Orwell's *1984*: The Role of Sociopolitical Climate in Fiction

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Abstract

1984 is a dystopian social science fiction and cautionary tale by George Orwell. It centres on the consequences of totalitarianism, mass surveillance and repressive regimentation of society. This paper will focus on finding parallels between the novel and the socio-political situation in the real world during and after the Second World War. Through literary criticism via a close reading of the text, this paper will try to demonstrate how literature can be treated as an account of historical events and try to establish that real-world politics influences writings to a large extent. Additionally, this research will establish a symbiotic relationship between the real world and the works it produces.

Keywords: George Orwell, Dystopian fiction, Propaganda, Freedom, Totalitarian.

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Introduction

George Orwell's *1984* is a dystopian work of social science fiction and a cautionary tale. Its primary focus is on the consequences of authoritarianism, mass surveillance, and the oppressive regimentation of society. *1984* was published in June 1949, particularly close to the end of the Second World War. This period experienced the reign of several totalitarian leaders, such as Josef Stalin and Adolf Hitler in the Soviet Union and Germany, respectively. In fact, the society where the protagonist of *1984* resides, Oceania, is described as having been modelled after the authoritarian states of Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany (Rai, 1990). Although research has been conducted previously on literature during wars, few have been focused specifically on *1984* and the influence the context of the time has on the novel. This paper will try to bridge this gap in literary research.

This paper will examine the parallels between Orwell's narrative and the sociopolitical climate that existed during and after the Second World War. It will try to demonstrate how literature, particularly *1984*, can be viewed as a record of historical events and how much real-world politics affect writing. One can see that there are numerous similarities between the fictitious setting of Oceania and the real world at that moment in time. Some actions and events are directly borrowed from actual occurrences in history, and others have changes or exaggerations. In doing so, the text exemplifies the relationship that literature and its socio-political context share. In writing *1984*, George Orwell was influenced by the socio-political situation in authoritarian states in the real world during the Second World War, specifically Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union in the creation of Oceania. This paper will look at themes Orwell uses that mirror those in real life. In particular, we will look at propaganda, the characterization of leaders, and youth because these themes resonate most strongly with the socio-political context of the time.

Role of Propaganda

In *1984*, Orwell identifies the role of language in shaping thoughts and, ultimately, freedom. In Oceania, language is extremely restricted, making it very difficult for people to put their thoughts into words. This is put into effect by the use of Newspeak, which was a language favoured by the Party and, in Orwell's words, "designed to diminish the range of thought" ("newspeak"). Newspeak was characterised by the elimination or alteration of certain words, the substitution of one word for another, the interchangeability of parts of speech, and the creation of words for political purposes and propaganda. For example, there is no 'bad' because negative words are deleted from existence. So 'bad' becomes 'ungood,' and although the word 'free' does exist, the concept of 'freedom' doesn't because there is no word for it. By extension, the government can manipulate the very thoughts people have. Newspeak is used by the government to control what people can and can't say, as well as censor unpopular opinions or whatever the government doesn't like.

Both the Party in *1984* and the Nazi Party in Germany used mass communication as a way of disseminating propaganda, another method with which a comparison can be drawn between Hitler and the Party's propaganda is the use of radios and visuals. In real life, the Ministry of Propaganda and Public Enlightenment 'instructed' the news announcers on the radio how to spin the problems the Germans faced in the Soviet Union, or how to discuss the cuts in food

rations, to always portray Hitler and the Nazi Party in a positive light (Bytwerk, 2007a). This can also be seen in the novel when it was announced on the telescreen that "the chocolate ration was reduced from thirty grammes to twenty," and then the next day it was announced that the population was thankful to Big Brother for raising the chocolate ration to 20 grammes (Orwell 1949a). This particular example displays the control the radio propaganda had on the people in Oceania and exemplifies the inspiration taken from Hitler's Ministry of Propaganda. The radio was the cheapest form of entertainment, and it was the most popular medium during the Second World War. The accessibility and availability meant it fueled propaganda and could reach a large number of citizens.

Every inhabitant of Oceania is obligated to take part in The Two Minutes Hate, a daily event. The populace sees a film on The Party's adversaries, notably Emmanuel Goldstein and the Brotherhood. The citizens express their rage at them by screaming about their hatred for Goldstein and the Brotherhood and even throwing things at the television. Comparably, Nazi propaganda promoted Nazi ideology by demonising the enemies of the Nazi Party, notably Jews and communists. On April 1, 1933, a boycott of Jewish stores was announced on the radio and in newspapers. Another radio announcement declared that "in Paris, London, and New York, German businesses were destroyed by the Jews; German men and women were attacked in the streets and beaten; German children were tortured and defiled by Jewish sadists" and called on Germans to "do to the Jews in Germany what they are doing to Germans abroad." (Bytwerk, 2007b; Koonz, 2005). The purpose of the Nazi Party and the Party in Oceania is to indoctrinate the people to hate the Jewish community and the Brotherhood.

Influence on Youth

The children of the Parsons family, the neighbours of the protagonist, Winston Smith, are enlisted in the "Junior Spies" programme designed to foster allegiance and unwavering loyalty to the government and Big Brother at a young age. Winston is fearful of the children because they can denounce him to the Thought Police, which is what they do to their father. The indoctrination tactics used by the Hitler Youth are mirrored in the children's enthusiasm for the Party and everything connected to it, such as the "worship of Big Brother, drilling with dummy rifles, hiking, processions, banners, and slogans" (Orwell 1949b).

Hitler established the Hitler Youth to educate and train young people in Nazi ideals, with the main objective being to foster allegiance to himself. Propaganda was used in games, toys, and textbooks to achieve this. The Hitler Youth program's emphasis on physical training was to get young men – and only men – ready to join the military. Both of these groups – the Hitler Youth and the Junior Spies – were intended to promote the relinquishment of individuality in order to advance the aims of the collective. The organisations superficially appear to want children who protect their society; however, in reality, these children are made to mindlessly follow the government's orders. The children are so deeply invested in the security of the state that they cannot think for themselves and make rational decisions. For example, the Parson children, who live next door to the protagonist, accuse their father, Mr. Parson, of murmuring as he sleeps and denounce him to the Thought Police for committing a thought crime. This event serves as a stark reminder of how deeply the Party has brainwashed young people, transforming them into enforcers of its values. In order to demonstrate their allegiance to Party doctrine, the Parsons children are shown to be merciless and uncompromising, and they are even prepared to betray their own father. Overall, the Parsons family scenario highlights the dangers of indoctrination and blind obedience, as the children have been trained to put Party allegiance above everything else, including their own familial bonds. This results in compromised intimacy in their relationships, which therefore distorts the meaning of family and breaks bonds. In both Oceania and Germany, the children's loyalty to the state was pertinent, implanting the idea of Big Brother or Hitler as the ultimate hero.

In addition to this, the Komsomol, a youth organisation of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union, can be drawn parallels with the "processions, banners, and slogans" of the Junior Spies (Orwell 1949c). The state ensured that communism was taught to young people, as members "were taught Soviet ideals through games, songs, and stories"(Fainsod, 1951) . Parallelly, in *1984*, the children had "processions, banners, and slogans" to have the Party's ideals take root in their mind (Orwell, 1949d). All of the activities were propaganda to control and manipulate the youth's ideas and way of thinking to turn them into perfect citizens that think and do as the government says. The government did this so that there will be no rebels or protests, unlike the older generation who have not been taught about the glorified state and leaders from the beginning.

Both *1984* and the real-life context of the Second World War depict the loss of

innocence experienced by the youth due to the influence of propaganda and the totalitarian regimes. In the novel, children are transformed into loyal Party members at a young age, losing their innocence and becoming instruments of the Party's control as seen with the Junior Spies. Similarly, during World War II, the youth were exposed to the horrors and propaganda of war (Hall, 2015). This coercion shattered the innocence of young adults and forced them to mature quickly.

Characterization of Leaders

A totalitarian ruler is described as someone who 'cannot admit mistakes because he must be seen as infallible' (Rasmussen, 2021). This is a common thread between Big Brother, Hitler, and Stalin. A direct parallel with Stalin's cult of personality, wherein the "Soviet press portrayed him as a caring yet strong father figure", with the Soviet people as his children (Gill, 1980). Instead of correlating the leader with positive family connotations as Stalin had wanted with "the use of the Father archetype" to convey both authority and benevolence, Orwell uses the name 'Big Brother' to also evoke a familial connection but with negative connotations; as someone to be afraid of (Pisch, 2016). Orwell satirises the false fraternity found in Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia by calling the dictator Big Brother. Instead of watching over you, as a big brother should, he is "watching you." The positive family values become threatening.

However, devolving to a more rudimentary style of comparison also leads us to identify that Orwell's descriptions of Big Brother's "black mustachio'd face" and "dark eyes" as well as the way he appears to "tower up, an invincible, fearless protector", "evoke the likenesses of both Hitler and Stalin, both known for their mustaches and powerful, commanding appearance in propaganda" (Orwell 1949e; Moran, 2018). This demonstrates that Orwell not only kept real leaders' personalities and characteristics in mind, when creating Big Brother but also their actual physical appearance. The physical description of Big Brother exemplifies that Orwell wanted Big Brother's image to remind people of the two real-life leaders and consider it as a warning against totalitarianism and what form it could take and had already taken. All of these leaders used their cult of personality to stay in power for extended periods of time and to control the population. Hitler was portrayed as a charismatic leader destined to save Germany and the idea of "The Führer is the Party and the Party is the Führer" abounded and seemed to highlight the helplessness of bringing back German glory without his help (Kershaw, 1989).

Stalin's cult of personality manifested in similar ways. Other government officials feared being outcasted as oppositionists, so they were reluctant to express their views, which created an "atmosphere of self-censorship, creating an illusion of uncontested support" for Stalin (Tucker, 1979). All of these characteristics of a cult of personality echo Big Brother and his image in the society of Oceania. The ideas of Big Brother as a saviour and solver of all of the peoples' problems, his role in the freedom of the fictional society and undisputed support from all other subordinate officials remind of the real societies at the time.

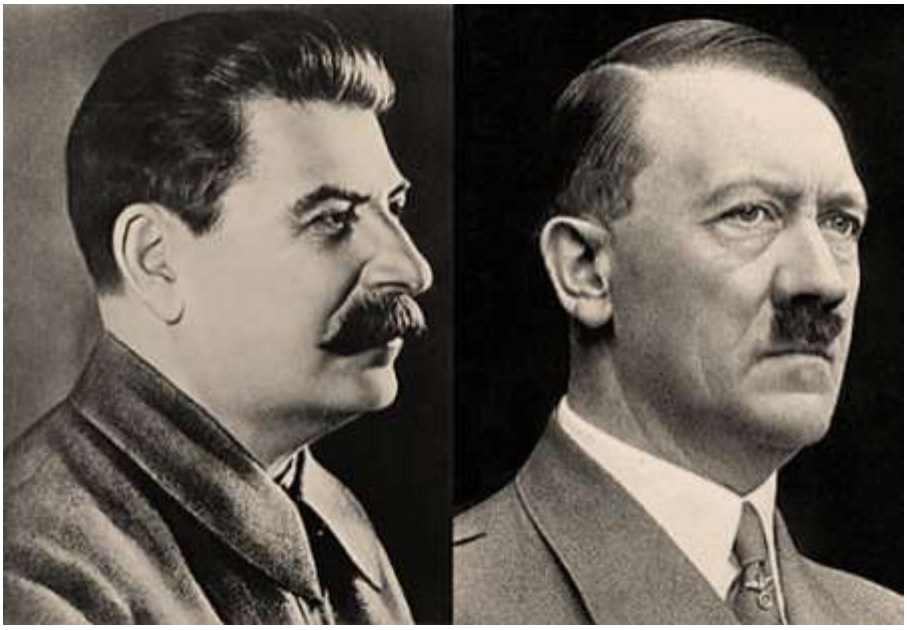

Fig 1: Photographs highlighting the close resemblance in the appearance of Stalin and Hitler.

Conclusion

George Orwell was guided by the political situation in the real world during the Second World War, specifically Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union in the writing of *1984,* which demonstrates how fiction can become a more creative outlet for discourse on situations than non-fiction at politically-charged times in history. Examining the parallels between the propaganda, youth and leaders of real totalitarian states and George Orwell's *1984* signifies that this novel can be viewed as an exaggerated record of historical events, which exemplifies that real-world politics affect writing and literature. Although there are similarities with other

leaders such as Mussolini of Fascist Italy that also indicate the link between the real and fictional world, the leaders and themes chosen resonate most strongly with the link established. Although we cannot know why Orwell wrote this novel, it serves as a stark reminder of the dangers of totalitarianism. Given that there is a rise in authoritarianism around the world currently, looking at these parallels is still relevant and can give us glimpses into what the world can look like.

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