ON TYRANNY

TWENTY LESSONS FROM THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

TIMOTHY SNYDER

ALSO BY TIMOTHY SNYDER

Nationalism, Marxism, and Modern Central Europe: A Biography of Kazimierz Kelles-Krauz (1872–1905)

Wall Around the West: State Borders and Immigration Controls in the United States and Europe (ed. with Peter Andreas)

The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1959–1999

Sketches from a Secret War: A Polish Artist's Mission to Liberate Soviet Ukraine

The Red Prince: The Secret Lives of a Habsburg Archduke

Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin

Thinking the Twentieth Century (with Tony Judt)

Stalin and Europe: Imitation and Domination, 1928–1953 (ed. with Ray Brandon)

Ukrainian History, Russian Policy, and European Futures (in Russian and Ukrainian)

The Politics of Life and Death (in Czech)

The Balkans as Europe: The Nineteenth Century (ed. with Katherine Younger)

Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning

ON TYRANNY

Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century

TIMOTHY SNYDER

TIM
DUGGAN
BOOKS

NEW YORK

Published in the United States by Tim Duggan Books, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

timdugganbooks.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available upon request.

ISBN 9780804190114
Ebook ISBN 9780804190121

Cover design by Christopher Brand

v4.1_r1
ep

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.