

George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: "Oldthinkers Unbellyfeel Ingsoc"

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The shortest rendering one could make of the "Newspeak" phrase in standard English is: "Those whose ideas were formed before the Revolution cannot have a full emotional understanding of the principles of English Socialism" (Orwell 250). This statement describes the reader as George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* leads him, in a quest for emotional and intellectual understanding, to ask: What is totalitarianism? When and how did it originate? Who are the oppressors and how do they differ from the oppressed? The novel gives definitive answers to none of these questions but does, however, provide the reader with powerful incentive to formulate his own opinions. Published originally in 1949, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* offers a glimpse into a terrifyingly surrealistic future world, set within the confines of our own recent past, where human dignity and compassion have been expunged, only to be replaced by hate, deception, and atrocity. Does the book have within its pages the means to instill the ability to avoid such a tragedy, or is it a diabolical portent to the legacy of humankind, an anachronism just slightly out of kilter with reality? Orwell commented in 1949, "I believe...that totalitarian ideas have taken root in the minds of intellectuals everywhere, and I have tried to draw these ideas out to their logical consequences. The scene of the book is laid in Britain in order to emphasise that the English-speaking races are not innately better than anyone else and that totalitarianism, *if not fought against*, could triumph anywhere" (Meyers 24). The likelihood is that it will not and moreover that Orwell's book was instrumental in inspiring resistance to totalitarian philosophy and played a major role throughout the world in restricting its implementation.

We are given only a vague description of just how Orwell's totalitarian society developed in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Harold Nicolson sets the scene in an article originally published in the *Observer*:

The world against which Mr. Orwell warns us is the world which emerged after the atomic war of 1950 and after the ten years of conflict, revolution, and counter-revolution which then ensued. Russia by then had absorbed the whole of Europe and created the super-State Eurasia; the United States had welded the Americas and the British Empire into the super-State Oceania; a third super-State had arisen later under the name of Eastasia: Great Britain had been reduced to the function and title of "Airstrip One." Each of these three world-masses had been subjected to a totalitarian system, known respectively as "Neo-Bolshevism," "Ingsoc," and "Death-Worship"; their political philosophies were indistinguishable, yet each regarded the other with fanatical hatred; they were in a constant state of war (Nicolson 257).

All are ruled by a system of oligarchical collectivism—by a party which has abolished all private property and has taken into its own hands all power over its subjects (Hollis 188).

At the beginning of the book, as the clock strikes thirteen and Winston Smith enters Victory Mansions,

the reader descends into the bleak, stultifying world of Oceania and Ingsoc—without explanation and without justification. The extirpation of human freedom and dignity in Orwell’s work, due in large part to the invasive use of technology and the “telescreen,” is likely more sordid than any future political scenario envisioned by western society at the time. Right from the start, the fear and repression experienced by Smith, the protagonist of the story, is palpable. “The thing that [Smith] was about to do was to open a diary. This was not illegal (nothing was illegal, since there were no longer any laws), but if detected it was reasonably certain that it would be punished by death, or at least by twenty-five years in a forced-labor camp (Orwell 9). The nightmarish plot chronicles Winston’s clash with Ingsoc party doctrine, beginning as tacit acceptance, and then ranging through contemplation, revelation, denunciation, and finally ending with, by virtue of both physical and psychological torture, a return to “political orthodoxy.”

The most salient features of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: The ubiquitous presence of Big Brother; The corrupt Ministries of Truth, Peace, Love and Plenty; and the ever-present terror of the Thought Police, gave a precise focus to the West’s growing detestation of totalitarian practices. The parallel to which the story line of the novel makes implicit reference is, of course, the brutal societal oppression sanctioned, under the aegis of Stalin, by the communist government of the Soviet Union. In his book, *The Politics of Literary Reputation: The Making and Claiming of ‘St. George’ Orwell*, John Rodden states that even before the publication of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell attracted the unfavorable attentions of the Soviet press with the publication of *Animal Farm*. “At the request of the U.S.S.R., American authorities in Munich seized copies of a Ukrainian translation of the fable in 1947 and turned them over to Soviet repatriation officials in Germany” (202). Rodden also describes a harrowing state of affairs in Soviet literary ideology through the words of an erstwhile Russian National: “By 1949, Glebe Struve, a Russian expatriate and friend of Orwell—whose *25 Years of Soviet Literature* Orwell greatly admired—could write that literature had become a form of ‘Soviet thought-control.’ ‘Rabid anti-Westernism,’ said Struve, was ‘the most important characteristic of Soviet letters’” (203). Even though in 1950, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was nowhere to be found in the Soviet Union, the book was labeled treasonous by *Pravda* in a review in May of that year. Orwell became, in accordance with Stalin’s rhetoric, an “enemy of the people” and was identified with the “Hate America” campaign, reminiscent of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*’s “Hate Week” and “Two-minute Hate,” which was intensified in the Soviet Union during the last years of the Stalin regime (Rodden 204).

As the Soviet Union steeled itself against the writings of Orwell, which communist party propaganda labeled “cosmopolitan” and an affront to human decency, England, the U.S., and other bastions of Western free-market capitalism were only too eager to embrace them. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell illustrates that the party’s sole motive for action is to acquire power, not as a means to an end but as an end in itself, as stated to Winston Smith by inner party member O’Brien as Smith is being tortured: “The party seeks power entirely for its own sake. We are not interested in the good of others; we are interested solely in power.... The German Nazis and the Russian Communists came very close to us in their methods, but they never had the courage to recognize their own motives....The object of power is power” (Orwell 217). Western

readers accepted the Russian association unquestionably, without any reservations whatsoever.

The effects of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* have certainly been felt around the world and it undoubtedly was, and still is, instrumental in limiting the acceptance of a totalitarian philosophy of existence. "His greatest accomplishment was to remind people that they could think for themselves, at a time in this century when humanity seemed to prefer taking marching orders. He steadfastly valued ideals over ideology" (Gray 56). By all current evaluations, humanity now appears to be marching to a different tune, to one of democracy, and to one of freedom of expression and freedom in the marketplace. As Paul Gray, in his essay written just before the dawn of 1984, stated so aptly and prophetically: "[George Orwell's] name is not a synonym for totalitarianism. It is in fact the spirit that fights the worst tendencies in politics and society by using a fundamental sense of decency—Orwellian, in the best sense of the word" (56).

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