

Orwell's Dystopia: A Brief Overview

George Orwell (Eric Blair) was born in India into a family with a history of both colonial-service and commercial interests in the region. He returned to England with his mother in year after his birth and went to various 'public'—i.e., private—schools then accessible to the 'lower-upper-class', as he called his family's status, and ultimately entered Eton and Oxford on scholarships. He then took a post in the Burmese Colonial Police and for five years he experienced the realities of British imperial rule in the Far East which turned him into a confirmed anti-imperialist. In 1936 Orwell joined the British contingent fighting on the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War and received a serious neck-wound from a sniper's bullet. In Barcelona he witnessed the bitter divisions in the Leftist groups, culminating in an attempt on the part of the Communist Party to destroy the group to which he belonged with mendacious journalism and show-trials on the Soviet model. In the course of this experience he developed a loathing of Russian totalitarianism and its methods which remained a hallmark of his writing throughout his publishing career. Back in England, he worked as a reviewer, a schoolteacher, and a bookshop assistant before he came to public notice as a successful left-wing author. During the war he worked in the BBC broadcasting to India while his wife, Ellen Shaughnessy, worked in the Ministry of Information. In *Animal Farm: A Fairy-Tale* (1945) he won a world-wide audience with a glaring allegory and exposure of the inmost contradictions of Soviet-style Communism. He was often attacked for turning against Socialists but, in his own view he was always the enemy of totalitarianism and a defender of common decency but also a proponent of Democratic Socialism which he specifically nominated as his political belief-system. Nineteen eighty-four followed in 1949, having been largely written on a remote Scottish island. \

In the brief time remaining to him it secured his world-wide fame as the prime critique of totalitarianism and the most ardent prophet of its continued rise not only in Western society but throughout the developing countries of the world. Yet 1984—as it is now called—is a novel in the sense that it treats the reader as the audience of a story, the attempted liberation and finally collapse of Winston Smith, a dissident citizen of the mega-state of Oceania which is held in the iron grip of Ingsoc, meaning English Socialism. Of course the Socialism to which he himself was devoted isn't precisely the one installed in Oceania. Almost to the contrary, it is a philosophy in which 'decent' human feeling has been all but extinguished, poverty is maintained as the proper condition for the masses ('proles') and radical falsehoods are promulgated and enforced with an iron rule. According to the philosophers of that state, 'he who controls the present controls the future and he who controls the past controls the present.' It is therefore necessary to rewrite history so that all the episode which tell a different story from the ideology of Ingsoc are erased and relegated to the region which Trotsky once called 'the trash-heap of history'.

By an irony of sorts, Trotsky was himself relegated to that dismal location by Stalin and suffered assassination in Mexico by an agent of the Soviet regime in 1940—an event well-known to Orwell. And when the great Russian film-maker Sergei Eisenstein was commissioned by Stalin to make a movie about the Russian Revolution, he received instructions that Trotsky should be cut out of the narrative. (A Russian actor to whom the role was assigned was dismissed and escaped to the Baltic countries and later moved to Hollywood.) In our photograph, a Russian admiral called ***** is first shown in a tight group with Stalin and his head of security, Lavrenti Beria (the dreaded founding head of the KGB). Here is a figure like O'Brien in 1984, capable of incredible violence and cunning. The unfortunate admiral fell out of favour—as Beria eventually did under the rule of Krushchev—and was accordingly airbrushed out of all the state photographs as if he had never existed. To insist on a simple historical truth, whether a glimpsed photography or a childhood memory, is to be an enemy of the State and the perpetrator of *crimethink*. (Orwell lavishes many pages and an appendix on the nature of his invented language.) He who is guilty of crimethink must first be made to offer a sincere confession of his errors and then, after due pause, executed in the classic KGB fashion with a bullet to the back of the head at some unexpected moment.

Is this what happens to Winston Smith on the past page of the novel? I leave it for you to decide. And you must decidedly also, whether it is a novel or a pamphlet—given Orwell's own contention that the atmosphere of political contention and rival ideologies which is so much a part of the modern world is not the best nurturing ground for humanist imagination and literary fiction. All of this pours light on what a novel is and can be and to what extent is it concerned with bringing news of the world around us. It is often said that Orwell succeeded in that almost better than any other writer. The trouble is that the new world he describes is not a particularly human one and the average reader is probably more interested to learning whether Winston and Julia betray each other when they are dragged into Room 101 than in the linguistic niceties of Newspeak—which, nevertheless, are an integral part of the plot. In the following pages I offer you a selection of passages from the novel which you should read, if you don't read the whole novel. And, if you have read it in Portuguese—which is a perfectly sensible thing to do—they exploring these shorter passages will be a very good way to measure the merits and possible failings of an other-language translation.



Kliment Voroshilov, Vyacheslav Molotov, Joseph Stalin, and Nikolai Yezhov – Head of the Secret Police - photographed at the Moscow-Volga Canal in April 1937. Yezhov was subsequently removed from the original image. (AFP via Getty Images – available online at History.net > Blurring & Falsifying – [online.](#))