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On Tyranny

Twenty Lessons from
the Twentieth Century

Timothy Snyder

On Tyranny is a call to arms and a guide to resistance, with invaluable ideas for how we can preserve our freedoms in the uncertain years to come. This ~~book~~ zine presents twenty lessons from the twentieth century, adapted to the circumstances of today.

In politics, being deceived is no excuse
-LESZEK KOŁAKOWSKI

0. Prologue

The Founding Fathers tried to protect us from the threat they knew, the tyranny that overcame ancient democracy. Today, our political order faces new threats, not unlike the totalitarianism of the twentieth century. We are no wiser than the Europeans who saw democracy yield to fascism, Nazism, or communism. Our one advantage is that we might learn from their experience.

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.

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.

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.

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.

5. 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.

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6. Be wary of paramilitaries

When the men with guns who have always claimed to be against the system start wearing uniforms and marching with torches and pictures of a leader, the end is nigh. When the pro-leader paramilitary and the official police and military intermingle, the end has come.

7. Be reflective if you must be armed

If you carry a weapon in public service, may God bless you and keep you. But know that evils of the past involved policemen and soldiers finding themselves, one day, doing irregular things. Be ready to say no.

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.

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.

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.

11. Investigate

Figure things out for yourself. Spend more time with long articles. Subsidize investigative journalism by subscribing to print media. Realize that some of what is on the internet is there to harm you. Learn about sites that investigate propaganda campaigns (some of which come from abroad). Take responsibility for what you communicate with others.

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.

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.

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.

15. Contribute to good causes

Be active in organizations, political or not, that express your own view of life. Pick a charity or two and set up autopay. Then you will have made a free choice that supports civil society and helps others to do good.

16. Learn from peers in other countries

Keep up your friendships abroad, or make new friends in other countries. The present difficulties in the United States are an element of a larger trend. And no country is going to find a solution by itself. Make sure you and your family have passports.

17. Listen for dangerous words

Be alert to the use of the words *extremism* and *terrorism*. Be alive to the fatal notions of *emergency* and *exception*. Be angry about the treacherous use of patriotic vocabulary.

18. Be calm when the unthinkable arrives

Modern tyranny is terror management. When the terrorist attack comes, remember that authoritarians exploit such events in order to consolidate power. The sudden disaster that requires the end of checks and balances, the dissolution of opposition parties, the suspension of freedom of expression, the right to a fair trial, and so on, is the oldest trick in the Hitlerian book. *Do not fall for it*.

19. Be a patriot

Set a good example of what America means for the generations to come. They will need it.

20. Be as courageous as you can

If none of us is prepared to die for freedom, then all of us will die under tyranny.

About the Author

Timothy David Snyder (born August 18, 1969) is an American historian specializing in the history of Central and Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, and the Holocaust. He holds the inaugural Chair in Modern European History, supported by the Temerty Endowment for Ukrainian Studies, at the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy at the University of Toronto. He is a permanent fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna, serves on the Committee on Conscience of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations.

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