Chapter Eighteen

Forbidding Life to Those Still Living

By Tara Smith

> "Andrei, why doesn't your Party believe in the right to live while one is not killed? . . . You may claim the right to kill, as all fighters do. But no one before you has ever thought of forbidding life to those still living."
>
> —Kira in *We the Living* (189)

Collectivism kills. With bullets and clubs. Through its material deprivations: poverty, hunger, primitive medical care, abysmal living conditions. And—what I focus on in this chapter—by crushing people's spirits. *We the Living* eloquently portrays the way in which collectivism destroys human life not only physically, but spiritually. Collectivism's impact penetrates far beyond its severe material damage, and its toll on the human psyche, I believe, is what makes *We the Living* an especially poignant story.

In her writings on aesthetics, Ayn Rand expressly rejected the idea that the purpose of any work of art should be the moral education or political conversion of its audience.[1] Accordingly, my purpose here is not to *prove* (or to argue that *We the Living* proves) the evils of collectivism. I wish simply to show how the spiritual expense of collectivism is displayed in the novel and, through intermittent references to the historical practice of collectivist principles, indicate how true to the nature of collectivism Ayn Rand's portrait is.

I shall speak of collectivism rather than communism because communism is merely one manifestation of the more fundamental (and more widespread) collectivist thesis that the individual should be subordinated to the group. An individual possesses no rights, according to collectivism, but is a tool to be used for the good of the whole. The individual's interests should be sacrificed to the collective's.[2]

The material destruction of collectivism should need no lengthy documentation here. Reams of empirical data testify to collectivism's assault on human lives, whether through outright annihilation or its strangulation of creativity and production and the consequent debasement of living conditions. *The Black Book of Communism*, a recent collection of essays by European-based scholars cataloguing the impact of communism in different parts of the globe, estimates the victims of communism worldwide to stand between eighty-five and one hundred million.[3] In quantifying collectivism's damage to humanity, one should not forget that Nazism, whose collectivist nature is usually neglected, claimed approximately twenty-five million victims.[4] For some perspective on these figures, consider that more people died in Stalin's war against the peasants in the early 1930s alone than the total number killed in World War I.[5]

Collectivism's economic record is also a disaster. In the final decade of the Soviet Union, only a third of households had hot running water.[6] As late as 1989, meat and sugar were still rationed—in peacetime. After sixty years of socialism, an average welfare mother in the United

States received more income in a month than the average Soviet worker earned in a year.[7] To this day, people suffer the aftereffects of decades of collectivist policies. In contemporary Russia, per capita gross domestic product is $1,800. In the United States, it is $36,500.[8]

Collectivism's material toll is certainly on display in *We the Living*. The novel opens with an overdue, overloaded train disgorging unwashed hordes into a Petrograd smelling of carbolic acid. Throughout, we see that the most taken-for-granted incidentals of daily life—getting warm, getting food—pose a continual struggle for Soviet citizens. When they can obtain provisions, rations for one or two often feed entire families, who face the monotony of eating the same few unappetizing things—millet, lentils, onions, often spoiled—day after day. Residents stand in interminable lines to buy matches that do not light, kerchiefs that tear the first time worn, shoes with cardboard soles (193). Out of desperation to get something that they *might* be able to put to some use, people buy things they don't want (54). At home, space and privacy are steadily eroded, as apartments are divided among ever-increasing numbers of strangers.

Should one suspect that Ayn Rand is indulging in the exaggerations of poetic license, historian Sheila Fitzpatrick's book on everyday life in 1930s Russia testifies to the exact conditions that Ayn Rand depicts. Fitzpatrick reports, for instance, that people would sometimes start lining up for goods in the middle of the night and that access to goods was so unreliable that people would join queues before they knew what they were for. People developed the habit of carrying around "just in case" bags on the chance that they would be unexpectedly able to acquire some needed items.[9] Once obtained, quality was every bit as shoddy as described in the novel. It was not uncommon to find clothes with missing sleeves, handles that fell off pots, matches that refused to strike, or foreign objects baked into bread.[10] Slavenka Drakulic, a contemporary journalist who was raised in communist Yugoslavia, observes that people reared under communism to this day tend to buy junk, so deeply engrained is the expectation that quality will never be available.[11] Another recent book details the conditions in communal apartments. When its author, Ilya Utekhin, was born in St. Petersburg in the late 1960s, thirty-five people shared the apartment he was raised in. In the 1920s, his grandfather had been one of fifty-six in the apartment. (Even today, Utekhin reports, many people in downtown St. Petersburg continue to inhabit such apartments.)[12]

Quite simply, Fitzpatrick summarizes, "For the greater part of the urban population, life revolved around the endless struggle to get the basics necessary for survival—food, clothing, shelter."[13]

For all of collectivism's material destruction, however, what *We the Living* depicts especially powerfully is the usually overlooked spiritual impact of collectivism—its effects on people's attitudes, outlooks, sense of themselves, and sense of life. Following Ayn Rand's usage, by "spiritual" I do not mean mystical or religious, but those aspects of our experience that pertain primarily to consciousness—such as beliefs, hopes, feelings.[14] A human being is a union of mind and body. The experience of our minds is a vital dimension of what matters to us. The spiritual *matters* both in physically sustaining us (the actions necessary to support our existence rely on rational thought) and in psychologically sustaining us (by providing the convictions, satisfactions, and hopes that fire the will to live and that motivate life's requisite actions).[15]

Ayn Rand has said that the theme of *We the Living* is the individual against the masses.[16] To consider collectivism's spiritual repercussions, I will first consider the masses—the novel's portrait of the kind of people and the kind of social relations engendered by collectivism—and then turn to the three central individuals.

LIFE AMONG THE COMRADES

The living conditions created by collectivist economic policies are naturally demoralizing. Material hardships are not necessarily discouraging; when people understand and endorse the reason for such strains, as during the struggle for a cause they believe in, they can accept temporary suffering for the sake of their goal. Under Soviet rule, however, people had little reason to expect conditions to improve. Wrenched from their privacy, property, and previous occupations, reduced to manufacturing soap in their kitchens, selling cherished family heirlooms, and speaking for causes they didn't believe in, this *was* the "better" world in which the collective good was served. Such abject conditions would naturally deflate a person's dreams, constricting his beliefs about what is attainable in life. If hard work leads, at best, to this, life is apparently not the open-ended wonder that it might have seemed in childhood. The relentless deprivations and indignities erode a person's hope, over time, and diminish his ambitions. Drakulic tells of people in collectivist societies hoarding all sorts of unlikely goods (stockings, shoeboxes, jars) for any conceivable use to be made of them in the future and interprets this as indicative of their loss of hope that the future would be better. What people stockpiled in their cupboards was a better sign of morale than anything they might have written, she observes.[17]

Accordingly, we see most of *We the Living*'s characters resigning themselves to a drastically circumscribed idea of life's possibilities. This is best (and to me, most startlingly) captured when Kira is about to make her final attempt to escape. Arguing that she shouldn't go, Kira's mother asks: "What's wrong with this country?" (448)

Collectivism corrupts not only a person's view of life and its possibilities; it also poisons a person's view of humanity. A principal means of effecting this is by criminalizing the entire population. Under collectivism, survival requires lawbreaking. People must lie, cheat, and bribe in order to secure bread, medicine, a job, a room, or simply to stay out of trouble. Fitzpatrick discusses "pull" or "*blat*" as an essential tool for navigating everyday Russian life. Having the right connections (enabling a person to get around the law) was not a convenience for securing the occasional luxury, but an indispensable survival mechanism.[18] Accordingly, we see Kira's family, and later Kira, bribing the building superintendent to try to keep rooms (52, 178). We see Leo denied a job because he cannot offer a bribe (170–71). Vava's family is rich only because her father performs illegal surgery (158). Kira, the most obvious victim, is forced to prostitute herself as a desperate means of obtaining the money for Leo's medical treatment.

Soviet authorities created so many restrictions that people could not help but run afoul of some of them.[19] And collectivism's strictures on production and trade brought shortages that necessitated extralegal activities in order to make ends meet.

Compounding the effect of unavoidably committing legal crimes, collectivism demands the moral crime of denying one's personal convictions. Kira's marching in the parade for a cause she detests and delivering a lecture entitled "Marxism and Leninism" (200, 205) are but two examples of collectivism compelling people to espouse the party line regardless of their actual evaluation of it and to hide, apologize for, if not denounce those things that they truly value—be it one's political views, moral convictions, or the people one loves.[20] The cost of being made to regularly engage in "criminal" activity (legal or moral) and of seeing one's fellows doing the same is a soiled image of human nature. It is difficult to develop a respect for mankind when you routinely observe people in compromised positions. A given person might realize that it is the system that is unjust, rather than the coerced subjects. Actions that are coerced are not truly immoral. Such clarity and self-possession as Kira displays, however, is a rare exception,

particularly difficult in a society that pounds its message in from all sides, doing its damnedest to stifle even the germination of anticollectivist points of view. And regardless of a person's reserves of self-esteem and independent judgment, it is demeaning to have to adopt the devious, sordid methods of criminals, to act even under the suggestion of moral depravity.

Collectivism is a menace not only to a person's image of humanity and to his self-esteem; it also injures the self itself. It penalizes independence and makes the achievement of a truly *personal* identity all but impossible.

The basic thesis of collectivism, recall, is that the group takes precedence over the individual. We see the practical implementation of this principle concretized throughout *We the Living.* The standard mode of address in collectivist Russia, "comrade Argounova," "citizen Kovalensky," introduces a person first, primarily, as a member of the group. The implicit message? You exist insofar as *you* are a part of this larger body. When Leo is asked to offer language lessons three nights a week, his desire for a personal life is dismissed as irrelevant (166). He is viewed not as a sovereign individual entitled to his own life, but as a tool whose sole function is to serve the collective good. Andrei's appeal to his "personal affairs" in an exchange with a G.P.U. executive is brusquely interrupted: "Your *what kind* of affairs, Comrade Taganov?" (344, emphasis in original). The individual simply does not count.

Kira encounters the collectivist attitude as her pleas to officials for Leo's medical care meet with cold indifference. As the Comrade Commissar asks: "Why—in the face of the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics—can't one aristocrat die?" (228). Another Soviet official explains, when chastising her for not being a union member: "What's a citizen? Only a brick and of no use unless cemented to other bricks just like it" (49). Much later in the story, when Kira is looking wistfully at a building under construction, a militia man inquires what she wants. "I was just looking," Kira answers. His response reflects perfectly the collectivist contempt for the self: "You have no business looking" (324).

Independence is the virtue of forming and acting according to one's own judgments. Independence does not preclude learning from other people, but it does demand that a person understand and evaluate ideas by using his own reasoning. A person's ends and decisions about how to achieve those ends should be rational, but in order to be rational, they must be his own. At its core, independence is a matter of orienting oneself around the facts of reality rather than around other people's beliefs or wishes.[21] An independent posture for dealing with the world is systematically beaten down by collectivism, however. Citizens are made to obey, to conform, to serve. Collectivism does not want a person to think for himself. Comrade Sonia repeatedly admonishes Andrei at any hint of his independent thinking. "Why do you think you are entitled to your own thoughts?" she asks accusingly (311). Pliability is the trait most conducive to the collectivist agenda.

Under collectivism, survival (economic, social, literal) is completely politicized. [22] Goods, position, and security are obtained not by rationality, virtue, hard work, or productiveness, but by trading favors; you must get on with the right people. This reign of pull *asks* for the soulless, groveling parasitism of Victor. (In the lexicon of *The Fountainhead*, it asks for second-handed-ness and propagates Peter Keatings.)[23] A person is rewarded in direct proportion to his obedience—that is, his following the dictates of others rather than forming and following judgments of his own. Victor is the natural result of collectivist rule, a person who purges any remnant of a distinct self and eagerly complies with the perceived wishes of those in power. (Even Victor's obsequiousness does not win him security, however. Since "the collective

good" is an elastic ideal arbitrarily invoked to justify any action against any individual, a person has no way to truly safeguard himself, however self-sacrificially he may aim to please.)[24]

Collectivism breeds puppets.[25] Because it compels people to follow its rulers' script, collectivism cripples the exercise of independent judgment. Not only does it discourage people from thinking for themselves, however; it also stunts people's capacity to want for themselves, to develop their own ends. Collectivism renders personal desire pointless (since such desires must be subordinated to the professed good of the whole) and thereby strangles the entire realm of the personal. Having a self—*your* convictions, your ambitions, your values—becomes nearly impossible, as the freedom necessary to exert that self is obliterated.

A self is not simply a body and a passport number. Kira understands the centrality of desire to simply *being* a self.

> I was born and I knew I was alive and I knew what I wanted. What do you think is alive in me? Why do you think I'm alive? Because I have a stomach and eat and digest the food? Because I breathe and work and produce more food to digest? Or because I know what I want, and that something which knows how to want—isn't that life itself? (404)

One reflection of the diminished selves that are possible under collectivism is the diluted emotional experience of those who have adapted to collectivist ways. The marchers at Andrei's funeral are utterly indifferent to the loss of this comrade's life (432–34). Sonia's attitude toward having a baby—usually a joyful prospect—is completely impersonal (316–17). No respect, let alone affection, marks Sonia's marriage. Victor forgets to kiss his wife Marisha as he leaves for his assignment on Lake Volkhov, just pages after the painfully exquisite parting of the trains carrying Sasha and Irina to their separate exiles (353–55). The ache of their parting is a result of the intensity of their love—which is made possible by their each being selfish individuals—which is precisely what collectivism does its utmost to quash. Ayn Rand is showing us not simply people of different political opinions. She is showing us how collectivism produces a different kind of people.

What remains, in collectivist society, are shells of human beings, quivering before party officials, sweatily anxious to please and appease. Far from "a new humanity" or "men of granite," as Timoshenko concludes, collectivism creates "little puny things that wiggle. Little things that can bend both ways, little double-jointed spirits" (372–73).

Alongside its damage to a person's self, self-image, and image of humanity, collectivism also poisons relations between people. Social relations are basically hostile, marked by wariness, resentment, and betrayal. At their best, most "comrades" are indifferent to one another's experience.

What is Pavel's reaction when told that people have been waiting in his office for three hours? "Tell them to go to hell" (288). The hospital refuses to treat Kira's aunt Maria because she does not belong to a trade union (187). Leo cannot obtain medical treatment (for a life-threatening illness) because of his father's former social status and his political views.[26]

One of the reasons for this pervasive callousness is, no doubt, the fact that relations between people are forced. *You* cannot choose whom to associate with, but are made to sacrifice for others, whether you like the relevant others and choose to or not.

Further, collectivist control of the economy causes material scarcity, which pits individuals against one another. By denying the freedom that fuels production and by centralizing distribution, collectivism shackles economic growth and forces people to fight for

access to a shrunken pool of goods doled out by the authorities. The arrival of ever more strangers in one's home, for instance, would hardly encourage communal attitudes, as Fitzpatrick observes. "Envy and covetousness flourished."[27] Since another person's needs typically demand a greater sacrifice from you (for the sake of the collective), wariness and resentment are understandable. Collectivism *creates* a "dog eat dog" universe.

According to Fitzpatrick, collectivist duty as well as shrewd calculation required a person to be "endlessly suspicious" of his fellow citizens. Denouncing someone could be a means either of improving one's own image as a loyal party servant or of gaining more immediate advantages, such as having that person ejected from your apartment.[28] Collectivism encourages people to continually search for what they can "get" on another person. Treachery is instilled as a way of life. You succeed by turning comrades in.[29]

In this environment, personal relationships are reduced from enduring values of potentially great significance to disposable, tactical alliances. Sonia warns Pavel (her *husband*) that she is keeping an eye on his activities (366). Victor obtains a room for Marisha in Leo and Kira's apartment so that he can meet Marisha's friends in the party (176–82). To preclude any damage to his party standing should his sister marry the counterrevolutionary Sasha, Victor turns both of them in to the authorities, resulting in their ten-year sentences to Siberian prisons. And he refuses to try to help his sister at least be with Sasha in exile, thus betraying his pleading father, as well (339, 347–48).

It is worth noting that as a devout collectivist, Victor does not only betray friends and family. He also betrays himself. By marrying Marisha rather than his longtime romantic interest Vava, whose family wealth was politically incorrect, Victor surrenders his own desires. He abdicates his happiness to satisfy the party's decree of how to promote the good of the whole. Where the collective good is enforced as the paramount value, political calculation replaces affection as the basis for social relations. Personal preferences are a luxury that a person cannot afford.

Overall, we observe little brotherhood or warm fellow feeling among the comrades. The only respect or kindness in evidence is offered by those who disdain the collective and who retain the ability to value specific individuals: Kira, giving bread she had waited hours to obtain to her hungry family, and Vasili, giving money to the amputee newspaper vendor who had fought against the Communists years before (146–47, 87). Andrei, a collectivist in name who gradually realizes his truer individualism, also shows respect for his fellows when he allows Captain Karsavin to take his own life (112–13).

ANDREI

If this much describes collectivism's spiritual ramifications for people at large, let us now focus more specifically on the novel's three principal figures. Of these, Andrei undergoes the greatest transformation. Collectivism destroys him not as one of its enemies, but despite his being among its staunchest advocates. Unlike Leo and Kira, Andrei accepts collectivist ideology, but ultimately finds that it crushes *him.* Introduced as a steely Communist hero, in the end, Andrei publicly renounces the party and takes his own life.

What enables this transformation is the fact that from the start, Andrei is self-possessed. Whereas the party loyalty of Victor, Sonia, Pavel, and their ilk consists of "playing the game" to stay on the higher-ups' good side, Andrei's allegiance stems from philosophical conviction. He fought in the revolution, before the outcome was assured and the party gained power, because he

sincerely believed in its ideals. Collectivism would improve people's lives, he thought, and Andrei valued human life. It is only when he comes to see that collectivism does not actually value life that he abandons that philosophy.

The contrast between Andrei and the party groupies could not be clearer. His values and his identity led him to embrace the party; their amorphous identities are *supplied* by the party. While the Victors and Sonias are playthings of the authorities, tapping to whatever tempo party leaders dictate, Andrei is his own man. He embraced collectivism because he thought it was based on noble ideals; he rejects it when he judges it to be evil.

Kira is attracted to Andrei's integrity. She senses that his is a colossal, but honest, intellectual error. His honesty is evident in the fact that he pursues the truth about the party and about Leo and Kira, knowing the pain and punishment that might result. What binds Kira and Andrei is their basic root: their belief in life, as Kira describes it (117). Like Kira, Andrei is independent, as anyone who truly loves his own life must be. "I joined the Party because I knew I was right. I love you, because I know I'm right" (278). He thinks for himself. And increasingly, he *wants* things for himself—for his pleasure in seeing Kira wear certain clothes, for instance. Andrei eventually accepts the idea, foreign in a collectivist society, that things' loveliness *to him* is reason enough to pursue them (357).

Over the course of his relationship with Kira, Andrei becomes more of an egoist. More precisely, the egoism muffled by his commitment to collectivism emerges more explicitly, as he gradually recognizes its propriety. At the roof garden of the European Hotel with Kira, Andrei speaks of discovering what it's like to have "no purpose but myself" and "how sacred a purpose that can be . . ." He realizes that "a life is possible whose only justification is my own joy" (277). It is largely *through* loving Kira that Andrei discovers the value of his own life. Observing his reactions to her reveals to him the entire realm of truly personal values. Originally, he admits, he thought of going to the stylish bar as a sacrifice for Kira's sake. "And now I like it" (277).

Andrei's love for Kira is at once intense and tender. He relishes her reading a book whose hero shares his name (247). Sometimes, he tells her, "I want just a look at you . . . the same day you've been here . . . sometimes even a minute after you've left" (247). The fact that she means so much to him is a sign of his strong self-love. Kira could not mean so much to Andrei unless *his* happiness meant so much.

As Ayn Rand has explained elsewhere, love is not a causeless emotion. The emotional force of love results from a person's underlying evaluation of the object loved—and of how it affects his happiness. Without an unequivocal commitment to his own happiness, however, a person would not have the foundation necessary for a definite, strong valuing of any particular person. "Only a rationally selfish man, a man of *self-esteem*, is capable of love—because he is the only man capable of holding firm, consistent, uncompromising, unbetrayed values."[30] The more developed a person's own identity and knowledge of his values and the more deeply a person values himself, the more he can appreciate another person's genuine value to him—and correspondingly, feel profound love for that person. As the hero of *The Fountainhead* says, "To say 'I love you' one must first know how to say the 'I.'"[31]

Andrei's virtue—his independence, his honesty, his integrity, his egoism—leads him to pursue the evidence he is encountering, to face its profound implications, and to take appropriate action. He pursues the case against Leo despite Kira's begging him not to because *he* needs to establish whether the party has integrity (385–86). Once he reaches his conclusions, he addresses his critique directly to the party, bravely attacking its most central creeds, declaring that "No one

can tell men what they must live for." Every honest man, Andrei proclaims in his speech, lives for himself. "The one who does not, does not truly live" (408).

Collectivism does not permit a man to live for himself. Thus, Andrei realizes, collectivism does not permit life.

Andrei's integrity is equally great in the personal sphere. When Andrei learns that Kira had actually loved Leo all along, he is pained largely because of the pain that he has caused her. Since he cherishes Kira, the thought that he had been a source of pain to her is piercing. And consider his response after Kira's tirade explaining the reasons for her relationship with Andrei: he would have done the same thing (405). This is a man of a large and honest soul.

Andrei takes his own life, yet it is collectivism that destroys him. At one level, he is disillusioned by its lies and corruption. While most party members cynically accept the double standards and disdain for those not well connected, Andrei's commitment had been earnest. This was the basis for his distinguished career in collectivism's service. By the story's end, the entire worldview to which Andrei had ardently devoted himself has been kicked out from under him. The problem cannot be solved by cleansing the party of a few bad apples. Andrei realizes that collectivism requires hypocrisy; a person *couldn't* faithfully follow its dictates. He sees how collectivism has shattered his personal life, forcing Kira to fake a love for him in order to save another man. The greatest value that Andrei had ever enjoyed, his love affair with Kira, is thus revealed to be a sham.[32]

Still more devastating than his discovery of Kira's true motivations, which Andrei understands, is what Andrei discovers about what *he* has done. Andrei realizes that he had been a traitor to himself all these years (358)—and that that is what collectivist principles demand. It was only to the extent that he had deviated from the collectivist course that he found himself, enjoyed himself, and truly lived.

Collectivism teaches you to kill yourself *while* living. This is what Kira realizes, in the passage cited as my preface, long before Andrei. In a sense, then, ending his life physically was only the completion of the extended suicide he had committed through his years of dutiful self-abnegation for the collective.

Andrei is spiritually crushed, in the end, by the realization that he had erected two altars, as Kira puts it: on one stood a harlot, and on the other, the immoral speculator citizen Morozov (404). This was the "life" that collectivism had given him.

KIRA

I cannot describe the spiritual destruction of Kira because no such destruction takes place. She is the exception. While she is gunned down physically by the collectivist state, Kira remains spiritually unconquered, her soul intact.

Kira's spirit survives because of the unusual depth of her egoism. She exerts heroic independence against the most extraordinary obstacles. Kira refuses to acquiesce to the reigning political dogma or to seek a "safer" existence, recognizing that no security worth having could result from surrendering her own judgment.

Frequently, Kira seems oblivious to the burdens of Soviet living conditions. She does not notice what she is eating, whether she is hungry, or the dimness of the reading light (36, 55). She certainly suffers the deprivations as much as any—the food, the cold, the cramped living quarters. Indeed, she is expelled from school and thus denied the pursuit of her passion, engineering. Yet these blows remain, at core, peripheral. She does not allow her experience to be

defined by external events. Witness her attitude toward politics, as she tells Andrei: "I don't want to fight for the people, I don't want to fight against the people, I don't want to hear of the people. I want to be left alone—to live" (90).

Kira is wholly selfish. She feels reverence for her own life and wants "the best, the greatest, the highest possible, here, now, for [my] very own" (117). Kira thinks continually of the future, of life abroad, of her values. On arriving in St. Petersburg, she relishes "the streets of a big city where so much is possible" (25). Getting to know Leo, she tells him not about her present but about all that she will construct in the future (83). On lines for rations, "she thought that somewhere beyond all these many things which did not count, was her life with Leo" (199).[33] At school, thoughts of the future bring her solace (202). Even late in the story, she looks longingly at a construction site, telling herself "Perhaps . . . some day . . . abroad . . ." (324).

The future was consecrated, for Kira, "because it was *her* future" (50, emphasis in original). Kira is not in denial. She is not a naïve schoolgirl and this is not evasive escapism. It is devotion to her own positive values that drives Kira to action—to everything from secretly sewing a dress in order to look attractive to Leo to sleeping with Andrei in order to save Leo. Ultimately, Kira's self-love leads her to try to cross the border and escape altogether collectivism's stranglehold. While Kira may not gripe about collectivism's daily assaults as much as her neighbors, she fights collectivism far more profoundly—physically, by attempting escape; spiritually, by never surrendering her soul.

To the end, Kira is living—acting, trying, aiming at a selfish purpose. Her attitude toward life is not fundamentally altered by the carnage around her or by her own suffering. Kira holds fast to herself—to her judgment, her values, and the goal of her own happiness. "I'll be afraid only on a day that will never come," she tells Irina. "The day when I give up" (350).

Yet it is precisely Kira's unshakeable commitment to herself that dooms her under collectivism. Her drive to make the most of her life is what collectivism emphatically opposes. The doctrine demanding individual submission before group supremacy will not abide a woman pursuing her own well-being. It greets any attempt to break free with bullets.

Human life, by its nature, is individual. Only individual human beings breathe and think and feel. Insofar as collectivism denounces the individual as subordinate to the group, collectivism sets itself against life itself, permitting only the living death we witness among the prisoners of St. Petersburg: begging for favors, food, jobs, pumping the primus and coughing through greasy soup, memorizing propaganda, with bribery and betrayal the only means of eking out a precarious subsistence. Anyone who is truly living—anyone like Kira, cultivating personal values and pursuing a selfish purpose—is exterminated. Our heroine remains smiling in the end; yet, for the glory of the collective good, she is also bleeding to death.

LEO

Unlike Kira and Andrei, Leo is not killed—yet he is hardly better off. His protracted spiritual death may actually be a more cruel fate.

Leo is largely defeated from the outset—from his first encounters with Kira. He admits to having no desires other than to desire something (83). It is safer not to aspire, he says; he struggles to muster the will to fight lice (83). And he advises Kira not to look too closely at people (62).

Leo does manage some resistance, early on. His attempt to flee to Germany with Kira is fueled by hope for a better life abroad. Once that effort fails, however, we see a steady, ever

more encompassing descent. Leo becomes a gambler and drinker, reckless in both word and action. He defies the rules of the state, spends irresponsibly the money he makes at illegal speculation, and flaunts his wealth in ways that could only invite official scrutiny. Leo is maddeningly indifferent to significant positive events: his return to Kira in good health after lengthy treatment at the Crimean sanatorium, his release after being arrested (261, 417–19). It is as if normal human reactions have been drained out of him. We would expect excitement, or at least relief, on these occasions, some enthusiasm for new opportunities. Collectivism, however, permits a man no opportunities.

In Leo, we observe most completely the spiritual devastation of collectivism. (Andrei retains the will to take his own life; in Leo, even that is destroyed.) On Leo's return from the Crimea, Kira "noticed something in his eyes that had not been cured; something that, perhaps, had grown beyond cure" (261). Leo is utterly without hope. Collectivism has shredded Leo's will to live.

Fairly early in his downward spiral, when Kira objects to his drinking and urges him to take care of himself, Leo's response is simply: "for what?" (213). When she asks him why he drinks, he replies: "why shouldn't I?" (216). His attitude is at best one of resignation. While Kira struggles to obtain medical care for his incipient tuberculosis, "she made Leo do his share of inquiries. He obeyed without arguing, without complaining," but also "without hope" (222).

On returning from the treatment, Kira asks if he is completely well and free to live again. "I am well—yes. As to living again . . ." (261). Asked his plans for the winter by Kira's father, Leo admits to having none. "Nor for any winter to come" (274). When Kira pleads with him not to be a front in the speculative venture with Morozov, warning that he would be risking his life, Leo counters that it is not much to risk (284). Finally, when Kira proposes another attempt to flee the country, his reaction epitomizes his broken spirit: "Why bother?" (363).

Reading the novel, it is easy to be exasperated by Leo's behavior. Yet he illustrates perfectly the psychological ravages inflicted by collectivism. As Ayn Rand observed, it is the background that creates these characters' tragedy.[34] In a free society, background would be only that: background. But collectivism's obliteration of individual freedom asphyxiates its subjects. Any anger at Leo presupposes a context in which rational action is possible and can be efficacious. That is what collectivism prevents.

By denying freedom, Leo understands, collectivism kills the future. Slavenka Drakulic, the Yugoslav writer, describes this as a particularly corrosive legacy of collectivist ideology.

> What communism instilled in us was precisely this immobility, this absence of a future, the absence of a dream, of the possibility of imagining our lives differently. There was hardly a way to say to yourself: This is just temporary, it will pass, it must. On the contrary, we learned to think: This will go on forever, no matter what we do. We can't change it. It looked as if the omnipotent system had mastered time itself.[35]

In a later book, written several years after the relevant collectivist governments had dissolved, Drakulic observes East Europeans' continuing image of the future as "distant and blurred and not yet to be trusted."[36]

This corrosion of hope is palpable in *We the Living.* At a party, amid guests exchanging tales of conditions abroad, a girl who reports hearing of shopping without ration cards confesses that she does not really believe it (153–54). When their freedom and potential are so completely withdrawn, people gradually lose the ability even to conceive that a better world is possible.

By erasing prospects of a worthwhile future, collectivism punctures the motivation to embrace purposes. It makes no sense to adopt specific personal objectives when any attempts to achieve them may be arbitrarily thwarted at any time. A person is permitted to pursue only those ends that the state approves. Could you start your own business? No. Could you be an engineer? Not if you are not politically correct. Could you simply spend an evening as you like? Not if party meetings call; not if you speak German and the authorities deem it useful to the collective that more of your comrades learn German.

When personal purposes are irrelevant and one's days are dictated by slave masters, it is little wonder that a man would lose his appetite for life. The more clearly a person understands the essential character of collectivist constraints—that the natural course of causal relations will be unpredictably obstructed, that any plans he makes are subject to obstacles imposed by people whose only claim to do so rests in their ability to literally force his compliance, and that reason itself is moot—the more natural it is to concede defeat. If reason is futile, why try to reason? When life is reduced to a crapshoot, playing craps seems a logical response. Leo lives for today, one might say, because today is all that collectivism grants him.

Contrary to this description of Leo as resigned, one might suppose that Leo's defiance of the authorities represents resistance. He does not meekly acquiesce to the government's dictates; he does not dutifully accommodate himself to an approved Soviet job, or study communist homilies to placate party bosses. Leo has decided to live as *best* he can under the circumstances, seemingly enjoying the finer things he can get his hands on. He thumbs his nose at the authorities, all but daring them to catch and punish him.

Such resistance is more of a surrender than it may superficially appear, however. For, were he a free man, drinking and gambling would not have been Leo's way. He would not have been tempted to become a gigolo. Aimless amusement does not reflect his true identity. What we are seeing, in fact, are simply the tormented squirmings of a defeated soul.

Leo was a smart man. We may be reluctant to acknowledge that. The idea that such a bleak outlook and prodigal waste of talent could in any way be right or even associated with intelligence is anathema to many people's sense of the world. In a free society, where rationality is allowed and rewarded, intelligence is a person's path to success, the tool enabling him to achieve values and attain happiness. Under collectivist clamps, however, Leo's ability to recognize the futility of purpose or rational action only accelerates his decline. It also makes it more wrenching to witness, since we can glimpse what Leo might have been.

Admirable as we find Kira, that admiration is premised on a different kind of society from the one that she inhabits. In the world as it should be, where individuals are free to chart their own course and seek their own happiness, Kira's attitude is exactly right: steadfast adherence to her own judgment of what is possible, what is good, what is worth pursuing.

In the context of collectivism, however, her virtues cannot save her. It is fitting that Kira is killed. For collectivism is opposed—in principle and in practice—to individual life. Thus we observe its smothering of Leo, its crucifixion of Andrei, and its physical annihilation of Kira.

The cliché has it that "Where there's life, there's hope." Ayn Rand's portrait of Leo makes plain that where there is no freedom, no future, and no hope, there can be no true life. Under collectivism's vise, all that is possible to an individual is a life that isn't worth having. Thus Andrei commits suicide, Kira risks death in order to escape, and Leo is murdered spiritually, bereft of all desire.

Collectivism kills Leo, just as surely as it kills the others, though he remains breathing at the end. In their penultimate encounter, even Kira accepts this: “His eyes were dead and she turned away, for she felt that those eyes should be closed” (441).

CONCLUSION

The destruction wreaked by collectivism that is portrayed in *We the Living* is not an aberration of a particular regime. The official who tells Kira that a citizen is merely a brick aptly captures the collectivist creed, however varied in details its application might be. The defining ideal of collectivism—the subordination of the individual to the collective—proclaims its hostility to life. For there *is* no collective apart from the particular members of a group. As Ayn Rand wrote in a 1936 letter, “You cannot claim that you have a healthy forest composed of rotting trees. I’m afraid that collectivists cannot see the trees for the forest.”[37] Life is inescapably individual. To condemn individuals is to condemn the only kinds of beings that do and can live. Collectivism is an anti-life philosophy.

If Leo is smart, so is Kira. For she recognizes the spiritual destruction of this doctrine, seeing how collectivism forbids life even to those still living. The irony—and the tragedy—is that collectivism triumphs in *We the Living*.[38] Its enemies are defeated. But *what* is won? For whom? Corpses and broken souls accumulate across its pages—of Andrei and Kira and Leo, of Irina and Sasha, Timoshenko, Maria, Vava, Vasili, Victor, Pavel, Sonia. While collectivism’s enemies are defeated, by the nature of collectivism, so are its friends. So is every individual.[39]

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1. Ayn Rand, “The Psycho-Epistemology of Art,” *The Romantic Manifesto: A Philosophy of Literature*, revised edition (New York: Signet, 1975), 15–24, especially 21–22. Also see (in the same collection) “Art and Sense of Life,” 34–44, especially 38; and “The Goal of My Writing,” 162–72, especially 169–70.

2. In a 1936 letter, Ayn Rand made clear that she considered the novel to be concerned not exclusively with communism but with all forms of collectivism. Michael S. Berliner, ed., *Letters of Ayn Rand* (New York: Dutton, 1995), 33. A film of *We the Living* released in Italy in 1942 was banned when the Fascist government realized that its message was anti-fascist as much as anti-communist. See Leonard Peikoff’s introduction to the sixtieth anniversary edition of *We the Living*, ix–x. Hitler, whose Nazis (National Socialists) represented another variant of collectivism, clearly articulated the collectivist attitude: “There will be no license, no free space, in which the individual belongs to himself. This is Socialism— . . .” Hermann Rauschning, *The Voice of Destruction* (New York: Putnam’s, 1940), 191–93. A slogan of Cambodian communism ran: “Losing you is not a loss, and keeping you is no specific gain.” Stéphane Courtois et al., *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression.* Translated by Jonathan Murphy and Mark Kraemer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 597.

Ayn Rand critiqued collectivism in many of her nonfiction writings. See, for instance, “The New Fascism: Rule by Consensus,” “‘Extremism’ or The Art of Smearing,” and “Theory and Practice,” *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal,* expanded paperback edition (New York: Signet, 1967), and “Racism” and “Collectivized ‘Rights,’” in *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism* (New York: New American Library, 1964).

3. Courtois, *Black Book*, x. The authors are former Communists or fellow travelers, xii. Many of these examples specifically concern Communism both because that is the species of collectivism

encountered in *We the Living* and because the Communist USSR was the powerhouse of collectivist regimes, thus it offers the fairest basis for comparisons.

4. Courtois, *Black Book*, xi. Since that book focuses on Communism, the Nazi deaths are cited as a point of contrast, and are not included in the eighty-five to one hundred million.

5. Robert Conquest, *Harvest of Sorrow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 1.

6. Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Failure—The Birth and Death of Communism in the 20th Century* (New York: Scribner's, 1989), 237.

7. David Horowitz, *The Politics of Bad Faith* (New York: The Free Press, 1998), 98ff. For more on the Soviet economic record, see Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted—The Soviet Collapse, 1970–2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

8. Paul Starobin and Catherine Belton. "What's in It for Putin?" *BusinessWeek*, May 27, 2002, 55.

9. Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism—Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 43, 41. *We the Living* is set in the 1920s, when conditions were a bit better, but basically similar.

10. Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 44.

11. Slavenka Drakulic, *Café Europa—Life after Communism* (New York: Norton, 1996), 72–73.

12. Bryon MacWilliams, "Communism at Uncomfortably Close Quarters," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 26, 2002, A56. The book is Ilya Utekhin, *Essays on Communal Life.* Some chapters are available in English at http://utekhin.da.ru.

13. Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 41. Fitzpatrick quotes a survivor of the Soviet regime, who had expected that in a collectivist society, "'ideas' would be everything and that 'things' would hardly count" because, as the woman put it in a letter, "everyone would have what they wanted without superfluities." On the contrary, the woman found that things "had never been so important." Things mattered enormously, Fitzpatrick concludes, "for the simple reason that they were so hard to get" (40).

14. Ayn Rand, "The Objectivist Ethics," *Virtue of Selfishness*, 35.

15. Spiritual goods include such things as books, art, friendships, self-respect, and intelligence. For more on spiritual values, see Tara Smith, *Viable Values: A Study of Life as the Root and Reward of Morality* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), chapter 5, especially 136–43.

16. Berliner, *Letters*, 18. Also see 12–13.

17. Slavenka Drakulic, *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed* (New York: Norton, 1991), 179–89.

18. Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 59–65. Drakulic discusses the criminalization of the populace in *Cafe Europa*, 112.

19. In various places, people were punished for wearing hats, for instance, or wearing dirty clothes on the streetcar. Fitzpatrick cites several examples. Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 34. It was a crime to be a "socially dangerous person," a loosely defined catchall category. *Black Book*, 135–36. Ayn Rand offers a perceptive analysis of the reasons for this in *Atlas Shrugged* (New York: Random House, 1957; Signet thirty-fifth anniversary paperback edition, 1992), 406. Dr. Ferris explains that the authorities want the laws broken, "since there's no way to rule innocent men."

20. See Courtois, *Black Book*, 420, 483 for some examples of these tactics in practice.

21. For an excellent discussion of the virtue of independence, see Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* (New York: Dutton, 1991) 251–59. Fully, the virtue encompasses making one's own way materially as well as intellectually.

22. In the words of Anders Aslund, "the communist system was the most thoroughly politicized system the world has seen." Anders Aslund, *Building Capitalism: The Transformation of the Former Soviet Bloc* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 23.

23. Ayn Rand describes a second-hander (or social metaphysician) as a person "who regards the consciousness of other men as superior to his own and to the facts of reality." "The Argument from

Intimidation," *Virtue of Selfishness*, 165. Also see "The Nature of the Second-Hander," *For the New Intellectual* (New York: Random House, 1961; Signet paperback edition, 1963), 68–71.

24. For her analysis of the "common good" that this subservience is supposed to advance, I strongly recommend Ayn Rand, "What Is Capitalism?" in *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*, especially 20–21.

25. Drakulic makes a similar observation, writing that communism breeds masses rather than individuals. *Cafe Europa*, 104.

26. These attitudes would be applauded by Lenin, who ruthlessly advocated "a bullet in the head" for speculators and who repeatedly employed terror against his own citizens. Courtois, *Black Book*, 59. Lenin's "benevolence" was equally apparent when he elaborated on the positive results that a domestic famine would bring. Courtois, Black Book, 123–24.

27. Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 47–48.

28. Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 19, 135, 22.

29. Fitzpatrick reports that people were encouraged to break off relations with a person who was deported and that children of arrested parents were strongly pressured to renounce them. Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 125, 213.

30. Ayn Rand, "Objectivist Ethics," 35, emphasis hers.

31. Ayn Rand, *The Fountainhead* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1943; Signet fiftieth anniversary paperback edition, 1993), 377.

32. Kira's feelings for Andrei are complex. While she does not value Andrei as she does Leo, she does develop strong feelings for him and in some sense comes to love Andrei.

33. For those familiar with *Atlas Shrugged.* Kira seems to embody the attitude expressed by Dagny, when she asks Galt: "We never had to take any of it seriously, did we?" (702). For Rand's comment on this passage, see Berliner, *Letters*, 583–84.

34. Berliner, *Letters*, 17.

35. Drakulic, *How We Survived*, 7.

36. Drakulic, *Café Europa*, 67. Fitzpatrick writes that Russian collectivism encouraged fatalism and passivity, since a citizen realized that he could not control his own fate. At the same time, because even strictly abiding by the rules afforded no reliable security, Fitzpatrick also found that people took surprising risks. Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 219, 221.

37. Berliner, *Letters*, 35. For more of Ayn Rand's analysis of this issue, see the entire letter and note 24, above.

38. It does not, of course, triumph over the human spirit, as Kira's attempt to escape and attitude in dying make plain. See Ayn Rand, *The Art of Fiction*, Tore Boeckmann, ed. (New York: Plume, 2000), 174.

39. Thanks to Robert Mayhew for many very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.