

BOOKS AND ARTS



Destination where?

HOW WE SURVIVED COMMUNISM AND EVEN LAUGHED. By Slavenka Drakulic. Hutchinson; 193 pages; £15.99. To be published in March by W.W. Norton; \$22.95

IT WAS lavatory paper, it seems, that doomed communism in Eastern Europe. Once people discovered that a kinder, gentler alternative existed, it was the end for Honecker, Ceausescu and co. Of course, communism failed to provide all kinds of things in proper quality or quantity; but as Slavenka Drakulic points out, women turned against the old regimes for just such delicate reasons.

Talking to women in Czechoslovakia, Poland, Bulgaria and East Germany at the beginning of 1990, Miss Drakulic, a Yugoslav novelist, finds similar complaints and survival techniques throughout Eastern Europe. To live under communism was a process of everyday dehumanisation, and she captures it sharply. At the Post Office, for example,

it was perfectly normal not only to have to wait in line pressed tightly together, but to peer at each other's documents, accounts, letters and bills quite shamelessly... Asking for the right to privacy meant you had something to hide. And hiding something meant it was forbidden. If it was forbidden, it must have been against the state. Finally, if it was against the state, you must have been an enemy.

One of the first reforms made by the new Yu-

goslav government was to introduce a yellow line in post offices, behind which people had to wait before they approached the counter.

Apart from the inevitable problems of shortages, women were united by a constant hankering after anything regarded as western. Even drinking from a Coke bottle became a symbolic gesture. Watching a young man eating a banana, Miss Drakulic becomes lyrical: "It was not a banana he was eating, but the promise, the hope of the future."

When the Berlin Wall finally broke, and items from the West flooded into Eastern Europe, women were both delighted and confused. The new order brought not only fruit and tampons but also pornographic posters, which were proudly displayed in buses, taxis and private homes as trophies of free expression. This was rather shocking to feminists, who are now busy trying to sort out sexist oppression from the old communist kind. "It's hard", Miss Drakulic writes,

to see [men] as an opposite force, hard to confront them as enemies. Perhaps because everyone's identity is denied, we want to see them as persons, not as a group or category, or a mass... we are not able entirely to distinguish

us from them, and all of us together from it. So, in our kitchens, while the soup is boiling, what we talk about is identity.

Which must make for a lot of spilled soup.

Many East Europeans refuse to surrender their unrealistic hopes for capitalism, and Miss Drakulic is one of them. Her idea of living standards in the West is still hugely inflated. She appears to believe that only under communism do women recycle things out of economic necessity. "A nice, strong shoe box can have several purposes," she informs the reader, as though no woman in the West would realise that.

Similarly, Miss Drakulic still clings to a cloudy and romantic view of democracy. She can understand why telephone booths and parking meters were vandalised in the East—obviously, it was because people were frustrated with socialism—but she is shocked and bewildered to find the same thing in the West, where there seems no reason for it. She is shocked, too, to encounter beggars in New York. Perhaps, she reasons, westerners cannot see them there; perhaps only those people from the East, who possess a "communist eye", are alert to the presence of vagrants in the street. "Like a third, spiritual eye placed in the middle of one's forehead, this eye scans only a certain type of phenomenon; it is selective for injustice."

Old communist habits die hard, not least sanctimony. Despite her infatuation with the West and all its consumer goodies, Miss Drakulic has a strong inkling that freedom can be terrible; she concedes that, for all its destruction, communism offered her native Yugoslavia (and other countries) some sort of cohesion, and a brutal guarantee against tribal warfare.

On a more humdrum level, too, she is never far from the piety of the old order. "I am not tempted to buy a dryer," she declares. "I think I will always hang my clothes outside for the sheer poetry of it." She goes on to tread imperiously on modern western sensibilities: "Before [East European women] give up their fur coats, they certainly want to have them, at least for a while." In her opinion, ecologists have no right to force "a green totalitarianism on us, telling us what to eat, wear and think."

In short, Miss Drakulic believes that the emerging democracies have earned certain allowances for what they suffered in the past. They cannot be expected to become politically correct overnight. And the long-suffering housewives of Eastern Europe surely deserve to take pride in their triumphs, before capitalism breeds a new kind of sourness in them.