

George Orwell's reception in USSR

An author can choose neither their readers nor how their texts will be interpreted. This is especially true if the relationship between a certain writer and a particular group of readership is a confrontational one. The Soviet readings of George Orwell's (Eric Arthur Blair) dystopian science fiction novel "Nineteen Eighty-Four"¹ are the perfect examples of such a case. Knowing the Soviet Union's position as the most powerful and despotic totalitarian state in the world during the time of the book's first publication and the same book's analysis of the totalitarianism gone to its logical extreme, it is no wonder that the response from the Soviet authorities was purely aggressive. However, it is reasonable to argue, that such confrontational readings of "1984", if not taken at the face value, might be the most valuable, and, in a way, the most insightful ones. In the following log I shall analyse the closeness between some of the major themes of "1984" and its reader response in USSR as well as try to prove, that the elaborate misinterpretations in this particular case can serve not to stop, but to convey the novel's ideas.

It is important to point out, that however confrontational official Soviet readings of Orwell may appear to be, it could be argued, that they all had an underlying purpose to transform him into USSR's ally (in one way or another). Two different Soviet reviews of "1984" written in 1950 illustrate this notion perfectly. The first one, "Pravda's" review called "Enemies of Mankind" states: "In describing a most monstrous future in store for men, he imputes every evil to the people. [...] He is obliged to admit that. . . capitalism will cease to exist, but only for opening the way to [...] the degradation of mankind, which will be brought

¹ From now on – 1984.

down to the level of robots called 'proles'². A similar citation could be found in another text, a survey named "General Trends in Bourgeois Literature in England": "Orwell's nightmare is [...] inhabited by the 'proles', who constitute a mere 85 per cent of Oceania and who are described with fear and loathing as ignorant, servile, brutish. It is thus that reaction seeks to uphold the system of class oppression [...]"³. Both of the reviews completely misinterpret Orwell's ideas: to anyone who has read "1984" it should be quite clear, that the proles are depicted as the sympathetic victims; the brutality is perpetrated by the oppressive totalitarian system (embodied by the Party). The need to purposefully misinterpret the novel may be obvious - the said fictional system was too similar to USSR and its Communist Party - but by completely changing its meaning from the critique of tyranny to the attack on the proletariat Soviet authorities have not only disarmed Orwell's critique, but also have made an example out of him - the celebrated western author turned out to be, not an enemy of oppression, but, as Stalin put it, the "enemy of mankind".

On the other hand, while viewing from a perspective, it is arguable that this aggressive reading does not disarm "1984's" ideas at all - it enriches them. The reviewers of the state which was very similar to the book's fictional Oceania have reworked both the novel's meaning and its writers intentions to suit the state's goals; in other words, exercised the reality control. The Party in "1984" practices the form of reality control called doublethink ("the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind and accepting both of them"⁴) all the time. In 1950 reviews very similar contradiction would undoubtedly

² As cited in Rodden, John *George Orwell in the Soviet Union: A Documentary Chronicle on the Centenary of his Birth: The Case of George Orwell*, Modern Age, 1988, pp. 131-141.

³ As cited in Blyum, Arlen *George Orwell in the Soviet Union: A Documentary Chronicle on the Centenary of his Birth*, 2003,

⁴ Orwell, George, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, London, Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1965, p. 221.

be concepts of Orwell as an enemy of the oppressors and Orwell as an enemy of the oppressed. Hence, by trying to suppress Orwell's ideas, these reviews have only provided the real-world illustration to them.

In time Orwell's transformations from enemy into ally started to become increasingly more literal - the notable Soviet interpretations included "1984" being an anti-capitalistic novel and a bizarre Big Brother's identification with Ronald Reagan.⁵ However, the Gorbachev's era and the first official USSR's publication of the long-banned novel (1988) has opened a way to a subtler and even more interesting reading - interpreting the book as a bleak satire of Stalin's reign. "Of all the old taboos relating to foreign literature, [the banning of 1984] was one of the firmest and least problematical," said the Literary Gazette. The cause of the taboo was not hard to guess: The Soviet censors recognized, as it were, that "B.B." was "J.S." ⁶. At the first glance this reading seems like a huge step forward - the literary authorities finally acknowledged that the Orwell's critique could easily be directed at least to some aspects of the Soviet Union. Yet singling out Joseph Stalin and his reign could also be called a form of reality control. After all, Soviet Union existed from 1922 to 1991; its oppressive system did not collapse with the Stalin's death in 1953. Making a direct link between the Big Brother and Stalin is, in a lot of aspects, missing the point. If B.B. represents one man, nothing that was committed after that man's death can be connected to B.B.; i.e., the repressions and crimes committed by the Soviet authorities in Khrushchev's, Brezhnev's and even Gorbachev's times automatically look better in comparison. Maybe even non-existent. Very similar concept is presented in "1984's" newspeak description: "[...] in thus abbreviating

⁵ Rodden, John *George Orwell in the Soviet Union: A Documentary Chronicle on the Centenary of his Birth: The Case of George Orwell*, Modern Age, 1998, pp. 131-141.

⁶ As cited in Rodden, John *George Orwell in the Soviet Union: A Documentary Chronicle on the Centenary of his Birth: The Case of George Orwell*, Modern Age, 1998, p.136.

a name one narrowed and subtly altered its meaning, by cutting out most of the associations that would otherwise cling to it."⁷ The concept of Big Brother is broad and mostly abstract; by giving it a face of a deceased real-world tyrant, its meaning is instantly changed and narrowed. The similar (perhaps intentional) mistake was also committed in the western media by Michael Radford's 1984 film adaptation - its depiction of Big Brother had unmistakably Hitler-like appearance.

The novel's status as a banned book in Soviet Union from 1949 to 1988 is yet another source of different and unexpected readings. As Arlen Blyum notes in his article, "By the end of the 1960s Orwell's texts, mostly 1984 in translation, appeared in what Pushkin called 'secretive notebooks, scorning print', which were lent out to be read against a very short agreed deadline."⁸ Such a unique way of spreading banned literature was quite widespread in USSR - my parents have told me on numerous occasions that most of the rare and forbidden literature they have managed to read was lent to them for no longer than a single night. Thus, it is no wonder that under such conditions a lot of banned books, especially "1984", have gained an almost legendary status amongst the free thinking intellectuals and dissidents. Orwell's influence on certain Soviet writers is undoubtable. Vilnius Poker (Vilniaus Pokeris)⁹, a complex multi-genre novel published in 1989's still Soviet Lithuania might serve as an excellent case study of such influences. A lot of novel's themes, such as systematic dehumanizing of the population and reality control are clearly inspired by Orwell; furthermore, Orwell himself is mentioned numerous times by one of the main characters and

⁷ Orwell, George, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, London, Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1965, p. 313.

⁸ Blyum, Arlen *George Orwell in the Soviet Union: A Documentary Chronicle on the Centenary of his Birth*, 2003, p. 412.

⁹ Gavelis, Ričardas, *Vilniaus Pokeris*, Vilnius: Vaga, 1989.

the novel "1984" features in the plot as a secret, almost sacred text. It is hard to know if George Orwell expected this, yet the similarities between "1984's" fictional character Emmanuel Goldstein (mythicized rebel) and his own image in Soviet Union (both official and unofficial) are extraordinary. The notion of Soviet readings serving as the illustrations to the book's plot thus is even more furthered.

Yet all of this is just a tip of an iceberg; USSR's readings of "1984" provide material for far further studies. Even more, knowing the vast scope of the novel, its interpretations in other totalitarian regimes - such as Mao's China or contemporary North Korea - should be just as fascinating. However, I do hope that this log does manage to convey, how confrontational interpretations of "1984" are not only worth reading but could also serve as an insightful secondary material to the text itself.

References:

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1984, 1984. Film. Directed by Michael RADFORD. UK: Virgin Films.