

Honoring the Christians persecuted under Bolshevik rule requires knowing their stories

How Rod Dreher gets Russian history—and the American present—wrong

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June 24, 2021



Russian Clergy on Forced Labor, by Ivan Vladimirov, 1919 (Wikimedia Commons, public domain)

Many American Christians are familiar with the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Christian who heroically resisted Nazism—and paid the ultimate price. Yet how many are aware of the Christians who suffered and died in Central and Eastern Europe under Bolshevik rule? This persecution [claimed far more lives](#) than the Roman persecution of Christians in the first centuries—and it happened in our own era. Surely these Christians' experiences and witness deserve to be better known.

In *Live Not by Lies*, Rod Dreher sets out to look at their example as lessons for Christians living in the West. He raises some deeply important questions about tensions between Christian and modern understandings of the human person. But his discussion of the experiences of Christians who suffered under communism fails to reckon with the profundity or complexity of that situation.

As [Benjamin Dueholm has pointed out](#), Dreher is interested in the suffering of Christians under communism not for their own sake, but rather to weaponize them for the American culture wars. Dreher does this by identifying the contemporary American Left with the Bolsheviks, caricaturing progressive identity politics as a new “soft totalitarianism” that’s as intolerant of Christianity as their communist predecessors.

To compare American Christians who feel like they have to keep their beliefs to themselves at the workplace or [feel harassed online because of their religious beliefs](#) to the tens of thousands of Christians who were executed, tortured, or sent to the Gulag for decades simply for living their faith under communism is an offense to the memory and the suffering of the latter.

Further, Dreher’s book is based on only a handful of interviews of people in Eastern Europe, and it reflects a superficial knowledge of the experience of Christians under communism. He seems not to have consulted any of the growing number of studies of religion in the Soviet Union or in communist Eastern Europe. This leads Dreher to make several faulty comparisons between Revolutionary Russian society and contemporary American society.

Unlike the United States, where power changes hands between parties by democratic means, Russia before 1917 was ruled by an autocracy which refused to reform, preventing democratic liberalism from introducing moderate, gradual change in the country. Only the most militant and radical of all opposition groups could succeed in seizing power, replacing one autocracy with another. The

Bolsheviks imposed their totalitarian model by force through a complete monopoly of power and ideology, which drove them to suppress Christianity alongside all alternative ideological viewpoints, including Leftist ones. Dreher also draws inaccurate parallels between the Bolsheviks and intellectuals of the American progressive Left. He paints a superficially monolithic picture of Democrats, who are in reality neither united nor in possession of the coercive means to enforce uniformity.

Noting that the West has become post-Christian, Dreher falsely claims that those who have “rejected religious faith,” as he puts it, will “oppose Christians when we stand up for our principles—in particular, in defense of the traditional family, of male and female gender roles, and of the sanctity of human life.” There has indeed been a sharp increase in religiously unaffiliated Americans (from [15.3% of Americans in 2007](#) to [28% in 2020](#)), with considerably higher rates among younger Americans. But instead of asking why young people are increasingly leaving their churches, Dreher builds a defensive bastion to protect those inside from threatening outsiders.

Scholars have noted the correlation between the [rise of the Religious Right and the decrease in Christian belonging in the US](#). The politicization of Christianity’s traditional values and the fixation on white grievance have resulted in a Christianity that fails to speak to increasing numbers of young people. As [Charles Mathewes has suggested](#), “it is Christians’ fears of losing control of the culture that have accelerated the rise of secularism itself.”

A different anxiety emerges in the second half of *Live Not by Lies*, and it’s one that resonates with my own experiences of living in Russia and Romania. Many Christians in the former communist world are finding that Western consumer capitalism—with its vision of freedom defined by self-satisfaction through material consumption—is as dehumanizing as communism was. While communism overtly repressed anyone who dissented, consumer capitalism lures people into believing the choices it gives them are an expression of their own freedom. As one of Dreher’s informants told him, 30 years of “liberal capitalism” succeeded in eroding cultural memory and disintegrating the family more than either Nazism or Communism.

The real threat to authentic Christian faith is the modern autonomous self which reduces the human person to being a consumer and the individual’s good to whatever brings self-fulfillment. But Dreher mistakenly identifies the modern self exclusively with freedom of sexual expression and gender identity. In fact, the

assumption of the modern self is at the core of the “old-fashioned liberalism” that Dreher lauds, with its strong emphasis on individual rights that can be traced back to the Enlightenment.

Socialism at least maintained some sense of the common good beyond the individual. The entire function of advanced capitalism depends on the modern notion of the self, and this has nothing to do with conservative or liberal. If anything, the Right has been the most deeply uncritical champion of consumer capitalism, which conservative Christians have also wholeheartedly embraced since the Cold War.

Some of the arguments in Dreher’s book, such as his critique of “surveillance capitalism,” might have been starting points for challenging both the Left and the Right from a consistent Christian perspective. Instead, Dreher does what he accuses the Left of doing: treating entire categories of people (“intellectual elites” especially) as enemies, caricaturing them as the vanguard of a gender identity revolution. Apparently, he is trying to scare his readers into taking Christian discipleship seriously. Ecumenical [Patriarch Bartholomew](#) has presented a much more compelling case for how traditional Christian spiritual disciplines can challenge the consumerist drive—and contribute to a more just society.

The greatest Christians under communism, from Patriarch Tikhon at the beginning to Father [Aleksandr Men](#) at the end of the Soviet period (neither of whom are mentioned in Dreher’s book) sought ways to critically engage and speak to Soviet society without fear that doing so would compromise their faith. Dreher takes his title from the Russian philosopher and novelist Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, but he misses one of Solzhenitsyn’s most powerful ideas, from [The Gulag Archipelago](#): “The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart—and through all human hearts.”