

ON TYRANNY

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FROM THE
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ON TYRANNY

Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century

TIMOTHY SNYDER



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In politics, being deceived is no excuse.

—LESZEK KOŁAKOWSKI

1. Do not obey in advance.

2. Defend institutions.

3. Beware the one-party state.

4. Take responsibility for the face of the world.

5. Remember professional ethics.

6. Be wary of paramilitaries.

7. Be reflective if you must be armed.

8. Stand out.

9. Be kind to our language.

10. Believe in truth.

11. Investigate.

12. Make eye contact and small talk.

13. Practice corporeal politics.

14. Establish a private life.

15. Contribute to good causes.

16. Learn from peers in other countries.

17. Listen for dangerous words.

18. Be calm when the unthinkable arrives.

19. Be a patriot.

20. Be as courageous as you can.

Prologue

History and Tyranny

History does not repeat, but it does instruct. As the Founding Fathers debated our Constitution, they took instruction from the history they knew. Concerned that the democratic republic they envisioned would collapse, they contemplated the descent of ancient democracies and republics into oligarchy and empire. As they knew, Aristotle warned that inequality brought instability, while Plato believed that demagogues exploited free speech to install themselves as tyrants. In founding a democratic republic upon law and establishing a system of checks and balances, the Founding Fathers sought to avoid the evil that they, like the ancient philosophers, called *tyranny*. They had in mind the usurpation of power by a single individual or group, or the circumvention of law by rulers for their own benefit.

Much of the succeeding political debate in the United States has concerned the problem of tyranny within American society: over slaves and women, for example.

It is thus a primary American tradition to consider history when our political order seems imperiled. If we worry today that the American experiment is threatened by tyranny, we can follow the example of the Founding Fathers and contemplate the history of other democracies and republics. The good news is that we can draw upon more recent and relevant examples than ancient Greece and Rome. The bad news is that the history of modern democracy is also one of decline and fall. Since the American colonies declared their independence from a British monarchy that the Founders deemed “tyrannical,” European history has seen three major democratic moments: after the First World War in 1918, after the Second World War in 1945, and after the end of communism in 1989. Many of the democracies founded at these junctures failed, in circumstances that in some important respects resemble our own.

History can familiarize, and it can warn. In the late nineteenth century, just as

in the late twentieth century, the expansion of global trade generated expectations of progress. In the early twentieth century, as in the early twenty-first, these hopes were challenged by new visions of mass politics in which a leader or a party claimed to directly represent the will of the people. European democracies collapsed into right-wing authoritarianism and fascism in the 1920s and '30s. The communist Soviet Union, established in 1922, extended its model into Europe in the 1940s. The European history of the twentieth century shows us that societies can break, democracies can fall, ethics can collapse, and ordinary men can find themselves standing over death pits with guns in their hands. It would serve us well today to understand why.

Both fascism and communism were responses to globalization: to the real and perceived inequalities it created, and the apparent helplessness of the democracies in addressing them. Fascists rejected reason in the name of will,

denying objective truth in favor of a glorious myth articulated by leaders who claimed to give voice to the people. They put a face on globalization, arguing that its complex challenges were the result of a conspiracy against the nation. Fascists ruled for a decade or two, leaving behind an intact intellectual legacy that grows more relevant by the day. Communists ruled for longer, for nearly seven decades in the Soviet Union, and more than four decades in much of eastern Europe. They proposed rule by a disciplined party elite with a monopoly on reason that would guide society toward a certain future according to supposedly fixed laws of history.

We might be tempted to think that our democratic heritage automatically protects us from such threats. This is a misguided reflex. In fact, the precedent set by the Founders demands that we examine history to understand the deep sources of tyranny, and to consider the proper responses to it. Americans today are no wiser than the Europeans who saw democracy yield to fascism, Nazism, or communism in the twentieth century. Our one advantage is that we might learn from their experience. Now is a good time to do so.

This book presents twenty lessons from the twentieth century, adapted to the circumstances of today.

1

Do not obey in advance.

Most of the power of authoritarianism is freely given. In times like these, individuals think ahead about what a more repressive government will want, and then offer themselves without being asked. A citizen who adapts in this way is teaching power what it can do.

Anticipatory obedience is a political tragedy. Perhaps rulers did not initially know that citizens were willing to compromise this value or that principle. Perhaps a new regime did not at first have the direct means of influencing citizens one way or another. After the German elections of 1932, which permitted Adolf Hitler to form a government, or the Czechoslovak elections of 1946, where communists were victorious, the next crucial step was anticipatory obedience. Because enough people in both cases voluntarily extended their services to the new leaders, Nazis and communists alike realized that they could move quickly toward a full regime change. The first heedless acts of conformity could not then be reversed.

In early 1938, Adolf Hitler, by then securely in power in Germany, was threatening to annex neighboring Austria. After the Austrian chancellor conceded, it was the Austrians' anticipatory obedience that decided the fate of Austrian Jews.

Local Austrian Nazis captured Jews and forced them to scrub the streets to remove symbols of independent Austria. Crucially, people who were not Nazis looked on with interest and amusement. Nazis who had kept lists of Jewish property stole what they could. Crucially, others who were not Nazis joined in the theft. As the political theorist Hannah Arendt remembered, "when German troops invaded the country and Gentile neighbors started riots at Jewish homes, Austrian Jews began to commit suicide."

The anticipatory obedience of Austrians in March 1938 taught the high Nazi leadership what was possible. It was in Vienna that August that Adolf Eichmann established the Central Office for Jewish Emigration. In November 1938, following the Austrian example of March, German Nazis organized the national pogrom known as *Kristallnacht*.

In 1941, when Germany invaded the Soviet Union, the SS took the initiative to devise the methods of mass killing without orders to do so. They guessed

what their superiors wanted and demonstrated what was possible. It was far more than Hitler had thought.

At the very beginning, anticipatory obedience means adapting instinctively, without reflecting, to a new situation. Do only Germans do such things? The Yale psychologist Stanley Milgram, contemplating Nazi atrocities, wanted to show that there was a particular authoritarian personality that explained why Germans behaved as they had. He devised an experiment to test the proposition, but failed to get permission to carry it out in Germany. So he undertook it instead in a Yale

University building in 1961—at around the same time that Adolf Eichmann was being tried in Jerusalem for his part in the Nazi Holocaust of the Jews.

Milgram told his subjects (some Yale students, some New Haven residents) that they would be applying an electrical shock to other participants in an experiment about learning. In fact, the people attached to the wires on the other side of a window were in on the scheme with Milgram, and only pretended to be shocked. As the subjects (thought they) shocked the (people they thought were) participants in a learning experiment, they saw a horrible sight. People whom they did not know, and against whom they had no grievance, seemed to be suffering greatly—pounding the glass and complaining of heart pain. Even so, most subjects followed Milgram's instructions and continued to apply (what they thought were) ever greater shocks until the victims appeared to die. Even those who did not proceed all the way to the (apparent) killing of their fellow human beings left without inquiring about the health of the other participants.

Milgram grasped that people are remarkably receptive to new rules in a new setting. They are surprisingly willing to harm and kill others in the service of some new purpose if they are so instructed by a new authority. "I found so

much obedience,” Milgram remembered, “that I hardly saw the need for taking the experiment to Germany.”

2

Defend institutions.

It is institutions that help us to preserve decency. They need our help as well. Do not speak of “our institutions” unless you make them yours by acting on their behalf. Institutions do not protect themselves. They fall one after the other unless each is defended from the beginning. So choose an institution you care about—a court, a newspaper, a law, a labor union—and take its side.

We tend to assume that institutions will automatically maintain themselves against even the most direct attacks. This was the very mistake that some German Jews made about Hitler and the Nazis after they had formed a government. On February 2, 1933, for example, a leading newspaper for German Jews published an editorial expressing this mislaid trust:

We do not subscribe to the view that Mr. Hitler and his friends, now finally in possession of the power they have so long desired, will implement the proposals circulating in [Nazi newspapers]; they will not suddenly deprive German Jews of their constitutional rights, nor enclose them in ghettos, nor subject them to the jealous and murderous impulses of the mob. They cannot do this because a number of crucial factors hold powers in check... and they clearly do not want to go down that road. When one acts as a European power, the whole atmosphere tends towards ethical reflection upon one's better self and away from revisiting one's earlier oppositional posture.

Such was the view of many reasonable people in 1933, just as it is the view of many reasonable people now. The mistake is to assume that rulers who came to power through institutions cannot change or destroy those very institutions—even when that is exactly what they have announced that they will do. Revolutionaries sometimes do intend to destroy institutions all at once. This was the approach of the Russian Bolsheviks. Sometimes institutions are deprived of vitality and function, turned into a simulacrum of what they once were, so that they gird the new order rather than resisting it. This is what the Nazis called *Gleichschaltung*.

It took less than a year for the new Nazi order to consolidate. By the end of 1933, Germany had become a one-party state in which all major institutions had been humbled. That November, German authorities held parliamentary elections (without opposition) and a referendum (on an issue where the “correct” answer was known) to confirm the new order. Some German Jews voted as the Nazi leaders wanted them to in the hope that this gesture of loyalty would bind the new system to them. That was a vain hope.

3

Beware the one-party state.

The parties that remade states and suppressed rivals were not omnipotent from the start. They exploited a historic moment to make political life impossible for their opponents. So support the multi-party system and defend the rules of democratic elections.

Vote in local and state elections while you can. Consider running for office.

Thomas Jefferson probably never said that “eternal vigilance is the price of liberty,” but other Americans of his era certainly did. When we think of this

saying today, we imagine our own righteous vigilance directed outward, against misguided and hostile others. We see ourselves as a city on the hill, a stronghold of democracy, looking out for threats that come from abroad. But the sense of the saying was entirely different: that human nature is such that American democracy must be defended from *Americans* who would exploit its freedoms to bring about its end. The American abolitionist Wendell Phillips did in fact say that “eternal vigilance is the price of liberty.” He added that “the manna of popular liberty must be gathered each day or it is rotten.”

The record of modern European democracy confirmed the wisdom of those words. The twentieth century saw earnest attempts to extend the franchise and establish durable democracies. Yet the democracies that arose after the First World War (and the Second) often collapsed when a single party seized power in some combination of an election and a coup d'état. A party emboldened by a favorable election result or motivated by ideology, or both, might change the system from within. When fascists or Nazis or communists did well in elections in the 1930s or

'40s, what followed was some combination of spectacle, repression, and salami tactics—slicing off layers of opposition one by one. Most people were distracted, some were imprisoned, and others were outmatched.

The hero of a David Lodge novel says that you don't know, when you make love for the last time, that you are making love for the last time. Voting is like that.

Some of the Germans who voted for the Nazi Party in 1932 no doubt understood that this might be the last meaningfully free election for some time, but most did not. Some of the Czechs and Slovaks who voted for the Czechoslovak Communist Party in 1946 probably realized that they were voting for the end of democracy, but most assumed they would have another

chance. No doubt the Russians who voted in 1990 did not think that this would be the last free and fair election in their country's history, which (thus far) it has been. Any election can be the last, or at least the last in the lifetime of the person casting the vote. The Nazis remained in power until they lost a world war in 1945, the Czechoslovak communists until their system collapsed in 1989. The Russian oligarchy established after the 1990

elections continues to function, and promotes a foreign policy designed to destroy democracy elsewhere.

Does the history of tyranny apply to the United States? Certainly the early Americans who spoke of "eternal vigilance" would have thought so. The logic of the system they devised was to mitigate the consequences of our real imperfections, not to celebrate our imaginary perfection. We certainly face, as did the ancient Greeks, the problem of oligarchy—ever more threatening as globalization increases differences in wealth. The odd American idea that giving money to political campaigns is free speech means that the very rich have far more speech, and so in effect far more voting power, than other citizens. We believe that we have checks and balances, but have rarely faced a situation like the present: when the less popular of the two parties controls every lever of power at the federal level, as well as the majority of statehouses. The party that exercises such control proposes few policies that are popular with the society at large, and several that are generally unpopular—and thus must either fear democracy or weaken it.

Another early American proverb held that "where annual elections end, tyranny begins." Will we in retrospect see the elections of 2016 much as Russians see the elections of 1990, or Czechs the elections of 1946, or Germans the elections of 1932? This, for now, depends upon us. Much needs to be done to fix the gerrymandered system so that each citizen has one equal vote, and so that each vote can be simply counted by a fellow citizen. We need paper ballots, because they cannot be tampered with remotely and

can always be recounted. This sort of work can be done at the local and state levels. We can be sure that the elections of 2018, assuming they take place, will be a test of American traditions. So there is much to do in the meantime.

4

Take responsibility for the

face of the world.

The symbols of today enable the reality of tomorrow. Notice the swastikas and the other signs of hate. Do not look away, and do not get used to them. Remove them yourself and set an example for others to do so.

Life is political, not because the world cares about how you feel, but because the world reacts to what you do. The minor choices we make are themselves a kind of vote, making it more or less likely that free and fair elections will be held in the future. In the politics of the everyday, our words and gestures, or their absence, count very much. A few extreme (and less extreme) examples from the twentieth century can show us how.

In the Soviet Union under the rule of Joseph Stalin, prosperous farmers were portrayed on propaganda posters as pigs—a dehumanization that in a rural setting clearly suggests slaughter. This was in the early 1930s, as the Soviet state tried to master the countryside and extract capital for crash industrialization. The peasants who had more land or livestock than others were the first to lose what they had. A neighbor portrayed as a pig is someone whose land you can take. But those who followed the symbolic logic became victims in their turn. Having turned the poorer peasants against the richer, Soviet power then seized everyone's land for the new collective farms. Collectivization, when completed, brought starvation to much of the Soviet

peasantry. Millions of people in Soviet Ukraine, Soviet Kazakhstan, and Soviet Russia died horrible and humiliating deaths between 1930 and 1933. Before it was over, Soviet citizens were butchering corpses for human meat.

In 1933, as the starvation in the USSR reached its height, the Nazi Party came to power in Germany. In the euphoria of victory, Nazis tried to organize a boycott of Jewish shops. This was not very successful at first. But the practice of marking one firm as “Jewish” and another as “Aryan” with paint on the windows or walls did affect the way Germans thought about household economics. A shop marked “Jewish” had no future. It became an object of covetous plans. As property was marked as ethnic, envy transformed ethics. If shops could be “Jewish,” what about other companies and properties? The wish that Jews might disappear, perhaps suppressed at first, rose as it was leavened by greed. Thus the Germans who marked shops as “Jewish” participated in the process by which Jews really did disappear—as did people who simply looked on. Accepting the markings as a natural part of the urban landscape was already a compromise with a murderous future.

You might one day be offered the opportunity to display symbols of loyalty.

Make sure that such symbols include your fellow citizens rather than exclude them.

Even the history of lapel pins is far from innocent. In Nazi Germany in 1933, people wore lapel pins that said “Yes” during the elections and referendum that confirmed the one-party state. In Austria in 1938, people who had not previously been Nazis began to wear swastika pins. What might seem like a gesture of pride can be a source of exclusion. In the Europe of the 1930s and '40s, some people chose to wear swastikas, and then others had to wear yellow stars.

The late history of communism, when no one believed in the revolution anymore, offers a final lesson about symbols. Even when citizens are demoralized and wish only to be left alone, public markers can still sustain a tyrannical regime.

When Czechoslovak communists won elections in 1946 and then proceeded to claim full power after a coup in 1948, many Czechoslovak citizens were euphoric.

When the dissident thinker Václav Havel wrote “The Power of the Powerless”

three decades later, in 1978, he was explaining the continuity of an oppressive regime in whose goals and ideology few people still believed. He offered a parable of a greengrocer who places a sign reading “Workers of the world, unite!” in his shop window.

It is not that the man actually endorses the content of this quotation from *The Communist Manifesto*. He places the sign in his window so that he can withdraw into daily life without trouble from the authorities. When everyone else follows the same logic, the public sphere is covered with signs of loyalty, and resistance becomes unthinkable. As Havel put it:

We have seen that the real meaning of the greengrocer’s slogan has nothing to do with what the text of the slogan actually says. Even so, the real meaning is quite clear and generally comprehensible because the code is so familiar: the greengrocer declares his loyalty in the only way the regime is capable of hearing; that is, by accepting the prescribed ritual, by accepting appearances as reality, by accepting the given rules of the game, thus making it possible for the game to go on, for it to exist in the first place.

And what happens, asked Havel, if no one plays the game?

Remember professional**ethics.**

When political leaders set a negative example, professional commitments to just practice become more important. It is hard to subvert a rule-of-law state without lawyers, or to hold show trials without judges. Authoritarians need obedient civil servants, and concentration camp directors seek businessmen interested in cheap labor.

Before the Second World War, a man named Hans Frank was Hitler's personal lawyer. After Germany invaded Poland in 1939, Frank became the governor-general of occupied Poland, a German colony where millions of Jews and other Polish citizens were murdered. He once boasted that there were not enough trees to make the paper for posters that would be needed to announce all of the executions. Frank claimed that law was meant to serve the race, and so what seemed good for the race was therefore the law. With arguments like this, German lawyers could convince themselves that laws and rules were there to serve their projects of conquest and destruction, rather than to hinder them.

The man Hitler chose to oversee the annexation of Austria, Arthur Seyss-Inquart, was a lawyer who later ran the occupation of the Netherlands. Lawyers were vastly overrepresented among the commanders of the *Einsatzgruppen*, the special task forces who carried out the mass murder of Jews, Gypsies, Polish elites, communists, the handicapped, and others. German (and other) physicians took part in ghastly medical experiments in the concentration camps. Businessmen from I.G. Farben and other German firms exploited the labor of concentration camp inmates, Jews in ghettos,