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How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed: Women and Communism

by Sophie Shukin

(History 2235)

S lavenka Drakulic wrote *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed*, to describe the hardships of life during the communist era in Eastern Europe. Drakulic's emotional account of life during communist times includes the lack of everyday products, the cramped living situations in Eastern Europe, and the oppressive behaviors of the communist government towards individuality. Although the communist government's ideology on equality of sexes and individualism affected men, Drakulic mainly focuses on the negative affects the flawed ideology had on women in the work place, in their personal lives, and how it inhibited their individuality and feminism.

In 1945, the Soviet Union that had conquered many Eastern European countries during World War II began implementing new governmental rules. The communist party promised their form of government would be better than any other, and if the people living under communist rule were patient, they would eventually have better lives with plenty of food, clothes, and spacious living areas. This, however, was not the case. As Drakulic shows throughout her book, the communist government focused on creating weapons of war, and they lacked severely in the production of basic products. Also, as part of the better-living campaign, newly established Eastern European countries under Soviet communist rule attempted to create equality of the sexes. However, instead of creating the utopian society that they envisioned, the communist ideology was shown to be flawed because of sexism that was still prevalent in the society.

Drakulic addresses the communist ideology of equal sexes by describing the flaws it has regarding men, women and work. Although the communist government tried to create equality of sexes, there were many questions about types of work that were not easily answered, like who would do the house work, and who would do the office work. Drakulic says herself, that "... What is one supposed to call hand-washing of laundry, scrubbing floors, or ironing? The answer is: just women's work" (Drakulic 46). This quote shows that although the communists strove for equality, their ideals would never be met because of ingrained sexism towards women.

In *Women, Communism, and Industrialization in Postwar Poland*, Malgorzata Fidelis also describes the flaws in the communist vision of equality. Fidelis depicts a female industrial worker in Poland as "wearing an "unsexed" uniform that diminished her physical differences from men" (Fidelis 21). Thus, sexism against women in communist countries was prevalent, and the realization that the communist government did not know what to do with women to make them equal, created an upheaval in traditional gender roles that destabilized both men and women.

The effects of the social destabilization of gender roles can be seen notably in the personal lives of men and women in communist countries. Drakulic gives many examples of men and women getting divorced, pointing out that a woman's struggle with sexism and suppressed individuality was often the cause of divorce. Drakulic says that a divorced woman "was hurt, because his life was more fulfilled than hers..." (Drakulic 107). Kate Weigand, the author of *Red Feminism* refers to the poet and writer Eve Merriam who wrote much about women's oppression during communism. She says that Merriam "refuted the myths that women dominate men, that they are naturally submissive and dependent, and that their proper place is in the home. Merriam decried the prevalence of sexism in traditional customs, mass culture, and language patterns" (Weigand 144).

Drakulic quotes a newly divorced woman saying, "When there is no space in society to

express your individuality, the family becomes the only territory in which you can form it... But a family is too limiting..." (Drakulic 107). This quote shows how the suppressive behaviors of the communist government towards individualism affected the personal lives of women to the point where there was no escape. Although women found they have the most individuality away from their family, Drakulic points out that they would never be fully happy because of the suppression of individuality by the communist government. One problem women had when trying to be individuals was the lack of makeup, hair products, and clothes that they could use to distinguish themselves. Drakulic sums this up by saying, "Without a choice of cosmetics and clothes... 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" (Drakulic 23).

Even though there was no chance for women or men to have individuality, Drakulic shows how women tried to avoid uniformity by fighting a constant battle. "To avoid uniformity, you have to work very hard: you have to bribe a salesgirl, wait in line for some imported product, buy blue jeans on the black market and pay your whole month's salary for them..." (Drakulic 26). Women strove to be individuals in the communist era, but since it was such a hard task, so many women found that they all ended up looking the same.

The battle for individualism in communist times was the same as the battle for feminism. Both constant battles were striving for individuality and the release from sexism, but because of the society and the government, both were futile. According to Drakulic however, she and her friends continued to pursue the vision of equality of sexes without sexism. Drakulic says that even though communism would not allow it, "...That didn't stop us from deciding to form our own group, the first feminist group in Yugoslavia" (Drakulic 128). The women organized and published articles, but they were soon attacked by other women's organizations. Drakulic remembers how the feminists were treated, as an enemy of the state. Men divorced their wives, and many feminists received threatening letters. The feminists continued to meet however, and Drakulic says that, "... It was lonely being one of a few feminists twelve years ago..." (Drakulic 129).

How we Survived Communism and Even Laughed, by Slavenka Drakulic, tells the story of living in Eastern Europe during communist times. Drakulic recounts the hardships of life without every day products, tight living situations and the suppressive government's stance towards individuality. One of Drakulic's main focuses is on the flaws in the communist ideology towards equality of sexes and individuality, and how it affected women's work, marriage and feminism. She shows that because sexism was ingrained in society, and individuality was impossible, many women turned to illegal activities to get imported cosmetics, many became divorced, and some joined feminist groups, always to get away from the uniformity that suppressed them.

Literature Cited

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