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ON TYRANNY

Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century

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TIM DUGGAN BOOKS

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1. **Do not obey in advance.** 17
2. **Defend institutions.** 22
3. **Beware the one-party state.** 26
4. **Take responsibility for the face of the world.** 32
5. **Remember professional ethics.** 38
6. **Be wary of paramilitaries.** 42
7. **Be reflective if you must be armed.** 47
8. **Stand out.** 51
9. **Be kind to our language.** 59
10. **Believe in truth.** 65
11. **Investigate.** 72
12. **Make eye contact and small talk.** 81
13. **Practice corporeal politics.** 83
14. **Establish a private life.** 87
15. **Contribute to good causes.** 92
16. **Learn from peers in other countries.** 95
17. **Listen for dangerous words.** 99
18. **Be calm when the unthinkable arrives.** 103
19. **Be a patriot.** 111
20. **Be as courageous as you can.** 115

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."

what he or she is reading there. If we can avoid doing violence to the minds of unseen others on the internet, others will learn to do the same. And then perhaps our internet traffic will cease to look like one great, bloody accident.

12

Make eye contact and small talk.

This is not just polite. It is part of being a citizen and a responsible member of society. It is also a way to stay in touch with your surroundings, break down social barriers, and understand whom you should and should not trust. If we enter a culture of denunciation, you will want to know the psychological landscape of your daily life.

Tyrannical regimes arose at different times and places in the Europe of the twentieth century, but memoirs of their victims all share a single tender moment. Whether the recollection is of fascist Italy in the 1920s, of Nazi Germany of the 1930s, of the Soviet Union during the Great Terror of 1937–38, or of the purges in communist eastern Europe in the 1940s and '50s, people who were living in fear of repression remembered how their neighbors treated them. A smile, a handshake, or a word of greeting—banal gestures in a normal situation—took on great significance. When friends, colleagues, and acquaintances looked away or crossed the street to avoid contact, fear grew. You might not be sure, today or tomorrow, who feels threatened in the United States. But if you affirm everyone, you can be sure that certain people will feel better.

In the most dangerous of times, those who escape and survive generally know people whom they can trust. Having old friends is the politics of last resort. And making new ones is the first step toward change.

13

Practice corporeal politics.

Power wants your body softening in your chair and your emotions dissipating on the screen. Get outside. Put your body in unfamiliar places with unfamiliar people. Make new friends and march with them.

For resistance to succeed, two boundaries must be crossed. First, ideas about change must engage people of various backgrounds who do not agree about everything. Second, people must find themselves in places that are not their homes, and among groups who were not previously their friends. Protest can be organized through social media, but nothing is real that does not end on the streets. If tyrants feel no consequences for their actions in the three-dimensional world, nothing will change.

The one example of successful resistance to communism was the Solidarity labor movement in Poland in 1980–81: a coalition of workers and professionals, elements of the Roman Catholic Church, and secular groups. Its leaders had learned hard lessons under communism. In 1968, the regime mobilized workers against students who protested. In 1970, when a strike in Gdańsk on the Baltic coast was bloodily suppressed, it was the workers' turn to feel isolated. In 1976, however, intellectuals and professionals formed a

group to assist workers who had been abused by the government. These were people from both the Right and the Left, believers and atheists, who created trust among workers—people whom they would not otherwise have met.

When Polish workers on the Baltic coast went on strike again in 1980, they were joined by lawyers, scholars, and others who helped them make their case. The result was the creation of a free labor union, as well as government guarantees to observe human rights. During the sixteen months that Solidarity was legal, ten million people joined, and countless new friendships were created amid strikes, marches, and demonstrations. The Polish communist regime put down the movement with martial law in 1981. Yet eight years later, in 1989, when they needed negotiating partners, the communists had to turn to Solidarity. The labor union insisted on elections, which it then won. This was the beginning of the end of communism in Poland, eastern Europe, and the Soviet Union.

The choice to be in public depends on the ability to maintain a private sphere of life. We are free only when it is we ourselves who draw the line between when we are seen and when we are not seen.

14

Establish a private life.

Nastier rulers will use what they know about you to push you around. Scrub your computer of malware on a regular basis. Remember that email is skywriting. Consider using alternative forms of the internet, or simply using it less. Have personal exchanges in person. For the same reason, resolve any legal trouble. Tyrants seek the hook on which to hang you. Try not to have hooks.

eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God." We should be modest, for "whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted." And of course we must be concerned with what is true and what is false: "And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

10

Believe in truth.

To abandon facts is to abandon freedom. If nothing is true, then no one can criticize power, because there is no basis upon which to do so. If nothing is true, then all is spectacle. The biggest wallet pays for the most blinding lights.

You submit to tyranny when you renounce the difference between what you want to hear and what is actually the case. This renunciation of reality can feel natural and pleasant, but the result is your demise as an individual—and thus the collapse of any political system that depends upon individualism. As observers of totalitarianism such as Victor Klemperer noticed, truth dies in four modes, all of which we have just witnessed.

The first mode is the open hostility to verifiable reality, which takes the form of presenting inventions and lies as if they were facts. The president does this at a high rate and at a fast pace. One attempt during the 2016 campaign to track his utterances found that 78 percent of his factual claims were false. This proportion is so high that it makes the correct assertions seem like unintended oversights on the path toward total fiction. Demeaning the world as it is begins the creation of a fictional counterworld.

The second mode is shamanistic incantation. As Klemperer noted, the fascist style depends

upon "endless repetition," designed to make the fictional plausible and the criminal desirable. The systematic use of nicknames such as "Lyin' Ted" and "Crooked Hillary" displaced certain character traits that might more appropriately have been affixed to the president himself. Yet through blunt repetition over Twitter, our president managed the transformation of individuals into stereotypes that people then spoke aloud. At rallies, the repeated chants of "Build that wall" and "Lock her up" did not describe anything that the president had specific plans to do, but their very grandiosity established a connection between him and his audience.

The next mode is magical thinking, or the open embrace of contradiction. The president's campaign involved the promises of cutting taxes for everyone, eliminating the national debt, and increasing spending on both social policy and national defense. These promises mutually contradict. It is as if a farmer said he were taking an egg from the henhouse, boiling it whole and serving it

to his wife, and also poaching it and serving it to his children, and then returning it to the hen unbroken, and then watching as the chick hatches.

Accepting untruth of this radical kind requires a blatant abandonment of reason. Klemperer's descriptions of losing friends in Germany in 1933 over the issue of magical thinking ring eerily true today. One of his former students implored him to "abandon yourself to your feelings, and you must always focus on the *Führer*'s greatness, rather than on the discomfort you are feeling at present." Twelve years later, after all the atrocities, and at the end of a war that Germany had clearly lost, an amputated soldier told Klemperer that Hitler "has never lied yet. I believe in Hitler."

The final mode is misplaced faith. It involves the sort of self-deifying claims the president made when he said that "I alone can solve it" or "I am your voice." When faith descends from heaven to earth in this way, no room remains for the small truths of our individual discernment and experience. What terrified Klemperer was the way that

this transition seemed permanent. Once truth had become oracular rather than factual, evidence was irrelevant. At the end of the war a worker told Klemperer that "understanding is useless, you have to have faith. I believe in the *Führer*."

Eugène Ionesco, the great Romanian playwright, watched one friend after another slip away into the language of fascism in the 1930s. The experience became the basis for his 1959 absurdist play, *Rhinoceros*, in which those who fall prey to propaganda are transformed into giant horned beasts. Of his own personal experiences Ionesco wrote:

> *University professors, students, intellectuals were turning Nazi, becoming Iron Guards, one after the other. At the beginning, certainly they were not Nazis. About fifteen of us would get together to talk and to try to find arguments opposing theirs. It was not easy. . . . From time to time, one of our friends said: "I don't agree with them, to be sure, but on certain points, nevertheless,*

I must admit, for example, the Jews . . . ," etc. And this was a symptom. Three weeks later, this person would become a Nazi. He was caught in the mechanism, he accepted everything, he became a rhinoceros. Towards the end, only three or four of us were still resisting.

Ionesco's aim was to help us see just how bizarre propaganda actually is, but how normal it seems to those who yield to it. By using the absurd image of the rhinoceros, Ionesco was trying to shock people into noticing the strangeness of what was actually happening.

The rhinoceri are roaming through our neurological savannahs. We now find ourselves very much concerned with something we call "post-truth," and we tend to think that its scorn of everyday facts and its construction of alternative realities is something new or postmodern. Yet there is little here that George Orwell did not capture seven decades ago in his notion of "doublethink." In its philosophy, post-truth restores

precisely the fascist attitude to truth—and that is why nothing in our own world would startle Klemperer or Ionesco.

Fascists despised the small truths of daily existence, loved slogans that resonated like a new religion, and preferred creative myths to history or journalism. They used new media, which at the time was radio, to create a drumbeat of propaganda that aroused feelings before people had time to ascertain facts. And now, as then, many people confused faith in a hugely flawed leader with the truth about the world we all share.

Post-truth is pre-fascism.

West German courts. But even these trials were a kind of minimization of the scale of the crime. Not the SS commanders alone, but essentially all of the thousands of men who served under their command were murderers.

And this was just the beginning. Every large-scale shooting action of the Holocaust (more than thirty-three thousand Jews murdered outside Kyiv, more than twenty-eight thousand outside Riga, and on and on) involved the regular German police. All in all, regular policemen murdered more Jews than the *Einsatzgruppen*. Many of them had no special preparation for this task. They found themselves in an unknown land, they had their orders, and they did not want to look weak. In the rare cases when they refused these orders to murder Jews, policemen were not punished.

Some killed from murderous conviction. But many others who killed were just afraid to stand out. Other forces were at work besides conformism. But without the conformists, the great atrocities would have been impossible.

8

Stand out.

Someone has to. It is easy to follow along. It can feel strange to do or say something different. But without that unease, there is no freedom. Remember Rosa Parks. The moment you set an example, the spell of the status quo is broken, and others will follow.

After the Second World War, Europeans, Americans, and others created myths of righteous resistance to Hitler. In the 1930s, however, the dominant attitudes had been accommodation and admiration. By 1940 most Europeans had made their peace with the seemingly irresistible power of Nazi Germany. Influential Americans such as Charles Lindbergh opposed war with the Nazis under the slogan "America First." It is those who were considered exceptional, eccentric, or even insane in their own time—those who did not change when the world around them did—whom we remember and admire today.

Well before the Second World War, numerous European states had abandoned democracy for some form of right-wing authoritarianism. Italy became the first fascist state in 1922, and was a military ally of Germany. Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria had been drawn toward Germany by the promise of trade and territory. In March 1938 none of the great powers offered any resistance as Germany annexed Austria. In September 1938

the great powers—France, Italy, and Great Britain, then led by Neville Chamberlain—actually cooperated with Nazi Germany in the partition of Czechoslovakia. In summer 1939 the Soviet Union allied with Nazi Germany and the Red Army joined the *Wehrmacht* in the invasion of Poland. The Polish government chose to fight, activating agreements that brought Great Britain and France into the war. Germany, supplied with food and fuel by the Soviet Union, invaded and quickly occupied Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, and even France in the spring of 1940. The remainder of the British expeditionary force was evacuated from the Continent at Dunkirk in late May and early June 1940.

When Winston Churchill became prime minister in May 1940, Great Britain was alone. The British had won no meaningful battles and had no important allies. They had entered the war to support Poland, a cause that seemed lost. Nazi Germany and its Soviet ally dominated the continent. The Soviet Union had invaded Finland

in November 1939, beginning with a bombing of Helsinki. Right after Churchill assumed office, the Soviet Union occupied and annexed the three Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The United States had not entered the war.

Adolf Hitler had no special animus toward Britain or its empire, and indeed imagined a division of the world into spheres of interests. He expected Churchill to come to terms after the fall of France. Churchill did not. He told the French that "whatever you may do, we shall fight on for ever and ever and ever."

In June 1940, Churchill told the British parliament that "the battle of Britain is about to begin." The German *Luftwaffe* began the bombing of British cities. Hitler expected that this would force Churchill to sign an armistice, but he was mistaken. Churchill later called the air campaign "a time when it was equally good to live or die." He spoke of "the buoyant and imperturbable temper of Britain which I had the honor to express." In fact he himself helped the British to

define themselves as a proud people who would calmly resist evil. Other politicians would have found support in British public opinion to end the war. Churchill instead resisted, inspired, and won. The Royal Air Force (including two Polish squadrons and a number of other foreign pilots) held back the *Luftwaffe*. Without control of the air, even Hitler could not imagine an amphibious invasion of Great Britain.

Churchill did what others had not done. Rather than concede in advance, he forced Hitler to change his plans. The essential German strategy had been to remove any resistance in the west, and then to invade (thus betraying) the Soviet Union and colonize its western territories. In June 1941, with Britain still in the war, Germany attacked its Soviet ally.

Now Berlin had to fight a two-front war, and Moscow and London were suddenly unexpected allies. In December 1941, Japan bombed the American naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, and the United States entered the war.

Now Moscow, Washington, and London formed a grand and irresistible coalition. Together, and with the help of many other allies, these three great powers won the Second World War. But had Churchill not kept Britain in the war in 1940, there would have been no such war to fight.

Churchill said that history would be kind to him, because he intended to write it himself. Yet in his vast histories and memoirs, he presented his own decisions as self-evident, and credited the British people and Britain's allies. Today what Churchill did seems normal, and right. But at the time he had to stand out.

Of course, Great Britain was only in the war because the Polish leadership had chosen to fight in September 1939. Open Polish armed resistance was overcome that October. In 1940, the character of the German occupation was becoming clear in the Polish capital, Warsaw.

Teresa Prekerowa was meant to finish high school that year. Her family lost its property to the Germans and was forced to move to Warsaw

and rent. Her father was arrested. One of her uncles was killed in battle. Two of her brothers were in German prisoner-of-war camps. Warsaw itself had been heavily damaged by a German air campaign, which had killed about twenty-five thousand people.

Teresa, a very young woman, stood out among her friends and family in her reaction to this horror. At a time when it was natural to think only of oneself, she thought of others. In late 1940, the Germans began to establish ghettos in the part of Poland under their control. That October, the Jews of Warsaw and the surrounding region were required to move to a certain district of the city. One of Teresa's brothers had been friendly with a Jewish girl and her family before the war. Teresa now observed that people quietly allowed their Jewish friends to slip away from their lives.

Without telling her family, and at great risk to herself, Teresa chose to enter the Warsaw ghetto a dozen times in late 1940, bringing food and medicine to Jews she knew and Jews she did not. By

the end of the year she had persuaded her brother's friend to escape the ghetto. In 1942 Teresa helped the girl's parents and brother to escape. That summer in the Warsaw ghetto, the Germans carried out what they called the "Great Action," deporting some 265,040 Jews to the death factory at Treblinka to be murdered and killing another 10,380 Jews in the ghetto itself. Teresa saved a family from certain death.

Teresa Prekerowa later became a historian of the Holocaust, writing about the Warsaw ghetto and about others who helped to aid Jews. But she preferred not to write about herself. When, much later, she was asked to speak about her own life, she called her actions normal. From our perspective, her actions seem exceptional. She stood out.

9

Be kind to our language.

Avoid pronouncing the phrases everyone else does. Think up your own way of speaking, even if only to convey that thing you think everyone is saying. Make an effort to separate yourself from the internet. Read books.