

READING GUIDE

# LIVE NOT BY LIES



A MANUAL FOR  
CHRISTIAN DISSIDENTS  
**ROD DREHER**  
Bestselling author of  
The Benedict Option



SENTINEL



# Study guide for **LIVE NOT BY LIES**

*Live Not by Lies* is both an attempt to read the signs of our times, and a call to action in the face of a mounting threat. My greatest hope is that readers who finish this book convinced of its warnings will come together with like-minded others and start building resistance cells and networks, as Father Tomislav Kolaković and his followers did in 1940s Slovakia.

The key method of the Kolaković resistance was gathering small groups together to discuss current events in light of the teachings of their faith, determine what to do about it, and then do it: **See, Judge, Act.** To this end, we have put together a study guide to serve as a starting point for small groups who want to discern their calling in response to the current crisis.

**ROD DREHER**



# INTRODUCTION

**“There always is this fallacious belief: ‘It would not be the same here; here such things are impossible.’ Alas, all the evil of the twentieth century is possible everywhere on earth.”**

**—ALEKSANDR SOLZHENITSYN**

1. Before reading *Live Not by Lies*, would you have agreed with Solzhenitsyn’s statement? Or did you, like Dreher, believe that “the menace of totalitarianism had passed” with the end of the Cold War? Has your opinion changed? Why or why not?
2. “The task of the Christian dissident today is to personally commit herself to live not by lies,” Dreher writes. Name some lies that you are expected to affirm in your own life (at work, at school, in your church or community, in your family, etc.). What would refusing to live by those lies look like?
3. Immigrants who grew up under communism told Dreher of their frustration with those who don’t see the imminent dangers to democracy and liberty from emerging totalitarianism. What are some of the obstacles that keep us from perceiving these things?



## CHAPTER ONE

# Kolaković the Prophet

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1. Father Tomislav Kolaković saw the threat to Slovakia coming from communism, and prepared his followers—the Family—to be faithful through the persecution to come. Their resistance grew out of small cells of prayer and fellowship. In your life, do you have a small group that could be a modern version of a Family cell? If so, what should your group do to prepare itself for dark times ahead? If not, how can such a group come together?
2. Dreher distinguishes between authoritarianism and totalitarianism. Under authoritarianism, the system demands unquestioned outer obedience. Under totalitarianism (an extreme form of authoritarianism), not only does the system demand obedience but it also seeks to conquer one's thoughts and to make all aspects of life political. Using examples from contemporary life, discuss the differences between authoritarianism and totalitarianism.
3. Dreher argues that the mode of totalitarianism we are starting to live under in America today is “therapeutic.” What does he mean by that? And how does that make “soft totalitarianism” different from “hard totalitarianism”?
4. What are “the pill of Murti-Bing” and *ketman*? Give examples of these phenomena in American life today.



5. In teaching his followers to read the signs of the times and discern God's calling, Kolaković prescribed the See, Judge, Act method. See means being aware of the realities around you. Judge means to discern the meaning of those realities. Act means acting to resist the evil the group has identified. As an exercise, try the method now with your group.

**See:** What is a problem, big or small, you've encountered in society?

**Judge:** Discuss the meaning of that problem. Does it constitute a serious threat to living in truth and being faithful to God or is it rather something that makes more sense to tolerate for now?

**Act:** Make a plan to act together on your conclusion. What steps can you take to resist evil in this circumstance?



## CHAPTER TWO

# Our Pre-Totalitarian Culture

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1. Why are people so willing to believe demonstrable lies?” Dreher asks this question about totalitarianism in the USSR. What is the answer? Do you see evidence of this phenomenon in American society today?
2. A Russian man helped Dreher understand why communism seemed like a good idea to people at the time of the Russian Revolution: because it offered an answer to deep problems the government and society’s institutions had failed to address. What serious problems do you see in our society today that the state and private institutions are not dealing with, and that open the minds of people to radical proposals?
3. In her 1951 study *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt identified a number of factors indicating that a society is susceptible to totalitarianism. Discuss the extent to which these factors are present in our own society today and give examples:
  - a. loneliness and social atomization
  - b. loss of faith in hierarchies and institutions
  - c. the desire to transgress and destroy
  - d. the willingness to believe useful lies
  - e. a mania for ideology
  - f. valuing loyalty more than expertise



## CHAPTER THREE

# Progressivism as Religion

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1. What is the Myth of Progress? How did this myth empower communist totalitarianisms in the twentieth century? How does this myth empower would-be totalitarians today?
2. Dreher writes about people who live in fear that they will lose their jobs if it were to be discovered that they are not progressive. Do you live in the closet, so to speak, as a Christian and/or a conservative because of fear of progressives?
3. How is a Christian understanding of social justice distinct from the secular social justice warrior ideology? How does the idea of social justice change without Christian principles about human fallibility, dignity, mercy, and redemption?
4. How can we keep hope alive even when it looks like things are going to get worse?



## CHAPTER FOUR

# Capitalism, Woke and Watchful

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1. Kamila Bendova, whose late husband was a political prisoner under Czech communism, says she believes Americans are very naïve about sharing their information online. Is this fair?
2. Dreher says that we think of totalitarianism as something imposed by an all-powerful government, but that model is outdated. What did you learn from *Live Not by Lies* about how private corporations use technology to shape the way we think and live?
3. What do you value more: privacy or convenience? What are the possible social implications of that choice?
4. In the past, big business generally avoided taking sides on controversial issues. Now, though, “woke capitalism” is popular. In what ways do you see big business endorsing a left-wing political and social agenda?
5. Do you believe that the rise of what Shoshana Zuboff calls “surveillance capitalism” undermines our liberties? Is there a role for government to play in regulating corporate mining and use of consumer data?
6. Do you foresee a version of China’s “social credit system” coming to the United States? If so, how do you think it will manifest itself?



7. The Czech novelist Milan Kundera writes that “[h]aving a public, keeping a public in mind, means living in lies.” How do Instagram and other social media platforms condition people to live falsely? How should we resist them?
8. To protect their privacy, Kamila Bendova and her adult children do not use smartphones but rather communicate with old-fashioned flip phones. Which sacrifices and lifestyle adjustments would you be willing to make to protect your privacy?



## CHAPTER FIVE

# Value Nothing More Than Truth

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1. Václav Havel offers the parable of the greengrocer as an example of the power an ordinary person has to resist living by official lies. Do you find the story convincing? Are the big sacrifices the greengrocer makes to obey his conscience worth it? Why or why not?
2. Displaying the Marxist slogan “Workers of the world, unite!” was one way that communist governments expected their people to signal conformity to the ruling order. Name some ways that people in our time and place are expected to show conformity to a political view or social principle.
3. Prudence is not the same thing as cowardice. How can we know when it is important to take the risk of speaking out, and when it is morally defensible to stay silent? How do the stories told by the men and women in *Live Not by Lies* help you think about this question?

## CHAPTER SIX

# Cultivate Cultural Memory

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1. Socialism is seen much more favorably among young Americans, who did not live through the Cold War. Why do you think historical knowledge of Marxist totalitarianism is so scant today?
2. Explain the concept of cultural memory. Give examples of ways in which today's culture war is a battle over shared memory.
3. Paul Connerton, in his book, *How Societies Remember*, explained that simply presenting information is not enough to pass on cultural memory. A community has to embody this information in concrete ways (e.g., rituals, feasts, parades). Which cultural memories do you and your community consider to be most important to pass on to future generations? How do you live them out? What else could you do, individually and collectively?
4. Tamás Sályi, an anti-communist Hungarian teacher, says that, ironically, his country has lost more cultural memory since the end of the Cold War than it did under two previous totalitarianisms. "What neither Nazism or Communism could do, victorious liberal capitalism has done," he says. How does our modern way of life undermine cultural memory? Give examples.
5. List some creative ways Christians today can establish practices and institutions that help us remember who we are in the face of soft totalitarianism?



## CHAPTER SEVEN

# Families Are Resistance Cells

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1. The late Václav Benda believed that the traditional Christian family should be the bedrock of resistance to the totalitarian state. Do you find his case convincing? In which ways has the dissolution of the American family, and the attack in popular culture on the traditional family ideal, pave the way for soft totalitarianism?
2. Václav Benda wrote that in the Christian model, marriage and family offers three gifts that are urgently needed for believers struggling within a totalitarian order (see p. 65). Let's discuss these gifts.
  - a. ***The Fruitful Fellowship of Love***

Benda is clear that in this gift, families and neighbors offer one another love “not on the basis of merit, rights and entitlements, but by virtue of mutual need and its affectionate reciprocation.” Why is it so important that this love is given rather than earned? How is this love countercultural today?
  - b. ***Freedom***

How does a seeming limitation on our freedom, such as marriage and family, actually give us more freedom? How is the freedom offered by marriage and family different than the freedom offered by civil society?
  - c. ***The Dignity of the Individual within Family Fellowship***

Benda notes that in most social roles, such as professional or political roles, we are all replaceable, but in the family, “such a

cold calculation of justice does not reign.” How does the family bond tend to increase our understanding of human dignity? Do you think it’s possible for a government or society to take away our dignity?

3. The Benda children learned how to be morally courageous from observing their parents, who helped lead the anti-communist dissident movement in Czechoslovakia. How can parents and grandparents in our time and place set a similar example against soft totalitarianism?
4. The Bendas knew that it wasn’t enough to teach their children how to identify what was bad, false, and ugly; they also needed to fill the children’s moral imaginations with the good, the true, and the beautiful. How can you change your own life, and the lives of your family, to do the same?
5. Part of the Benda family’s fearlessness was their courage to be nonconformists. Václav and Kamila taught their children that to be a faithful Christian, you had to be willing to be thought of as weird by society. Do you agree? Where are the limits to nonconformity?
6. The Bendas made sure their children knew that their lives were to be lived in service to principles greater than individual self-interest: to God, to Truth, and to the common good. How does this principle run counter to what our culture teaches today? What new and different things can we do to inculcate this moral vision into ourselves and our young people?
7. Father Jerzy Popiełuszko learned in his simple rural family the faith and courage that helped him stand up to communist authorities, even to the point of martyrdom. What did you learn in your own home that strengthens your spiritual resilience? What do you wish you had learned? What do you want your children to learn from you?



## CHAPTER EIGHT

# Religion, the Bedrock of Resistance

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1. The political prisoner Silvester Krčméry (pronounced “kirch-MERRY”) said his faith was the only thing that got him through the years of confinement and torture. He structured his daily life in prison to deepen his discipleship. Discuss ways we should live today, in freedom, to prepare ourselves to withstand future persecution.
2. In this chapter, you read about how the visible witness of Christians like Father Dmitry Dudko and Alexander Ogorodnikov—men who were not afraid to speak out publicly for the Gospel, despite the risk. Their public courage gave hope and inspiration to many others suffering demoralization. Which public figures today—Christian or not—inspire you to be brave and resilient against soft totalitarianism?
3. How could you change your life to become more inspiring to those who are fearful and depressed?
4. Christian political prisoners often testified that behind bars confessional differences did not matter. In which ways should today’s Christians, from various churches and traditions, work together to prepare for persecution? How can they do this without compromising their particular theological commitments?
5. Alexander Ogorodnikov tells a story about how God worked a miracle that convinced many fellow prisoners to take the Gospel seriously. Have you seen miracles in your own faith journey? How do you think people today would react if something like that happened in front of their eyes?

## CHAPTER NINE

# Standing in Solidarity

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1. Ján Šimulčík, in talking about his years working in the underground church, says, “Only in small communities could people feel free.” František Mikloško says that “you can build a whole country on ten righteous people who are like pillars.” What do they mean? How can this idea be understood in a contemporary American context?
2. Father Kolaković’s network kept the life of the underground church alive when the government cracked down hard on clergy. Discuss how small groups could do the same if churchgoing were forbidden in a future totalitarian America.
3. Yuri Sipko, a Russian Baptist pastor, says that in Russia today, people enjoy far more individual freedom but they are losing the felt need to meet as Christians in small groups. This is why some Evangelicals are returning to the habits of the underground church. Does this make sense to you?
4. Why is it important to make common cause with people who are not Christian?
5. Hannah Arendt said that widespread loneliness was the greatest factor that led to totalitarianism in the twentieth century. Today, Hungarian teacher Mária Komáromi says despite the ubiquity of social media, her students are desperately lonely. Do you see this in your community’s life? What can you do to fight it?



6. Zofia Romaszewska, a hero of Poland's Solidarity movement, urges young people to form resistance groups and networks today while there is still time and freedom to organize. What does this mean to you?

## CHAPTER TEN

# The Gift of Suffering

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1. What does it mean to have the “right to be unhappy”? Do you feel that you have that right? Is it important to you?
2. “The old totalitarianism conquered societies through fear of pain; the new one will conquer primarily through manipulating people’s love of pleasure and fear of discomfort.” Discuss this prediction.
3. What is the difference between an admirer of Christ and a disciple of Christ? Has the contemporary American church done a better job of creating admirers or disciples? Explain your answer.
4. Has your own way of living the Gospel prepared you to suffer for Christ? Why or why not?
5. Suffering torture in communist prisons could have destroyed Silvester Krčmery and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn or left them embittered and angry. Instead, it made their faith stronger and their love deeper. What made the difference?
6. Father George Calciu said that as he and his cellmates cared for the dying prisoner Constantine Oprisan, “we did not realize how important [he] was for us.” Why was Constantine Oprisan important to them?

## CONCLUSION

# Live Not by Lies

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1. The young Slovak photographer Timo Križka learned about the power of the powerless through his interviews and photographs with elderly countrymen who had suffered in communist prisons for their faith. Spending time with these men and women caused Križka to start “a revolution against the greatest totalitarian rule of all: myself.” What does he mean?
2. “You have to live in a world of lies, but it’s your choice as to whether that world lives in you.” What does Dreher mean by this statement?
3. Which dissident stories in *Live Not by Lies* were the most meaningful to you? Why?
4. If Father Kolaković were alive today, what would he advise Christians to do? What would a network like his Family look like in the contemporary world?
5. Dreher and the dissidents and survivors he interviews often express great hope that the pain of Christian persecution under totalitarianism will revive and purify the church. Do you share this hope? What makes you hopeful for the future?
6. If the secret police arrested you and charged you with being a Christian, would there be enough evidence at your trial to convict you? Why or why not?



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