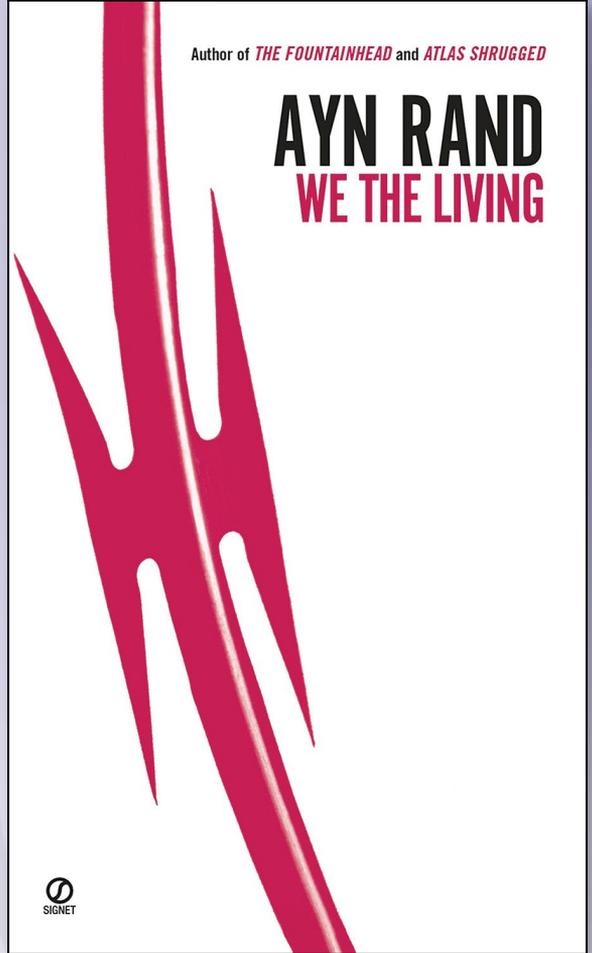


INCLUDES: SUMMARIES, STUDY QUESTIONS,  
AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING



## We the Living

By Ayn Rand

Teacher's Guide by Michael S. Berliner, Ph.D.

For 10th - 12th graders

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## INTRODUCTION AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

At a farewell party before Ayn Rand left Soviet Russia for America in 1926, a family friend urged her: “When you get out, tell the rest of the world that we are dying here.” *We the Living*, published ten years later, fulfilled her promise to that friend. It was also a promise that the fictional Kira Argounova wanted to fulfill for her Uncle Vasili: “I’ll tell them over there, where I’m going, I’ll tell them about everything. And maybe someone, somewhere, will understand.”

*We the Living* was Ayn Rand’s first major work. She had previously written short stories, scripts for silent films, and a play (*Night of January 16th*) that was produced in Hollywood and on Broadway. But *We the Living* was her first attempt at fiction with an explicit philosophic theme. She began working on it only three years after her arrival in America, while she was struggling to learn and then master the English language. Nevertheless, upon publication in 1936, reviewers praised her writing style as “remarkably fluent English” (*New York Times*), “beautifully written” (*Washington Post*) and “irreproachable English” (*London Times Literary Supplement*).

In some ways, *We the Living* is autobiographical. The background is drawn from Ayn Rand’s life under the Soviets (she was twelve when the revolution started and twenty when she left Russia). Such things as the details of the revolution, Communist control and terror, general living conditions—all of these mirrored what she and her family lived through. In many cases, as she later related, she took “chronologically the exact events as

they were happening at the time.” One example was the purge of university students whose parents were proletarian; and many of the small details were taken from her own life, such as the music she liked. Many of the characters were based on members of the extended Rosenbaum (her birth name) family: Ayn Rand’s sister Nora was the basis for the character of cousin Irina, her actual father was the basis for Uncle Vasili, and her real mother had much in common with Kira’s fictional mother. Leo’s name and some of his characteristics were drawn from Ayn Rand’s first romantic interest, Lev (Leo) Bekkerman, who (unknown to Ayn Rand) was executed in 1937 as a “counter-revolutionary.” (For details regarding the real-life bases for these characters, see Scott McConnell’s essay “Parallel Lives” in *Essays on Ayn Rand’s “We the Living,”* edited by Robert Mayhew.) Andrei was totally fictional, as was the story of Kira, Andrei and Leo. But was Kira based on Ayn Rand herself? Yes and no, as she wrote in 1959: “The specific events of Kira’s life were not mine; her ideas, her convictions, her values were and are.” As a university student, Ayn Rand studied history and philosophy, not engineering (Kira’s field), and Ayn Rand was more philosophical than Kira (Ayn Rand began writing fiction at the age of eight and started a philosophic diary at the age of twelve). But she shared Kira’s independence and self-sufficiency, hatred of dictatorship and hatred of a moral philosophy that demanded that people live for something other than their own happiness.

## THE THEME

The theme of *We the Living* is “the individual against the state, and, more specifically, the evil of statism.” (Statism is the view that man’s life belongs to the state, which holds unlimited power.) Here’s how Ayn Rand stated the plot-theme (the basic plot situation by means of which the theme is presented): “A woman sells herself, not to a villain who forces her

into it, but to a man who really loves her, whom she respects and whose love she takes seriously. He does not want to buy her, and she must hide from him that it is a sale—but she has to sell herself to save the man she really loves, a man who happens to be the particular person the buyer hates most.”

## THE STORY (PART ONE)

The story opens in a rotting Petrograd in 1922. The long civil war between the Bolsheviks (the Reds) and their opponents (the Whites) has ended. The city is in chaos and its citizens are starving, terrorized, hopeless, hostile and helpless against the military and police power of the Communist government. The Argounova family has returned from four years in the Crimea, where they awaited the Bolshevik defeat that never came. One of the family members is Kira, the novel's heroine, who, at eighteen years old, is set to begin the great adventure of life. Despite the living conditions and the constant assault of Red propaganda, Kira is positive and excited. She wants a career as an engineer (because engineering is honest, creative and fact-based), but her family urges her to play it safe and choose a career unrelated to her personal values and one more appropriate for a female. She wants to build not for the Red state but for herself, and, in her first philosophic statement, disavows any duty to "society," rejecting the notion that society is anything other than individuals. Her heroes, we learn, are not the masses, not the Soviet worker, but rather Vikings, conquerors and achievers.

Kira, who has started her studies at the Technological Institute, meets Leo Kovalensky and is attracted to his independence of spirit. Given the growing power of the Reds and their anti-bourgeois policies, many, including Leo, have become cynical and increasingly hopeless; they are convinced that it's not worth having ambition and goals. Kira also meets Andrei Taganov, who works for the GPU (the secret police). Andrei is a Communist but not out of duty or opportunism: he thinks that Communism is right

and that he can raise the quality of the masses. Kira is attracted to his underlying character but not to his ideas. In a discussion with Andrei, Kira makes her first extended philosophic statement—that man does not live for the state. When Kira is questioned by the authorities about her meeting with Leo, Andrei intervenes on her behalf. Kira's father's business has failed, and, like other non-Communists, he is drawn into illegal dealings, the only option for non-Communists. Kira voices her atheism, rejecting the view that there is anything above man, and she tells Andrei that whereas he is willing to kill for his ideas, she wants only to live for her ideas. She and Leo try to escape Soviet Russia but are caught. Her mother is outraged and shamed by Kira's love affair with Leo and banishes Kira from their home. Kira vows to fight against Communist injustice, but Leo has little hope. Kira eventually reconciles with her mother, who has taken a Soviet job and mouths Soviet slogans. Leo can't get a job, because he's not a Party member. Kira and Leo's rent is raised, because people must pay based on their social class and not their earnings. Leo gets more cynical, as life becomes more unjust and arbitrary. The overriding goal of Kira and Leo now is to go abroad. Kira continues her friendship with Andrei, who has fallen in love with her. Life becomes more degrading, with relatives and supposed friends informing on each other and seeking political influence. Desperate to help Leo and to get him into a sanatorium for his tuberculosis, Kira begins an affair with Andrei, who gives her money, purportedly to help a sick relative.

and thrive. (This anticipates her 1958 characterization of her philosophy, Objectivism, as a "philosophy for living on earth.") Life, for human beings, requires political freedom, which allows people to act on their thinking,

## PART ONE STUDY QUESTIONS

### What does Kira mean when she says that the USSR "forbids life to those still living"?

She means that the Soviet system makes it illegal and ultimately impossible for people to do what they need to do in order to live

their independent judgment of what's true and what's valuable. Human beings can survive and thrive only by the use of reason, but collectivism in general, and Soviet Russia in particular, eliminates political freedom and makes it illegal to think for yourself and act on your own judgment. An example of forbidding life to the living is Leo: Although he is not put before a firing squad, he is denied what he needs in order to live a human life, e.g., education and work. He is condemned to what amounts to a drawn-out death sentence. Ayn Rand's working title for *We the Living* was "Airtight," which she took from a line in the novel that expressed the attempt by the Soviets to prevent people from living as humans: "You've driven us all into an iron cellar and you've closed all doors, and you've locked us airtight, airtight till the blood vessels of our spirits burst!"

### What attracted Kira to Leo and to Andrei?

Kira responded to Leo's independence, which she recognized the first time she met him. He thought for himself, chose his own values, and had no interest in being part of the crowd. He was severe, self-sufficient and evoked the spirit of Kira's ideal man. What attracted Kira to Andrei was his purposefulness and honesty. Kira said "no" to his words (the ideas he espoused and tried to live by) but "yes" to his voice, i.e., his integrity and commitment to what he believed in. In contrast to Leo, Andrei believes (at least at this point in the novel) that his values and ideals can be achieved.

### Why do visiting peasants get propaganda lectures rather than real help for their problems, such as shortages?

(1) The problems, e.g., shortages, faced by the peasants were caused by the government, as the leaders well know. The only way to actually solve the problems is for the govern-

ment to stop controlling the lives and business activities of the peasants, but the government can't admit that. The only "solution" they allow themselves to undertake is to arrest speculators, hoarders and private traders (which the Soviets' planned economy has created). (2) The purpose of the system is to maintain control of people's lives; thus there is no attempt at practical solutions (other than the occasional relaxation of economic controls, called the NEP, or New Economic Policy). The overriding goal is that all people, including starving peasants, become part of the Greater Whole.

### Why is there so much emphasis on illegal business dealing, much of it by racketeers?

Business (the exchange of goods, such as food, clothing, shelter) is unavoidable in any economic system, if people are going to survive. But in the Soviet world of *We the Living*, all economic activity is controlled by the state, which owns all businesses (private businesses, like that of Kira's father, have been nationalized); there is no private property and no freedom to buy or sell without the permission of the state. The normal business dealings we take for granted are illegal. Some honest Soviet citizens engage in illegal dealings, because they have little choice but to take the risk of jail (or worse). But those who have large enterprises and get considerable money are generally dishonest people. They are attracted to illegal dealings because they like to get something for nothing, and they know that their customers have no legal recourse if they are cheated. Their customers can't call the police or sue the seller for breach of contract, because "black market" purchasing is just as illegal as "black market" selling. Some illegal business deals are made possible only because of government controls, such as Leo's scheme that depended on government connections with Pavel Syerov.

## THE STORY (PART TWO)

In contrast to the beginning of Part One, Part Two opens with an admiring description of the productive and intellectual history of St. Petersburg (the pre-1914 name for Petrograd). Andrei is now more focused on Kira than on his work. Leo returns cured from the sanatorium but won't commit to "living again," though some part of him wants to hold on to the self-confident person he used to be. Andrei talks of personal goals, which leads Kira to anticipate a major conflict in Andrei's life, since Communists aren't supposed to have personal, private goals. As Leo becomes increasingly purposeless, he enters into short-range and dangerous business activities, sinking deeper and deeper into despair. Andrei laments Communist Party corruption, but Kira blames it on Party ideals. When Irina's brother Victor (a Party member) refuses to help Irina, she realizes that the lives of individuals make no difference in the USSR. Andrei buys presents from a speculator and, disillusioned by Party corruption, suggests that he and Kira go abroad. The ideological and psychological conflicts among the main characters become more manifest in their lives: Andrei warns Kira about Leo, and Kira warns Leo about

impending danger from Andrei's investigation. The GPU plans to prosecute Leo as a private speculator but not his partner Comrade Syerov, because that might stir up opposition to the Party. Andrei discovers that Kira has been living with Leo and, in the novel's climax, arrests Leo as a speculator, but Kira tells Andrei that she's proud of herself; she also tells him what his Communist philosophy really means. Andrei learns *why* Kira had the affair—to save the man she loves—and this restores what he feels for Kira and the idea that he was right to love her, that she was what he had always thought she was. He is therefore committed to helping Leo. Recognizing that it is his philosophy that has led to death and destruction, Andrei publicly denounces the Party. After blackmailing Syerov to obtain Leo's release, Andrei commits suicide, but at his funeral, Andrei is praised as a Communist hero who lived and died for the Collective. Aware of Kira's affair with Andrei, Leo denounces her as immoral, but Kira doesn't tell him why she did it, not wanting to see him struggle and be defeated once again. Knowing that she can't save Leo from himself, Kira decides to escape but is killed at the border.

## PART TWO STUDY QUESTIONS

### Why did Party leaders attack "over-idealism"?

By "over-idealism" the Party meant a strict adherence to Communist ideas and an unwillingness to compromise. There are two related reasons they advocated this approach: (1) The "ideal" of collectivism doesn't work, as the history of the USSR showed, i.e., it can't be practiced to achieve even the economic goals it professes, i.e., it can't produce goods or even enough food. Nor can it totally ban self-interest and independent thought. Therefore, "over-idealism" turns out to be a threat to the system. In fact, it was Andrei's "over-idealism" that sealed his fate. The purer the Commu-

nism, the quicker it will fail. (2) The professed standard of morality is "the furtherance of the revolution" (a non-objective standard that is used to justify anything and everything). Since the leaders must be free to do anything they want at any time, they need a justification for the relaxation or temporary abandonment of their professed "lofty goals."

### Is there any special significance to the description of Ivan Ivanov, the Soviet border guard who shot Kira?

Here's Ayn Rand's response to an editor who wanted her to cut that scene: "It contains—in a few pages—the whole idea and purpose of the novel. After the reader has seen Kira

Argounova, has learned what a rare, precious, irreplaceable human being she is—I give [the reader] the picture of the man who killed Kira Argounova, of the life that took her life. That soldier is a symbol, a typical representative of the average, the dull, the useless, the commonplace, the masses that killed the best there is on this earth. . . . Citizen Ivan Ivanov is the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics. And that Union killed Kira Argounova."

### Why does Ayn Rand have Kira die at the end of the book? Is the ending (Kira's death) necessary to the novel? Or could it just as easily have ended happily?

The ending is necessitated by the theme of the novel and the nature of collectivism: col-

lectivism kills. But it's not a tragic ending, because it doesn't happen by chance and because Kira is never defeated (the Broadway version of the novel was titled *The Unconquered*). As Ayn Rand later explained: "The theme of *We the Living* is 'the individual against the state.' What I present in the story is the evil of the state, and what it does to its best individuals, under its power. If I let Kira escape, then I'm leaving the readers with the following conclusion, 'Statism is very bad, but there's hope, because you can always escape abroad.' Now that wasn't the theme of *We the Living*. . . . And in Russia, a citizen has no chance to leave, and no chance to escape. Someone who does escape is an exception."

## GENERAL STUDY QUESTIONS

### How does Ayn Rand show the lack of individuality under collectivism?

People are called "Citizen" or "Comrade," both of which emphasize an individual's connection to and identity as part of a greater whole. People, including Party members, spout memorized clichés rather than any ideas that come from their own minds. Personal goals are attacked as "selfish." Privacy, including where you live, is minimized. Baby names are derived from the revolution. Personal achievement is suspect; rewards are based on social class and family background, rather than on what the individual himself has earned. Literature and art have become nonpersonal: no heroes, just the "drama and color of mass life."

### What explains the prevalence of propaganda and the endless use of pro-Communist slogans used by everyone, from Party lectures to private conversations?

The leaders bombarded the country with propaganda that no one believed, because they wanted these slogans to take over peoples' minds and discourage them from thinking for themselves. They wanted the citizenry

to look to the Party, not to reality, for the truth. Party propaganda about the wonderful life under Communism takes the place of the facts of starvation and terror. Individuals spouted Communist propaganda and slogans as evidence of their loyalty to the state, their proof that they were (at least outwardly) obedient parts of the collective rather than independent individuals. Whether or not they actually believed those words was irrelevant even to themselves.

### Why does Leo give up? Do you think that he was justified?

Leo gives up because the society he lives in has no place for him; he lacks the strength to resist but has too much character to try to become part of the system. Doors are closed to him because he has an aristocratic rather than a working-class background; employment and advancement are based on the economic class of one's parents. His not being a Party member also precludes his getting jobs, and his background and independence are enough to prevent him ever becoming a Party member. Success in Soviet Russia is based on background and personal pull. As a result, Leo turns to illegal business

dealings, which have little chance of long-term success. He doesn't care, sinking into despair. His life is at the mercy of the whims of bureaucrats and Party leaders; his success in life is not a consequence of his own decisions. He has no control over what the Party and the government do, but he does have control over his response. Unlike Kira (the unconquered), he gives up any hope and any plans for the future, turning to self-destructive behavior. Because Ayn Rand was an advocate of free will, she did not describe Leo's situation as forcing him to give up, any more than Kira's situation forced her not to give up: each was a choice, though few people did (and can) remain psychologically strong while living in a totalitarian dictatorship.

#### Did Ayn Rand believe collectivism to be a noble idea that was betrayed by power-hungry leaders?

No, she did not believe that the ideals espoused by collectivists were noble; in fact, she considered them to be evil (see below). Rather than betraying the ideals of collectivism, the leaders were putting those ideals into practice: anything that strengthened the collective and the dictatorship of the proletariat was considered to be good. In that respect, the traditional notions of honesty and dishonesty are rejected as bourgeois prejudices. It should come as no surprise that the Soviet government was full of power-hungry employees who confiscated property, approved or denied both external and internal passports, controlled the distribution of food and determined what (if any) jobs people could hold: that's exactly the type of person who wants to work for a government that controls every aspect of peoples' lives.

#### How does the novel's theme necessitate the "fates" of the main characters?

The theme is the individual against the state. *We the Living* shows how collectivism destroys the individual. Leo survives physically, but his spirit is destroyed; he loses all interest in life, has no goals, no values, becomes cynical, has no interest in whether he lives or dies. Andrei is destroyed physically, because he

comes to realize that the ideals he's always lived by result in the destruction of everything that makes life possible and worthwhile. Kira dies but is unconquered spiritually: she never forsakes her values, and in fact she dies in pursuit of the value of freedom; she never stopped living by her own judgment and for her own happiness.

#### How was self-interest a threat to the leaders?

Self-interest is always a threat to those who want to control other people's lives. If your goal in life is to make yourself happy, then your primary concern is not to make the group happy or to do what the group (as mandated by its leaders) wants you to do. Making your own decisions about what you want in life is always in potential conflict with the goals of the group (whether it's the masses, the proletariat, the Party or your family). To seek your own goals means that you're thinking for yourself—and the man who thinks for himself is the man who can't be controlled by others.

#### Collectivism preaches the brotherhood of man. How does *We the Living* show that it achieves the opposite?

By "brotherhood," collectivists don't mean friendship and benevolence between individuals; they mean that an individual should become part of the collective, with no separate rights and that each should live for all people collectively. (Karl Marx attacked the idea of individual rights, because it separated people, leaving them free to think for themselves and act to achieve their own private goals.) If you sacrifice yourself, then others are reaping the benefits; if you're giving, then someone else must be receiving. The result is what is described in *We the Living*: would-be masters vs. prospective slaves, each person trying to get the better of others, to succeed by getting others to fail. There can be no "brotherhood" or good will when some are being sacrificed to others.

## THE MAIN CHARACTERS

**Kira Argounova.** Kira is the central character in *We the Living*, the character who drives the story and through whom we see the effects of the Soviet regime on human beings. It is through Kira that we see the meaning of the political/moral philosophy of collectivism. Throughout the book, Kira is unconquered. She may be beaten down physically but never psychologically. Kira is presented as what "could be" in a human being, with the capability and the values to live a full human life. But she is prevented from doing that, and although she is unbroken, her love, her career, and ultimately her life are taken by the Soviet government. What characterizes her above all is her purposiveness. She is guided by a single main purpose, although the particular purpose changes over time: career, Leo's health, and, finally, freedom. Kira's goal in life is to be an engineer, and, in the early parts of the book, she is uninterested in anything else; she is oblivious to clothes, food, weather, other people, even politics—the only thing that matters is her studies at the Technological Institute, leading to a career as a builder of bridges. Then, when Leo develops tuberculosis, her over-riding goal is to restore his health, and she goes to the extreme of becoming the mistress of Andrei, so that she can acquire the funds to send Leo to a sanatorium. In Ayn Rand's notes for the novel, she wrote: "[Leo] is, to her, the symbol of everything [Kira] wants and the meaning of life as she sees it. Therefore, her indifference to others, the clarity of her mind that leaves her cool to many useless emotions and affections, her straightforwardness—these lead her to an all-absorbing passion, almost unbearable for a human being." And finally, with both Leo and Andrei out of her life, she thinks of nothing but escaping to freedom, and as with her other values, she acts to achieve it, and this is what makes Kira heroic and the best example in *We the Living* of someone who is fully alive.

**Leo Kovalensky.** Leo represents what can happen to the best under a collectivist dictatorship. Initially benevolent, purposeful and self-confident to the point of arrogance, Leo is slowly beaten down by the system and his own inability to deal with it. Leo's personality and appearance were meant to reflect the real-life person on whom he was based: "There was," said Ayn Rand, "always a smile behind [Lev Bekkerman's] attitude, and an arrogant smile of, 'Well, world, you have to admire me.' [Arrogant] in a good sense of the word." But Leo gradually becomes cynical, self-destructive, apathetic, as if nothing he does makes any difference. He comes to care about nothing, not even Kira. And finally he ceases to be the Leo with whom Kira fell in love. As Kira put it to Leo: "It was I against a hundred and fifty million people. I lost."

**Andrei Taganov.** Andrei is mixed. A dedicated Communist, he has a personal character that clashes with his ideals: he holds deeply personal values despite the fact that his philosophy rejects the personal and the private. That is why Kira said "no to his ideas but yes to his voice." From Ayn Rand's notes about Andrei: "Dominant trait: a born individualist and leader who never discovered it. A great mind and a profound honesty. An iron will and unconquerable strength. A great calm and deliberation—the calm of a man who knows he is master of himself and has learned long ago to have complete self-control. Occasional, very rare flashes of temper that show the real fire in him—a fire, however, that never gets the best of the man." Andrei was ultimately honest enough that when he realized what his ideas meant in practice, he took his own life.

## PHILOSOPHIC MESSAGE

**Collectivism is evil.** Collectivism is the view that the individual is nothing but a part of some great whole or collective; and therefore, the individual belongs to the collective for it to do with him whatever it wants. The individual has a duty to act only for the collective good and to live his life for the collective. The particular collective can take many forms; typical examples are: the nation, community, social class, ethnic group and family. The most common form is the one that rules in *We the Living*: the state, or the political collective. In this regard, it is important to keep in mind that the enemy that Ayn Rand portrays in *We the Living* is not Soviet Russia per se. Ayn Rand was emphatic that *We the Living* is not a novel about Soviet Russia but rather a novel about collectivism set in Soviet Russia. This point was brought home in 1942, when a pirated film of the novel was produced in Fascist Italy and endorsed by the Fascist government—they had praised it as anti-Communist—but they soon discovered that its popularity in Italy was due to its also being anti-Fascist, so they quickly banned the film.

One aspect of the evil of collectivism is the ethics on which it's based: altruism or self-sacrifice. Ayn Rand developed this idea in her later novels and essays (e.g., the theme of *The Fountainhead* is "individualism vs. collectivism, not in politics but in man's soul"), but she had already identified the immorality of collectivism when she was a teenager, rebelling against the idea that man should live for the state. Collectivism requires the sacrifice of the individual, his values, his goals, his interests to the collective's goals (as decided by its leaders). This idea is portrayed throughout *We the Living*, as the individual citizens lose their identities, swallowed up by the Greater Whole. All desires for personal happiness are condemned as selfishness, which, in fact, they are—selfishness being a concern for one's own individual happiness. "Living for others" means that you must reject all personal goals and values, that your life as an individual means nothing. As Victor Dunaev says at

Andrei's funeral: "What, then, are the standards of our new humanity? The first and basic one is that we have lost a word from our language, the most dangerous, the most insidious, the most evil of human words: the word 'I.' We have outgrown it. 'We' is the slogan of the future. The Collective stands in our hearts where the old monster—'self'—had stood." This point is, in fact, the theme of *Anthem*, Ayn Rand's 1937 novella, where, in a futurist society, the word "I" has vanished.

In showing the evil of collectivism, Ayn Rand refutes a claim often heard about communism and socialism: that it's a noble idea that lacks practicality. In fact, the Soviet Union is still often described as a great moral experiment that went awry because it was betrayed by its leaders. But, as Kira tells Andrei, and as Andrei comes to realize, it's those "noble ideals" that led to the slaughter and enslavement of millions. It is that same "noble" ideal of self-sacrifice that justifies and leads to all forms of totalitarianism, whether Soviet Communism or German Naziism. There is *nothing noble about an idea that advocates the sacrifice of individuals*, nothing noble about the idea that the individual should live for others—what that leads to and what it means is that the individual is a slave to whatever collective he exists to serve. Collectivism is impractical; collectivism doesn't "work," because it is immoral.

The essence of collectivism's immorality is implied in the title of the book (and Ayn Rand's working title, "Airtight"): *Collectivism makes life impossible*. This is another point developed in her later writings, but *We the Living* dramatizes the meaning of life and the impossibility of life under collectivism. Life requires thought, decision-making, independent judgment—all of which are considered immoral by the dictators, who need blindly obedient servants. The arbitrary and ever-present demands from government officials and the need to justify everything by the undefinable standard of "collective good" make it impossible for people to plan ahead or to act on any decision they make.

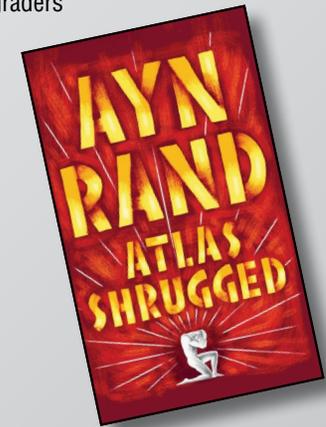
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