

## **‘Nineteen Eighty-Four’ in USSR**

“Who read, who could read and when?”<sup>1</sup>, asks George Steiner during his Oxford inaugural lecture, implying, that studying just the text in question is not sufficient. For the novel to be fully analysed, its connections with the various readerships must be considered. To prove that one should not look much further than to one of the more extreme cases of reception - for example, the Soviet readings of George Orwell's (Eric Arthur Blair) novel *'Nineteen Eighty-Four'*.<sup>2</sup> The reception was immensely confrontational: both the USSR's authorities and its dissidents recognized striking similarities between *'1984's'* science-fiction dystopia and the Union's totalitarian, despotic regime. The reaction from the Soviet official was a series of attempts to transform George Orwell into an ally of the USSR through various purposeful misinterpretations of the novel, whilst the Soviet dissidents celebrated him as the state's enemy. It could be argued though that such a confrontational reading of *'1984'* did not negate, but in fact helped to convey the novel's ideas, at the same time providing them the real-world illustrations. Furthermore, the underlying reasons of the Soviet elaborate misinterpretations of the book reveal the much more global tendencies of interpreting *'1984.'* In the following essay both of these arguments shall be explored which in turn should show the importance of the reception studies.

Paradoxically, the Soviet treatment of George Orwell, which could be used as the secondary reading to *'1984'*, started to generate even before the first publication of the novel. On May 31, 1937 Sergei Dinamov, editor-in-chief of the Communist literature magazine *'International Literature'* has send Orwell a single letter, in which he asked for a copy of the author's new book (*'The Road to Wigan Pier'*). The correspondence, however, was not a

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<sup>1</sup> Steiner, George, *No Passion Spent* (1996), London, Faber & Faber, p.152.

<sup>2</sup> From now on: *'1984'*

long-lived one - in 1938 S. Dinamov was arrested and a year later died in Gulag. The reason behind his swift liquidation did not lie in the content of the letter: although Orwell was already seen in the very negative light by the Soviet authorities, Dinamov's letter was a politically neutral one. It seems that the NKVD has terminated the correspondence and got rid of the chief editor for quite a different reason - the mere acknowledgement of Orwell's existence. According to Arlen Blyum, "it was these 'competent and trusted persons' [NKVD Foreign Section] whose function it was to ensure that the Russian reader's 'non-encounter' with Orwell [...] was maintained."<sup>3</sup>

The notion of Orwell's early 'non-existence' in Soviet Union can be reinforced with another case: a scandal concerning Nora Gal's essay '*Decadent Literature*', which was published in 1947. Although the essay describes Orwell in a strikingly negative manner, its publication was nevertheless deemed by the Soviet literary authorities as a "serious political mistake."<sup>4</sup> The mistake was not the essay's content (which corresponded with the official polemic), but the fact, that it was published openly: "Soviet citizens were not supposed to know of his [Orwell's] existence."<sup>5</sup> A certain term often used by Orwell in his '*1984*' comes to mind – 'unperson', someone, who is not simply shunned, but actually erased from the existence. The early Soviet reaction to Orwell mirrors a manner in which the fictional Party authorities neutralize their enemies in '*1984*'.

The English publication of the novel (1949) has made it impossible to continue not to acknowledge Orwell - some sort of response was necessary. 1950's '*Pravda*' review of the

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<sup>3</sup> Blyum, Arlen, *George Orwell in the Soviet Union: A Documentary Chronicle on the Centenary of his Birth* (2003), [Online] Available from: <http://library.oxfordjournals.org/content/4/4/402.full.pdf+html>, [Accessed: 29<sup>th</sup> November 2013], p. 403.

<sup>4</sup> Blyum, Arlen, *George Orwell in the Soviet Union: A Documentary Chronicle on the Centenary of his Birth* (2003), [Online] Available from: <http://library.oxfordjournals.org/content/4/4/402.full.pdf+html>, [Accessed: 29<sup>th</sup> November 2013], p. 407.

<sup>5</sup> Blyum, Arlen, *George Orwell in the Soviet Union: A Documentary Chronicle on the Centenary of his Birth* (2003), [Online] Available from: <http://library.oxfordjournals.org/content/4/4/402.full.pdf+html>, [Accessed: 29<sup>th</sup> November 2013], p. 408.

book was one of the first to adjust the official reception strategy: to transform Orwell from USSR's enemy into its ally. By exercising doublethink (reality control used by the Party in '1984', which is "*the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind and accepting both of them*"<sup>6</sup>), Soviet reviewer Anisimov purposefully misinterpreted Orwell's critique of the oppression as a critique of the oppressed - the proletariat - in turn discrediting it and naming the author an "enemy of mankind." This way Orwell became a kind of an ally to the USSR - a living proof of the decadence and the hostility of Western literature.

The usage of doublethink is certainly interesting and provides another real-world illustration to '1984;' yet the reasons for it are even more intriguing. It is clear that the Soviet officials did not misinterpret the book's meaning unintentionally: a secret 1978 censors' evaluation of the novel (signed by the executor Monogarova of the Directorate Markov) summarizes '1984' in a very simplistic, but nevertheless honest manner - a target of Orwell's critique is not misplaced. It is unlikely for Anisimov, who wrote his review during the more oppressive times, to be less attentive and simply miss some of the most obvious themes of the book. Thus, one must conclude that the misinterpretation was applied to neutralize the perceived book's attack on the Soviet system. Monogarova's report confirms that notion: "[the banned books (including '1984')] are works of negative tendency in regard to the Soviet Union, the Communist Party and the Soviet way of life [...]." <sup>7</sup> However, '1984' does not attack or satirize the Soviet system; Orwell's previous work, 'Animal Farm' surely does, but '1984' is a broader work of fiction, which analyses social and psychological aspects common to all of humanity. The reason why the novel is set in the futuristic Britain is precisely to show that totalitarian system could emerge anywhere in the world - the book does not critique Soviet Union directly. And yet these more general themes of the novel are lost in the official

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<sup>6</sup> Orwell, George, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1965) , London, Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, p. 221.

<sup>7</sup> As cited in Blyum, Arlen, *George Orwell in the Soviet Union: A Documentary Chronicle on the Centenary of his Birth* (2003), [Online] Available from: <http://library.oxfordjournals.org/content/4/4/402.full.pdf+html>, [Accessed: 29<sup>th</sup> November 2013], p.412.

Soviet readings - the reason of their conscious misinterpretation of '1984' seems to be an unconscious ignorance of its broader ideas.

'1984's' unofficial reception in the USSR is notable as well. While the book was banned up until 1988, by the end of 1960's it began to circulate amongst the Soviet dissidents via the means of *samizdat*<sup>8</sup>. The dangers that surrounded the practice and the fictional dystopia's uncanny similarities to the USSR itself raised a novel to quite a legendary status. The book was often read overnight and then passed on to other dissidents; furthermore, the possession of it was used as one of the means to identify them, as is evident from Monogarova's report: "[the banned books] aim to subvert and weaken the established order of our country, and their circulation in the Soviet Union should be regarded as the ideological sabotage."<sup>9</sup> All of these aspects made Orwell similar to his own creation - a fictional character Emmanuel Goldstein - in the eyes of both the dissidents and the authorities. The dissidents regarded him as a voice for rebellion (not unlike the '1984's' Goldstein, who (despite his doubtful identity) was the only voice of truth in the dystopia); the officials however deemed him as one of the most dangerous ideological enemies. The fact, that his book could have been used to identify dissidents, yet again shows, how the Soviets transformed this perceived enemy into an ally; quite unsurprisingly the fictional Party in the novel acted very similarly (they have used Goldstein's book for the same purposes).

On the other hand, the situation does reveal more than just another instance of the potential secondary reading of the novel. John Rodden in his article describes the uncanny effect '1984' left on USSR's dissidents in more detail: "Eugenia Cinsburg, a political prisoner during the Stalin era, has described in her autobiography the eerie resemblance of Stalinist

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<sup>8</sup> A practice of reproducing banned publications by hand and passing them from reader to reader.

<sup>9</sup> As cited in Blyum, Arlen, *George Orwell in the Soviet Union: A Documentary Chronicle on the Centenary of his Birth* (2003), [Online] Available from: <http://library.oxfordjournals.org/content/4/4/402.full.pdf+html>, [Accessed: 29<sup>th</sup> November 2013], p.412.

Russia to 1984 Oceania”<sup>10</sup>; “Like Milosz and others, he [the Romanian dissident] was astounded that an Englishman who had never set foot in Eastern Europe could describe with such horrifying accuracy the climate of terror which he then felt as a young man in rebellion against the state.”<sup>11</sup> The second extract is especially important, as it implies that Orwell described the atmosphere which was *unique* to the Eastern Europe during the Cold War; it seems that the universal themes of the novel were ignored by the Soviet rebels the same as by the states officials and only the direct similarities to the infamous Communist state caused the book's legendary status.

With the changing political climate, the strategy of how to make Orwell the state's ally has changed as well. The '1984's' review in a 1983 issue of the *Literary Gazette* did that quite literally: by interpreting Orwell's views as friendly to the Soviet system and hostile towards USA (which, according to the review, was the real target of Orwell's critique): “there is a striking similarity between what [Orwell] described in 1984 and what is going on in the U.S.!”<sup>12</sup> The review concludes with Orwell's message being that “B.B. is R.R.”<sup>13</sup> (the novel's main antagonistic force, Big Brother, who is more of a concept than the real human being, according to the review is supposed to represent the real life figure Ronald Reagan). The similarities of this unique interpretation to the novel's plot are instantly recognizable: as Oceania declared their neighbouring super-states being enemies or allies according to the current political needs, so did the Soviet officials changed Orwell's status from 'enemy of mankind' to a 'friend of a common man' in the face of different political situation. In truth, his status remained unchanged - Orwell was still to be neutralized and serve the needs of the

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<sup>10</sup> Rodden, John *Soviet Literary Policy, 1945-1989: The Case of George Orwell*, Modern Age, Spring 1988, Vol. 32 Issue 2, p. 138.

<sup>11</sup> Rodden, John *Soviet Literary Policy, 1945-1989: The Case of George Orwell*, Modern Age, Spring 1988, Vol. 32 Issue 2, p. 138.

<sup>12</sup> Rodden, John *Soviet Literary Policy, 1945-1989: The Case of George Orwell*, Modern Age, Spring 1988, Vol. 32 Issue 2, p. 135.

<sup>13</sup> Rodden, John *Soviet Literary Policy, 1945-1989: The Case of George Orwell*, Modern Age, Spring 1988, Vol. 32 Issue 2, p. 135.

state. The relations between fictional Oceania, Euroasia and Eastasia never changed as well (despite all the betrayals and alliances) - the perpetual war amongst them always served the singular purpose, which was to maintain the survival of the oppressive social order.

As absurd as the not-so-subtle exercise of the doublethink in 1983's review sounds, the main issue of it is the fact, that '1984' did not critique any particular country at all, but the totalitarian ideology itself. B.B. was never intended to represent any real-life person - even J.S. (Joseph Stalin), as was concluded by the subsequent reviews following the 1988's first official publication of '1984.' Therefore, the underlying reason of the Soviet misinterpretations of the book may have *actually been* a misinterpretation - after all, both the Communist officials and the dissidents deemed the novel to be the satire of USSR, not the critique on totalitarian ideology in general. The elements that were similar to the contemporary socio-political situation in the Soviet Union overshadowed some of the complex, universal themes; the book's receptiveness in this particular case has shaped its interpretations in USSR for decades. This information would not be available while studying the text itself - '1984's' receptiveness and its effects only reveal themselves in the connection between the book and the readership. In a similar fashion how the memory is formed through the connective synapse between two neurons, the varying meanings of any book are generated through the readings and the interpreting. Thus, it seems that the reception studies are applicable indeed.

On the other hand, the counter-argument could certainly be made. The Soviet readings of '1984' as an attack on Soviet Union could have been caused not by the high receptivity of the novel, but solely by the political views of George Orwell himself. After his participation in the Spanish Civil War, Orwell was openly critical towards the Communist Party and the USSR. Furthermore, during his short-lived correspondence with S. Dinamov in 1937 Orwell admitted his relations to the P.O.U.M. - a socialist organization, which was denounced by the

Soviet Union - and expressed his negative views on the Union itself. Hence, misinterpreting '1984' as the satire of USSR may have been just a reaction to a writer who was already a self-proclaimed enemy of the state.

However, this theory does not explain the dissident readings of the novel - the correspondence between Orwell and Dinamov was top secret, the majority of the rebels and the intellectuals could not have had access to it. The extracts from their interviews suggest that they have judged the text on its own; therefore, the focus on the similarities between the Soviet Union and the Oceania *must* have been generated by novel's receptivity. The modern reviews of the book are also telling - a lot of them (and their subsequent internet comments) focus on '1984's' similarities to the peculiarities of the modern world, such as the mass surveillance or the relativity of the official truths (“[...] Then, afterwards, you can get really scared about how much of it has come true and how close our society is to that of Orwell's imagination...”).<sup>14</sup> This way the familiar elements are emphasized, universal ideas - neglected, just as in the Soviet readings. Last, but not least, even if Orwell's personal political views indeed were the main catalysts for the Soviets misinterpretations, this explanation is still the result of the reception studies - his letter to Dinamov does not exist inside the novel, after all.

The Soviet reception of '1984' with all its purposeful transformations does not negate the novel's ideas, but (unintentionally) reinforces them by providing the real world equivalents. Even more - various Soviet readings reveal the reason why the novel's universal themes are so often lost to its readers throughout the world. Due to the novel's high receptiveness the reader often stumbles on some plot elements which are eerily similar to their own socio-political background. Ironically, '1984's' globalism seems to be the cause of

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<sup>14</sup> Hoseason, Rowena *Nineteen Eighty-Four Customer Reviews* (2007), Amazon [Online] Available from: <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Nineteen-Eighty-Four-George-Orwell/dp/0141393041>, [Accessed: 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2013]

the localization in the Soviet reception - and most likely in the other countries as well. “Who read, who could read and when?” asks George Steiner; throughout the most of the Soviet Union's existence only a small percentage of the population could have read '1984.' Yet their reception sheds the light on the novel itself, enriches it and explains why some of its misinterpretations are popular to this day.

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