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## Totalitarianism in Interwar Europe and the Alternate World of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

### Introduction

This paper is an analysis of political, cultural and economic policies of Oceania in George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the policies of the totalitarian regimes of Europe, such as Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Through comparison of the policies of Oceania and these totalitarian regimes, the paper will argue that Orwell was, at least partially, inspired by the empirical totalitarian regimes whose rise he witnessed.

### Political Systems and Concentration Of Power

The alternate world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is dominated by three superpowers—Oceania, Eastasia and Eurasia. Each of these countries is described as a single-party totalitarian state, each having one ruling doctrine—that of Oceania being Ingsoc, that of Eurasia being Neo-Bolshevism and that of Eastasia being Death-Worship. These ideologies are shown to be at complete odds with each other, though Goldstein in his book claims that they are all basically the same (Orwell 162).



While there is relatively little description on the organisation of the states in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, there are some basics through which we can compare the Oceanian regime of Orwell's alternate world with the regimes of the interwar Europe. Oceania is ruled by a single Party, its government divided into four Ministries—the Ministry of Love, the Ministry of Peace, the Ministry of Truth and the Ministry of Plenty (Orwell 8). The society is divided into three groups—the Inner Party, the Outer Party and the Proles, who have no influence on the governing of the state. All important posts are held by the members of the Inner Party, with the Outer Party members serving as clerks and bureaucrats (Orwell 171). Similar power structures existed in the Soviet Union, for example, such as parallel party and state organisations. Historian Richard Overy notes that the Communist Party had its own committees that served the same function as the ministries of the official state government,<sup>3</sup> which led to the fusion of the functions of the state and the Party (64). It can be claimed that, once the state functions were assumed by the Party, the Party became the state, similar as in Oceania.

In addition, Oceania's Party is headed by a mysterious and mythical figure of Big Brother—a handsome mustachioed figure, estimated by Winston to be in his forties. It is not made clear whether Big Brother is a real figure or a symbol—in the words of Emmanuel Goldstein, "the guise in which the Party chooses to exhibit itself to the world" (Orwell 171). In this way, Big Brother is portrayed as the embodiment of the Party—and since the Party takes over the functions of a state, Big Brother is the embodiment of the nation as a whole. This strong leader figure is very similar to the

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<sup>3</sup> Overy notes that the power of Party organizations waned, and that decisions were brought more and more in informal meetings as Stalin's power grew (64-65).

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personas of Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini—all were in their late thirties or forties when taking over the reins of power,<sup>4</sup> and all were the leading faces of the parties they either formed or helped found. In the final speech of the Nazi Party Rally of 1934, depicted in Leni Riefenstahl's propaganda movie *Triumph of the Will*, Deputy Fuhrer of the Reich Rudolf Hess said: "[t]he Party is Hitler—but Hitler is Germany, just as Germany is Hitler!" This shows the almost divine status enjoyed by these individuals—just like Big Brother did in Oceania.

Just as there were opponents of Stalin, Hitler and Mussolini, there were opponents of the Party and Big Brother in Oceania. The methods of dealing with subversive elements were the same, such as torture, interrogation, show trials and death, as described by Overy:

The trial that followed was a cursory investigation at most, based on evidence that was generally not made available or known to the prisoner. Prisoners were given copies of an indictment, which was the basis on which they were to confess their guilt . . . Evgenia Ginzburg . . . was brought in by two guards, who sat either side of her as she faced three judges and a court secretary . . . 'You plead guilty?' asked the presiding judge. When she said no . . . they withdrew to consider the verdict and sentence; two minutes later they were back, to impose ten years in a labour camp. (183)

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Winston recollects having in his hands a newspaper article in which Party leaders Rutherford, Aaronson and Jones are portrayed as being close associates of Big Brother, but also remembers that they were later put on trial

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<sup>4</sup> Hitler and Stalin took over the reins of power at the age of 43, and Mussolini at the age of 39.

for crimes against the state, found guilty and executed (Orwell 65-67). This is very reminiscent of Stalin's Great Purge of 1937-1938, during which thousands of state officials and members of the Communist Party were condemned to death on false charges, according to Overy. Among them were some of the highest ranking members of the Party, such as Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky, Nikolai Bukharin and Nikolai Yezhov—one of the masterminds behind the Great Purge himself (Overy 183-86). In addition, the trials in Oceania are very much similar to the trials of Special Courts (*Sondergericht*) in Nazi Germany, which, Overy claims, killed thousands of German citizens in the 1930s and 1940s (188, 197).

## Economy of a Totalitarian State—an Example of Internal Colonialism

In his book *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism*, Emmanuel Goldstein writes: “[w]ith the establishment of self-contained economies, in which production and consumption are geared to one another, the scramble for markets . . . has come to an end, while the competition for raw materials is no longer a matter of life and death” (Orwell 154). It is obvious that the economies of the three superpowers of the world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are autarchic and independent of each other, due to the size of their labour pool, their manufacturing capabilities and almost limitless natural resources.

Goldstein claims that such an economic order was found in order to allow for a state of perpetual war between the three superpowers, to such an extent that it can no longer be brought to a decisive end by any of them. In that regard, fighting never occurs on the home territories of these countries, the primary battlegrounds being the colonies, whose primary role is not the exploitation of minerals and natural



wealth, but that of human labour: “[a]ll of the disputed territories contain valuable minerals, and some of them yield important vegetable products such as rubber . . . But above all they contain a bottomless reserve of cheap labour” (Orwell 154). However, it is necessary to point out that Goldstein himself recognizes that the *status quo* in place would not change much even if those territories were not controlled by any of the involved parties. The primary role of these wars is not fight for resources or labourers, but, as said by Goldstein, “to use up the products of the machine without raising the general standard of living” (Orwell 155). In short, it was feared that the rising standard of living would abolish the hierarchical structure of society based on wealth, and wars were sought as a solution to that problem.

Similar patterns emerged very early in the history of the Soviet Union. A country which rose from the ashes of an empire, the Soviet Union faced many real and alleged opponents—both internally and abroad. One of the largest opposition groups according to the historian Mark Mazower was the peasantry, which resisted early on the collectivisation of agriculture (120). The sociologist Alvin Gouldner supports this view, and also claims there were only 2.5 million industrial workers in the Soviet Union, and over 100 million peasant farmers before the Great War and the Civil War. Soviet industry was thus not self-sufficient and not capable of expanding on its own (12, 19). The Soviet leadership, especially Joseph Stalin, wished to settle this issue, as well as handle the problem of wealthy peasants known as kulaks, through forced collectivisation of agriculture, which was the basis of the first Five-Year Plan brought in 1928. Overy notes how kulaks and small-scale farmers were portrayed as the enemies of the working people, the left-over of the bourgeois capitalist system, and that their resistance was dealt with swiftly (202). The results of the First and Second Five-Year Plans were obvious, according to Gouldner:

“[b]etween 1929, the year when the forced collectivization of Soviet agriculture began, and 1939, a year after the last Moscow purge trial, about twenty million Soviet citizens were killed. They were shot, or died of famine, disease or exposure, directly resulting from the punitive actions of the Soviet government” (11).

It can be presumed that the basis of all these systems is the idea of internal colonisation, a notion supported by Gouldner in the Soviet case: “[i]nternal colonialism meant that the peasants were the raw material of socialism, not the object of its emancipation” (28). Internal colonialism is defined by Gordon Marshall as “a term used widely to characterize exploitative relationships between a ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’ within a single nation-state or society” (“internal colonialism”). All these nations, not having colonies, or having temporary ones in Oceania’s case, must rely on their internal resources and their domestic populations, and must exploit them like a nation with colonies would exploit its colonial resources and populations. To that end, the Soviet Union exploited its workers and peasants in the processes of forced industrialisation and collectivisation, and Oceania exploited its proles. All these people were second-rate citizens in their countries, considered to be political enemies, and in that sense their nourishment and their comfort was not imperative. What was imperative was the formation of an internal empire for the purposes of expanding or creating an international empire, and the maintenance of the existing social order.

## Cultural Policy—Indoctrination and Propaganda

The *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* notes that one of the most important tenets of totalitarianism is “the ability of the totalitarian state to establish and maintain a highly integrated social system that controls nearly every



aspect of public and private life" ("totalitarianism"). While the political and economic aspects of a society must be controlled to the fullest possible extent, it is also important to control the cultural policy and dictate the cultural life of a nation.

The cultural policy of the Party in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is described in great detail. It is known that the Party publishes approved songs and books through the Ministry of Truth, and that possession of any other kind of literature is strictly forbidden (Orwell 38). In addition, throughout the novel there are references to various youth organisations, such as the Spies, whose goal is the political indoctrination of the youth and raising them to be model citizens, subservient to the nation and the Party. Students were taught that the Party was the frontrunner of scientific development, having invented aircraft, nuclear bombs, cars etc., and that it is the Party that liberated the people and enabled them a better standard of living—even though Winston recalls that it is not so (Orwell 63-65). In addition, all Party members must attend ceremonies that exalt the Party and Big Brother, and participate in the activities of communal centres. Finally, all Party members' homes are supplied with a telescreen, which is providing them with war reports and news bulletins, putting them in a state of frenzy against the perceived enemies of the state (Orwell 1, 6).

This is, again, similar to the cultural policies of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and the Soviet Union. Youth political organisations in which membership was mandatory, such as Young Pioneers and the Hitler Youth, were established, and great party rallies and ceremonies held, such as the Nazi Party Rallies. School lectures were adapted according to the needs of the regime. According to historian David Welch, the works of art not deemed fit by the Nazi regime were destroyed and large scale book-burnings were held (Welch 32-35). Art was to be created according to the party

lines, such as the Zhdanov doctrine, brought in 1946 and named after its mastermind, Andrei Zhdanov. In Germany, loudspeakers were installed in large numbers throughout the country, and the Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels enticed the production of cheap radios, known as People's Receivers (*Volksempfänger*) that were available to every German household. People were allowed by law to listen only to German and Austrian radio stations. All German radio stations were under strict control of national regulation agencies, which all belonged administratively to the Ministry of Propaganda. That way, people received regular reports on armed forces and listened to Hitler's speeches through these radios, with Welch considering them to be an invaluable asset of the Nazi propaganda machinery (38-43).

## Conclusion

The political, economic and cultural policies of Oceania and the totalitarian regimes of interwar Europe are very similar. The political organisation of the state was based on a single party and ideology, and it followed the leadership of a single figure and crushed any form of resistance. Economic policies in place and the state of permanent war allowed for the enslavement of domestic populace through the process of internal colonisation for the maintenance of existing social order. Cultural policy was dominated by the state through the formation of various political organisations and the creation of state-sanctioned art and various technical solutions, with the goal of creating a population of obedient followers.

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