

Spot the Difference: Putin 2022 versus Big Brother 1984

A fine line between fiction and reality



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George Orwell's 1984 is one of the most famous examples of a totalitarian government in science fiction. In the novel, the government of Oceania controls a large section of the world, including Airstrip One, which used to be the United Kingdom. The government is led by the Party, represented by the image of Big Brother, and controls the population through a variety of methods including censorship.

What is the main theme of 1984? The main theme of 1984 is that the goal of a totalitarian government is to maintain absolute control of its citizens' thoughts and actions, and it will use any means necessary to achieve that goal. The government's constant surveillance leads to paranoia and suspicion since citizens can never be certain about who or what may be watching them

The novel's protagonist, Winston Smith, works at the Ministry of Truth, a government agency that alters records to whatever the government needs them to say. If someone is found to be a dissident and must be eliminated, for example, all records of that person's existence are altered so it appears they never existed in the first place.

The role of censorship is central to the maintenance of power. In 1984 this is further represented by the concept of Newspeak. This is a language created by the government of Oceania to slowly replace English.

The language is based on English, but it condenses the language and cuts words and terms out every year, even combining certain phrases into new words like "Minitrue" for "Ministry of Truth."

The goal is to eventually simplify language to such an extent that concepts like freedom will no longer exist. This way, the Party can censor and inhibit thinking in the population by ensuring that certain concepts don't even have words attached to them.

In 1984 society is closely monitored and is under surveillance by the Thought Police. 'Thinkpol' is a newspeak word to describe the secret police of Oceania, who are responsible for the detection, prosecution, and elimination of unspoken beliefs and doubts that contradict the Party. They use audio-visual surveillance via the telescreens and offender profiling to monitor the populace. Within this context you can be found guilty of a thoughtcrime.

The term "thoughtcrime" is used to describe a thought that's antithetical to the Party's teachings and beliefs. For example, if one felt sexual desire towards another person, thought something negative about Big Brother, such as doubting Oceania's war. However, you look at it, the similarities are almost an exact representation of Putin's society in Russia in 2022.



12 essential George Orwell quotes about freedom (reference Penguin books)

Individual liberty. Society. Technology. Political liberty. Revolution. The importance of free speech.

Orwell's ambition to create a fairer and more egalitarian society is essential inspiration as we strive for freedom and equality in today's world. Here are **12 important quotes** from the author of 1984, taken from the ultimate anthology on liberty: Orwell on Freedom.

'He is a slave with a semblance of liberty which is worse than the most cruel slavery.'

'You just got to say to yourself, "I'm a free man in here" - he tapped his forehead - 'and you're all right.'

'No one can get up much enthusiasm for a Government which puts you in jail if you open your mouth'

'Like a drug, the machine is useful, dangerous and habit-forming. The oftener one surrenders to it the tighter its grip becomes.'

'There was a belief in the revolution and the future, a feeling of having suddenly emerged into an era of equality and freedom.'

'In every one of those little stucco boxes there's some poor bastard who's never free except when he's fast asleep and dreaming'

'The nation is bound together by an invisible chain.'

'The fallacy is to believe that under a dictatorial government you can be free inside.'

'If liberty means anything at all it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear.'

'Freedom of speech is real.'

'Will the man in the street ever feel that freedom of the mind is as important and as much in need of being defended as his daily bread?'

'What is needed is the right to print what one believes to be true, without having to fear bullying or blackmail from any side.'

1984 - a best seller in Russia

George Orwell’s dystopian novel “1984” has been catapulted into the spotlight in Russia since the country invaded Ukraine on February 24th, 2022

Many have drawn parallels between the book - written in 1949 to describe a world under totalitarian surveillance and modern Russia, where ordinary people are punished for calling Moscow’s attack on Ukraine a war.

The novel is now at the heart of anti-war protests, as well as denunciations from officials who claim the book reflects Western societies. Here’s an interesting fact and one that begs to ask the question why Putin has not censored and banned 1984 in Russia: sales of 1984 in Russia have soared since Russia invaded the Ukraine.

Is it he sees 1984 as a biblical representation of the totalitarian world he has created and sees it as good for his people, or is it that he underestimates the intellectual capacity of his people to read and translate 1984 into their own reality? Even more absurdly, as noted in The Guardian (Monday May 23rd, 2022):

“For many years we believed that Orwell described the horrors of totalitarianism. This is one of the biggest global fakes ... Orwell wrote about the end of liberalism. He depicted how liberalism would lead humanity to a dead end,” Maria Zakharova, the spokesperson for Russia’s foreign ministry, said during a public talk in Ekaterinburg on Saturday.

Zakharova had been asked by a member of the public how to respond to friends and relatives abroad when they suggested that Russia was living in a modern-day replay of Orwell’s novel: “Orwell did not write about the USSR, it wasn’t about us,” she said. “He wrote about the society in which he lived, about the collapse of the ideas of liberalism. And you were made to believe that Orwell wrote it about you.” Zakharova suggested the audience member tell her relatives abroad: “It’s you in the west who live in a fantasy world where a person can be cancelled.”

You doubt that this interpretation is why “1984” become more popular in Russia since the start of the war. Th irony is not lost by most that this misrepresentation represents the concept of Thinkpol and the role of the Thought Police in (re)writing the truth with views increasingly detached from reality.

It is a fact that sales of “1984” in Russia grew 30% in bookstores and 75% online in March 2022 compared to the same period last year. Quotes from the novel have been widely used among anti-war activists in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Yekaterinburg and other Russian cities (ref: The Moscow Times: independent news, May 2022).



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However, Orwell's novel has always been popular in Putin's Russia: it was one of the decade's best-selling books between 2010 and 2019, selling 1.8 million physical copies. The novel even made Russia's top 10 bestsellers in 2015, a year after Moscow annexed Ukraine's Crimean peninsula.

Conversely one of Russia's very few supporters, Belarus, has recently banned the sale of 1984, ironic also as this is a suppression and censorship of book that portrays a society where press and freedom of speech are censored by the state for their own gains and protection.

Not surprisingly, Russia's aggressive state media campaign to justify its invasion of Ukraine has drawn comparisons to 1984 and its most celebrated line:

"War is peace. Freedom is slavery. Ignorance is strength."

Spot the difference? It's hard to do so.



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