her journalism. Slavenka is a strident feminist, vegetarian and environmentalist but throughout the book we see sympathy for material things, markets and insight into the totalitarian tendency that can arise out of environmentalism. While remaining true to her values, Slavenka sees that liberal capitalism, despite its flaws, satisfies the deep spiritual and material needs of the vast majority of people by supplying them with ways to express their uniqueness and personality.

## Communists

Many of the book's human characters are inconsequential, other than Slavenka. Most of the time, however, communist officials of one sort or another are present. In one chapter, Slavenka must meet with her communist Censor, who inspects her work for unacceptable ideas. In many cases, Slavenka points out the communist secret police that make privacy impossible. Communist food trucks often produce food shortages and communist leaders promise great things for the people but rarely deliver. Communist leaders like Lenin, Stalin and Tito are often mentioned; they are treated not so much as villains but as centers of power that could not be and were not resisted. Further, communist party members come in for criticism for the faux elections that they run in order to communicate their legitimacy to the outside world.

The communists all have something in common: a desire for the imposition of equality of material possessions at all costs, even if it means the imposition of poverty across the country. They share a fanatical atheism that they forcibly impose on their subjects and they are completely indifferent to the natural human desire for privacy, ownership and self-expression. One of the points of the book is not so much to criticize communism; that is easy enough. Instead, it is to communicate what conditions under

communism are like, how women fare under these regimes and how communist leaders impose a destructive mindset on those they rule, a mindset that persists after the destruction of these leaders' regimes.

## Tanja

Tanja is a Croatian journalist and friend of Slavenka's. An article she wrote that criticized the government leads to her being fired by the Yugoslavian regime. She eventually commits suicide.

## Jolanta

A Polish translator of English that Slavenka spends time with in Warsaw, where they eat pizza and Coke.

## Tito

The dictator of Yugoslavia for decades. When he dies, many fear the coming wars in the Balkans.

## Zofia

Slavenka's mother, who tries to remain beautiful despite the paltry make-up available in Croatia. Slavenka sees her mother's struggle as a struggle to express her individuality.

## Rumiana

A Bulgarian movie director and director of an international organization of women who is a friend of Slavenka's.

## Slavenka's Grandmother

An old Eastern European woman suspicious of washing machines as inadequate for washing clothes.

## Ulrike

An East German woman who is imprisoned for trying to escape the Eastern bloc; Slavenka is introduced to her by a friend.

## Slavenka's daughter

Slavenka has a daughter who has grown up with amenities that Slavenka lacked. One day, she complains to Slavenka about buying cheap toilet paper. As Slavenka begins to rebuke her, she realizes that there is nothing wrong with her daughter's complaint.

# Objects/Places

## Zagreb

The capital of Croatia, location of Slavenka's home and where she receives her degrees.

## Croatia

Slavenka's home country where communism falls in 1989-1990, soon to be replaced by democracy.

## Eastern Europe

Slavenka spends time all over Eastern Europe and speaks of the lives of many women there.

## The United States

Slavenka travels to the United States often and is usually shocked by the great wealth and income disparities there.

## Bulgaria

An Eastern European country Slavenka often visits.

## Sofia

The capital of Bulgaria.

## Yugoslavia

The country ruled by Tito for several decades that decays into civil wars and secessions creating the large number of present-day Balkan states.

## Golub

A communist brand of toilet paper, which is an improvement over newspaper.

## Glass Jars

One of the most valuable "disposable" commodities that the women of Eastern Europe collect.

## Mink Coat

A symbol of freedom to Slavenka, the ability to develop her own personality, despite her vegetarian and animal rights views.

## Make-Up

The way in which women express their individuality in many ways; in Eastern Europe women have few options for make-up choices.

## Soup

Eastern Europeans eat soup often due to constant meat shortages.

## A Communist Eye

The mindset and perspective of many Eastern Europeans, including Slavenka, which gives them the ability to be shocked and sometimes appalled by American wealth and inequality.

## Midnight Mass

The Eastern bloc countries are forced to be atheistic. When communism falls, Christianity often reasserts itself. Midnight Mass is held at Christmastime one year and Slavenka and her mother attend.

# Themes

## The Communist Mindset

Perhaps the most important theme of How We Survived Communism is that communist social institutions are correlated with a communist mindset and that the communist mindset outlives the destruction of communist institutions. When communism fell in the late eighties and early nineties, many in Eastern Europe expected dramatic cultural and economic change. While some countries did get better off, on the whole, things improved more slowly than expected. Slavenka attributes this to a continuing communist mindset. The communist mindset cannot expect life to improve. It has been so disappointed for so long that it sees only danger in hoping for a better life. It is the mindset of the exhausted, those exhausted by wars, poverty and tyranny. It is also the mindset of the terrified. Under communism, many were terrified by the possibility of their family being removed by secret police, of being reported by a neighbor to the secret police, of the government cracking down on rebels or dissidents or of civil or external war. The communist mindset was often one that preferred an equality of poverty to an inequality that made someone worse off. In one case, Slavenka saw a communist mob chase a girl off of a bus just because she had on an old mink coat during the winter, a coat they could not afford. Further, the communist mindset is one that takes no risks. It expects disaster and so stockpiles everything and it does not invest, start businesses, or do anything important that might be lost. For if something could be lost, it would be lost.

## The Struggles of Eastern European Women under Communism

The only major characters in How We Survived Communism are women. We meet women of all ages—Slavenka's grandmother, mother and daughter, her friends and acquaintances of many ages all across Eastern Europe and emigrants to the United States. Slavenka is an ardent feminist who is often asked about the experience of women under communism and after communism in Eastern Europe. One of her points about women under communism is that under communism there is so much social control and so much poverty that women simply cannot hope to be women. Women are raped without consequence, sold into prostitution, beaten by their husbands, forced to have abortions—or not to have them—and so on. However, these crimes do not happen to every woman. What does happen to every woman is that they have no ability to express themselves as women. Communist governments spent few resources planning on the production of make-up or women's clothes or appliances to lessen the load of housework that women must do. Women could not make themselves beautiful according to their own standards. They worked their fingers to the bone just to wash their clothes, they had only the most basic facial creams and much of the make-up they received was so bad that it would often produce odd side-effects, like turning their hair red. Dresses, as well, were in short supply. Most women under communism wore gray

and had few other options. The most tragic thing about all of their struggles, however, is that communism had taught them that there was no point in hoping for a better life, and so they acquiesced to all manner of oppression.

## Why Communism Failed

One of the most powerful moments in How We Survived Communism occurs when Slavenka recalls a speech she gave to a socialist scholars' conference concerning women in Eastern Europe after the collapse of communism. Slavenka announces that she has just come from Bulgaria and pulls one sanitary napkin and one Tampax out of her purse and holds them in the air. She tells the crowd that women in Bulgaria have neither sanitary napkins nor Tampax, and they have never had them. The same goes for women in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania and the Soviet Union. Slavenka argues that the reason communism failed is that because "in the seventy years of its existence, it couldn't fulfill the basic needs of half the population." Her point was not merely that men had few commodities but that women did not even have the most basic modern means of mitigating the difficulties associated with their menstrual cycles. She argues at the end of the book that the communist subject's habit of collecting items meant to be thrown away—yogurt cups, glass jars—was an illustration of the fact that communism taught its people to live in fear and without hope. The people did not trust their regimes, lived in constant poverty and had no hope of any improvement or change. The people expected their society to collapse. No people could endure this kind of suffering when so many superior options were practiced only a few nations to the West.

# Style

## Perspective

Slavenka Drakulic is the author and main character of How We Survived Communism. She was born in Croatia in 1949 and grew up under the communist regime that ruled there until 1990. Slavenka studied comparative literature and sociology at the University in Zagreb in 1976 and wrote for Croatian magazines from 1982 to 1992, where she acquired a reputation as an expert on women's issues, particularly on feminism and the plight of women in Eastern Europe.

Slavenka is an ardent anti-communist. She believes that communism has destroyed not only the material well-being of Eastern Europe but its soul as well. Communism led the peoples of Eastern Europe to despair, uniform poverty and an inability to believe that life could be better than it was at present. As a feminist and a social democrat, Slavenka has a strong sense of social justice that pervades the book. Women are horrifically treated in Eastern Europe, even after the fall of communism. Forced prostitution, rape and pornography are rampant and the feminist community in Eastern Europe could practically fit into a single room. Slavenka is stunned by Western feminists who ask how the movement is progressing in Eastern Europe; there is no movement. However, unlike many feminists, she is an outspoken critic of communism and makes a limited but full-throated defense of market society. Markets produce the wealth not only needed for material well-being but for women to express their uniqueness, individuality and spirituality. Throughout the book, Slavenka focuses on what simple commodities came to represent to Eastern European people. Women did not have reliable access to even basic tampons or reliable make-up, and so were unable to develop their own sense of beauty. Thus, the perspective of Slavenka is mixed—she is both a feminist, yet a strong defender of liberal capitalism.

## Tone

The tone of the book is somber, largely hopeless, but with a small bit of hope. Slavenka regards communism as a disaster for the human race. It has destroyed the soul of the Eastern European people, leading them into a life of despair and hopelessness. Further, communist governments inevitably produced a communist mindset—people who were hostile to any kind of social inequality and that would go to great lengths to suppress individuality as a result; it caused people to stockpile goods because they were constantly afraid of collapse. There was no privacy and no way to express one's individuality because everyone was poor. One of Slavenka's greatest laments is that the end of communism did not bring the end of the communist mindset. While democracy brought some social improvements, many things remained just the same. Slavenka's tone, therefore, is one of somber despair, because she had hoped for things to change quickly but they did not. She, along with so many others, believed that the death of communism would make a new beginning, and while it did in some ways, more things

stayed the same than changed. Thus, we meander through chapters observing the communist mindset amongst Slavenka's family and friends. She records their horrible struggles, their persecution, suicide, poverty, and inability to express themselves religiously and socially, always seeing an attitude of despair, hopelessness and acquiescence to an impoverished existence. Slavenka, however, does believe that the communist mindset can be overcome, but she believes that this will be a long time in the making.

## Structure

The structure of How We Survived Communism is not chronological. The period of the book ranges from Slavenka's childhood in the 1950s to her experience with the fall of communism in the early 1990s. But chapters jump back and forth between time periods, sometimes in the 1950s, others in the 1990s, still others in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. The book has nineteen chapters and an introduction, all of which are relatively short. The chapters consist mostly of character sketches. Slavenka describes a memory or event in the life of an Eastern European woman who is either a family member, a friend or an acquaintance. Each character sketch is meant to illustrate the ways in which women endured communist oppression. Further, many chapters illustrate this oppression through discussing the symbolic meaning of commodities. For instance, in Chapter 2, "Pizza in Warsaw, Torte in Prague," Slavenka describes the coming of new Western food to the former communist bloc. It represented a new world. However, Chapter 3, "Make-Up and Other Crucial Questions," discusses the terrible paucity of make-up in Eastern Europe under communism that prevented women from expressing themselves both as women and as individuals. Chapter 5 describes the significance of the washing machine (which represent the time freed up to avoid menial chores), Chapter 9 of apartments (which represent the possibility of privacy and ownership in a communist society), Chapter 11 of soup (which represents the constant food shortages (particularly of meat) under communism) and so on. However, the book usually returns to 1989, 1990 and 1991 where Slavenka reflects on the significance of the events she relates in each chapter. It should also be noted that the references to the early 1990s come only in the second edition, as the book's first edition was released in 1987.

# Quotes

"The end of communism is still remote because communism, more than a political ideology or a method of government, is a state of mind." (xvi-xvii)

"No, this is not possible; this must be some terrible mistake." (5)

"But here Coke, like everything coming from America, is more of a symbol than a beverage." (13)

"In a totalitarian society, one has to relate to the power directly; there is no escape. Therefore, 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)

"In the five-year central plans made by men, of course there was no place for such trivia as cosmetics." (22-23)

"She lost all her hair in prison." (34)

"I concluded that what disturbed me was the fact that the reporter had to explain to her American readers that there is still a part of the world where clothes are washed in tubs, by hand, and hung outdoors." (47)

"It took me time to see that any kind of ideology could reduce us to poverty and emotional suffering." (64)

"Orwell exploited the uneasy feeling we all had. An apartment, however small, however crowded with people and things, kids and animals, is 'ours.'" (91)

"What is public is of the enemy." (92)

"Just how many 'iron curtains' still exist? What are they made of? Sometimes it seems to me they are made of a material stronger than iron itself: our memories." (113)

"I have just come from Bulgaria and believe me, women there don't have either napkins or Tampaxes—they never had them, in fact. Nor do women in Poland, or Czechoslovakia, much less in the Soviet Union or Romania. This I hold as one of the proofs of why communism failed, because in the seventy years of its existence it couldn't fulfill the basic needs of half the population." (124)

"I am the child of a Yugoslav army officer who was a communist, so everything was perfectly clear from the state: God does not exist, religion is the opium of the people, and churches are nothing more than monuments of history and culture." (152)

"Maybe only now ... will we have a chance to repossess our cities, re-privatize them, treat them as if they are not merely places we are sentenced to be in or which we only pass through." (166)

"If the politicians had only had a chance to peek into our closets, cellars, cupboards, and drawers—looking not for forbidden books or anti-state material—they would have seen the future that was in store for their wonderful plans for communism itself. But they didn't look." (189)

# Topics for Discussion

Do you think Slavenka's commitments to left-wing social ideas and relatively right-wing economic ideas are in tension with one another? Why or why not?

What is the communist mindset? How does Slavenka think one gets rid of it?

Why was Slavenka not optimistic about democratic government in Eastern Europe?

What was Slavenka's attitude about the treatment of women in Eastern Europe? What were some feminist complaints that resonated with her? What were some feminist complaints that did not?

What is the role of commodities in How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed? Do they have a spiritual dimension? If so, what is it?

What is the significance of the mink coat? Of make-up? Of Slavenka's doll? What do they all represent to Eastern European women like Slavenka?

Why do you think the vast majority of characters in the book are women?