



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

Timothy Phillips

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Timothy Phillips visits strategic points along the former Soviet border in his travelogue *Retracing the Iron Curtain*.

The Iron Curtain was an ideological and physical barrier that cut Europe into East and West for decades. Though the Cold War is now over, traces of the Curtain remain, both in the landscape and in people's memories. By following the full 3,000-mile route of that barrier, Phillips brings to light the historical events—some grandiose, but many small enough for an individual to spark them—that helped to define the second half of the twentieth century and the modern world.

Phillips's remarkable travels take him from Norway's northernmost tip, where locals on both sides of the border enjoy cordial commercial relations despite lingering political tensions, to a haunting Azerbaijani city that is filled with tributes to the nation's ruling family but almost devoid of people. At each stop, he unveils more of the continent's turbulent history, from wars and annexations to daring escapes and cultural erasure. He speaks with ordinary people who lived in the Iron Curtain's long shadow. Their recollections make it plain that Cold War battle lines were not as clear-cut as each side's propaganda implied.

The story of the Iron Curtain remains relevant today as Western nations grow more nostalgic for communist authoritarianism and more xenophobic toward contemporary refugees. In some places, Phillips's narrative takes on a prophetic quality in light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. By turns painful and poignant, *Retracing the Iron Curtain* is much more than a simple travelogue or history: it is a love letter to human kindness and a plea for decency in the face of indecent, inhumane government oppression.

Retracing the Iron Curtain is a fascinating, nuanced travel narrative about the history and legacy of Europe's most infamous border.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (March / April 2023)

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