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1984 After February 24th: A Philosophical Rereading of Orwell's Novel

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Abstract

The article offers a philosophical rereading of George Orwell's novel *1984* in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war, in particular after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24th, 2022. In recent decades, the dystopia of the English writer has become not only a model of literary criticism of totalitarianism but also the subject of constant falsifications and censorship for Russian propagandists. This study aims to clarify the primary philosophical content of Orwell's novel and its heuristic potency to expose the sociopolitical situation in contemporary Russia. The author of the article turns to biographical descriptions and philosophical interpretations of the novel in the works of leading Western scholars to finally draw reasonable analogies between the dystopian world of *1984* and the contemporary Russian Federation.

Key Words: George Orwell, *1984*, Russian-Ukrainian war, philosophy, totalitarianism, power.

Short introduction

The recent history of mankind does not stop showing itself as a history of confrontation of political ideologies, in particular extremist ideologies with moderate ones. Over the past hundred years, we have witnessed numerous encounters between on the one hand, national socialism, communism, religious fundamentalism, and on the other hand, liberalism, social democracy, etc. It is interesting that almost always in the context of all these clashes special attention was paid to the figure of English writer George Orwell with his dystopian novel *1984*. This was the case during the Caribbean crisis, the September 11 attacks, and so happened during the Russian-Ukrainian war of 2022. Back in 2014, when Russia invaded Ukraine, annexed Crimea, and occupied part of Donbas, the American historian Timothy Snyder wrote: "Anyone who wants to understand the current Russian position on Ukraine would do well to begin with George Orwell's classic, *1984*."¹ At that time, the Russian-Ukrainian war provoked a limited reaction from the international community. But Orwell gained a new wave of popularity, which was strengthened in the following years. At first, Orwell was reminded by Russian special services, which during their intervention in the presidential elections in the USA in 2016 decided to use the authority of the famous writer. According to American biographer Dorian Lynskey, "the Internet Research Agency, a Russian troll farm, flooded social media with fake news stories designed to

1 Timothy Snyder, "To Understand Putin, Read Orwell," *POLITICO Magazine*, September 3, 2014, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/09/to-understand-putin-read-orwell-110551/>.

generate confusion, cynicism, and division. One of the agency's popular memes reads: "The People Believe What the Media Tells Them They Believe: George Orwell." The quotation was fabricated.² Subsequently, after the inauguration of Donald Trump and his consultant Kellyanne Conway's manipulative use of the phrase "alternative facts," the novel *1984* became a bestseller. It is unlikely that the Russian special services and Trump propagandists wanted to stir up interest in Orwell's work, but they succeeded in it. When Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, many knew which book to open.

In turn, the Russians were quick to respond. During the entire time of the full-scale invasion, they use Orwell's dystopia to compare it with the state of affairs in contemporary western-oriented Ukraine, and the spokesperson for Russia's foreign ministry, Maria Zakharova, even stated: "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... Orwell did not write about the USSR; it wasn't about us... He wrote about the society in which he lived, about the collapse of the ideas of liberalism."³

What did Orwell actually write about in his novel *1984*, and how does his work relate to contemporary Russia? In this work, we will investigate these questions, turning first to the biographical origins of *1984*, then to its philosophical interpretations, in order to finally draw balanced parallels between the dystopia of the English writer and contemporary Russia, especially considering the actions of the Russian Federation during the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The experience of abuse of power: biographical origins of *1984*

1984 was the pinnacle of Orwell's literary work and his last novel. The writer died at 46. He was overcome by tuberculosis. Despite constant lung disease since his youth, Orwell lived his years actively. One of the main features of his character was his high keenness of observation and sober mind. Perhaps, that is why this English writer never lived monotonously, he was attentive to events and drew conclusions from them, which constantly led to a change in the direction of his life. His biography includes a variety of episodes: from wandering with the London vagabonds to creating intellectual radio blogs for the BBC. Of course, most of these episodes of his life are inextricably linked with writing. Writing works is the rod on which other events were strung. After each large-scale event, Orwell published a new book in which he made sense of the experience, either in an artistic or journalistic way. To a

2 Dorian Lynskey, *The Ministry of Truth: The Biography of George Orwell's 1984*, Ebook (Doubleday, 2019), 277.

3 Pjotr Sauer, "Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four Was about Liberalism, Not Totalitarianism, Claims Moscow Diplomat," *The Guardian*, May 23, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/23/george-orwell-1984-about-liberalism-not-totalitarianism-claims-moscow-diplomat>.

certain extent, the novel *1984* can be called the result of the author's understanding of the post-war challenges facing humanity, in particular, the "Cold War" – by the way, a term invented by Orwell himself. But in fact, *1984* was the apogee of understanding the topic, which there are reasons to consider the main one in Orwell's work. This topic is an abuse of power. The main events in the writer's life prompted him to write a book about the misuse of power.

In his recent book, American biographer Thomas Ricks vividly described several defining episodes from Orwell's life in this regard.⁴ As a child, George Orwell, whose real name was Eric Blair, grew up in a family without a father who was a petty clerk and worked thousands of miles from England in India. He hardly visited his wife and little son. In Eric's memory, the father remained only in the form of a blurred figure of an old man who constantly disciplined his son with the words "Don't." The father was not a tyrant, but because of his constant absence, Eric lacked his love, and he was remembered by the kid only as a source of coercion. But real coercion awaited the eight-year-old boy at St. Cyprian's School. There, he was subjected to corporal punishment. He was severely beaten so that the lonely and frightened boy would not wet the bed, and so that he would study well. Since Eric was a stipendiary and the preparatory school was paying for his education, it was important for its administrators to get something out of the scholar in return. This recompense was to get Eric into a top-level school that would raise the profile of the preparatory school that had graduated him. So, already at the stage of childhood, Eric suffered from a lack of parental love and overt school violence.

In his late youth, Eric had the opportunity to see violence already from the position of someone who wields power. After college, he enlisted as an officer in the colonial police force in Burma. At the end of the 19th century, Britain annexed regions of Burma. Colonial oppression reigned there. Eric not only saw it every day with his own eyes, but also participated in it. It is not surprising that after several years of working in such an atmosphere, he renounced the police service.

The third and decisive episode of familiarity with the abuse of power occurred with Eric already in adulthood during the Spanish Civil War. At that time, he was an anti-colonialist and socialist, sympathizing with enslaved peoples and oppressed classes. Therefore, right-wing extremists who tried to destroy the left and seize power in Spain caused him inescapable discomposure. The discomposure was so great that he came to Spain and was ready to stand with weapons in his hands in the left ranks and risk his life at the front. However, it turned out that the Spanish leftists were just as extremist as their right-wing opponents. The left in Spain was represented by various forces that seemed to be fighting for a common goal. For example, Orwell quite accidentally joined the partial Trotskyists (The Workers' Party of Marxist Unification). At that time, he did not suspect the danger of such a decision. The fact is that the main force among the Spanish left was the Stalinists of the Communist Party of Spain, who did not tolerate ideological deviations from their line, especially those inspired by

4 Thomas Ricks, *Churchill and Orwell: The Fight for Freedom* (Penguin Books, 2018).

Leon Trotsky. Therefore, even in the midst of the civil war, when a convenient opportunity arose, the Stalinists, with the support of the USSR People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD), began to cleanse the Workers' Party. They directed the entire propaganda machine against the Trotskyists, in the information space they turned them into traitors, direct accomplices of the fascists. And meanwhile, they began to imprison and kill them. The little-known Orwell was not the main target of the Stalinists, but as it became known later, during this period he was charged with espionage and treason. Fortunately, the writer's friends informed him of the danger, and he escaped from his persecutors: he slept in the ruins of a church at night, and warily wandered the streets during the day until he received documents to leave the country. In a few months, the Stalinists destroyed the leaders of the Workers' Party. For the third time in his life, Orwell was convinced of the terrible nature of the abuses of power. This time it was the deepest understanding because the leftists, those on whom he placed his hopes, stabbed him in the back. This applied not only to Stalin's executioners but also to all other leftists, including his comrades from the Workers' Party, who during this confrontation were ready to use lies "for good purposes." Orwell could not accept such radicalism. Later, in the essay *Looking Back on the Spanish War*, he wrote: "Early in life I had noticed that no event is ever correctly reported in a newspaper, but in Spain, for the first time, I saw newspaper reports which did not bear any relation to the facts, not even the relationship which is implied in an ordinary lie... I saw, in fact, history being written not in terms of what happened but of what ought to have happened according to various 'party lines.'"⁵

The writer's social experience related to human abuse of power was, of course, supplemented by literary experience, namely, the experience of a reader, observer, and reviewer, which Orwell was throughout his creative career. Lynskey wrote about this in detail.⁶ There were many books that strongly influenced the writer on the eve and during the Second World War. Orwell learned a lot about the real state of affairs in the communist Soviet Union from the memoirs of various political refugees, such as Andre Gide's book *Return from the USSR*. Orwell drew many artistic tools from various novels about the life vicissitudes of people in a totalitarian society, for example, from Arthur Koestler's book *Darkness at Noon*. In addition, dystopia, a genre that gained popularity in those difficult times, also took an important place. Here, one of the most influential was Yevgeny Zamyatin's book *We*, which Orwell read for the first time during the writing of 1984.

Orwell would not be himself if he did not constantly try to maintain as much impartiality and cool judgment as possible. Even during the Second World War, when many English intellectuals joined the service of domestic propaganda, Orwell tried not to turn into a propagandist. He worked at the BBC and observed numerous

5 George Orwell, "Looking Back on the Spanish War", in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell: Volume II: My Country Right or Left 1940-1943*, eds. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (Penguin Books, 1968), 294.

6 Lynskey, *The Ministry of Truth*.

exaggerations and uncritical assessments of his fellow journalists in the context of the events of the time. It was important for him not to give in to the temptation of vulgar use of the information power granted to him on the radio. Therefore, Orwell filled his popular programs on the BBC with deep literary content, and desperately resisted any attempts to correct his statements. This episode of the writer's biography prompted him to pay additional attention to the themes of lies, manipulation, and distortion of facts, which will become parts of the future dystopian novel *1984*.

It can be said that Orwell's observations on the abuses of power were observations on the baldness of many dominant ideologies of the first half of the 20th century: conservatism, imperialism, communism, and eventually liberalism. Orwell had no complaints about the liberal protection of basic human rights because he himself considered the right to individual freedom, security, and dignity to be inviolable values. However, he was an opponent of the capitalist economy and considered it destructive in relation to human rights. According to the logic of his beliefs, it is unlikely that most people can live a free, safe, and dignified life when capitalists have complete economic power and concentrate most of the wealth in their pockets. Orwell was a socialist, and after the events in Spain, he emphasized that he was a "democratic socialist," thus distinguishing himself from authoritarian socialists and communists.⁷ Orwell's socialism was instinctive rather than theoretically thought out in detail. He did not clearly understand what a good society should look like, but he supported progressive democratic reforms, nationalization of enterprises, redistribution of resources, public education and medicine, decolonization, etc.⁸ Subsequently, he saw a generally similar policy in the British Labour Party led by Clement Attlee, who came to power in the country after the Second World War.

Disreality, cruelty, godlikeness: philosophical interpretations of *1984*

The novel *1984* was first published in 1949. Since then, the general dynamics of the work's popularity has only grown. Orwell's dystopia became an example of classic literature not only for ordinary readers but also for intellectuals. The work can owe such recognition primarily to its own political and philosophical depth. Leading thinkers from different parts of the world turned to the dystopia of the English writer to illustrate and explain some fundamental aspects of totalitarianism. In our opinion, three of them are crucial. The first two concerns the question of the method of using totalitarian power, and the third concerns the question of the purpose of such power.

7 George Orwell, "Why I Write," in *George Orwell: An Age Like This 1920–1940: The Collected Essays, Journalism & Letters*, eds. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 2000), 5.

8 George Orwell, "The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius," in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell: Volume II: My Country Right or Left 1940–1943*, eds. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (Penguin Books, 1968).

This corresponds to the very structure of the novel when initially the main character learns about exactly how the Party uses power, and later – why it does it.

Reality is not self-sufficient for the Party but is entirely a product of the mind⁹. As man perceives the world, so the world really is, and since the Party powerfully determines how man perceives the world, reality is ultimately a product of the Party's mind. The principle of doublethink allows the Party to control individuals. It is known that human perception of reality is built on the laws of logic, one of which is the law of non-contradiction. According to this law, a statement and its negation cannot be true at the same time. The Party restructures human perception and, contrary to the law of non-contradiction, accustoms people to hold two opposing beliefs at the same time and accept both equally. For example, one can be persuaded of the absolute equality of all people, and at the same time take at face value the substantial privilege of some groups, such as Party members. As Orwell wrote in another famous work: "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others."¹⁰ The principle of doublethink is a manipulation tool of party rulers to constantly manipulate the views of the population. When the Party benefits from one thing, it spreads the idea of equality, and when it benefits from another, it pushes the population to wholehearted acceptance of hierarchical submission. This is the denial of reality, the construction of "disreality."

Another feature of the principle of doublethink is its application by party members in relation to themselves. In Orwell's novel, members of the Inner Party are described as the best masters of doublethink, and at the same time as its hostages. "It need hardly be said that the subtlest practitioners of doublethink are those who invented doublethink and know that it is a vast system of mental cheating. In our society, those who have the best knowledge of what is happening are also those who are furthest from seeing the world as it is. In general, the greater the understanding, the greater the delusion; the more intelligent, the less sane. One clear illustration of this is the fact that war hysteria increases in intensity as one rises in the social scale."¹¹ Members of the Inner Party are forced to apply the principle of doublethink to themselves because they need to persuade themselves of the moral acceptability of their goal in order not to feel guilty. In this way, they over-persuade themselves that, while manipulating reality, they are not actually violating it. Lithuanian philosopher Leonidas Donskis wrote in his essay on Orwell that fanatics are ready to deny the existence of any reality that cannot support their faith or ideological beliefs.¹² This requires a deliberate suppression of intellectual and moral sensibility because otherwise the

9 George Orwell, "Nineteen Eighty-Four," in *George Orwell: Complete & Unabridged* (Secker & Warburg/Octopus, 1980), 886.

10 George Orwell, "Animal Farm", in *George Orwell: Complete & Unabridged* (Secker & Warburg/Octopus, 1980), 63.

11 Orwell, "Nineteen Eighty-Four," 865.

12 Leonidas Donskis, "George Orwell: The Anatomy of Fanaticism and Hatred," *Eurozine*, April 10, 2003, <https://www.eurozine.com/george-orwell-the-anatomy-of-fanaticism-and-hatred/#>.

inner uncertainty and tension in the human mind can reach the point of insanity. As a result, refusing to make a clear distinction between manipulating reality and following reality leads to a loss of connection with it. In fact, fanatical party-members substitute one kind of insanity for another. They avoid insanity from moral tension, but they go insane from immersing themselves in a world of imagination unrelated to reality.

However, controlling the mental sphere is not the easiest thing. No matter how cunning modern brainwashing methods are, the evolutionarily formed human mind is always more complex than the tricks of manipulators. Therefore, another, rougher tool is needed. This is the principle of suffering. "Power is in inflicting pain and humiliation."¹³ To achieve complete control, the Party must work not only with people's beliefs about the world but also with those people's bodily and mental self-perceptions. The most effective means for this are torture and humiliation, which at a certain stage of their application force the victim to renounce all beliefs prohibited by the Party and surrender completely to the will of the torturer. Since the cessation of suffering and the state of peace of the victim depends entirely on the will of the executioner, the victim begins to identify himself with this will. Moreover, Orwell wrote about love for the executioner, or for the symbolic figure of Big Brother, who personifies the Party.

The American philosopher Richard Rorty saw the significance of the last third of the novel *1984* in the fact that it makes its readers more sensitive to cases of cruelty and humiliation that people tend to overlook.¹⁴ In his opinion, the first two-thirds of the novel were also of great value because with their help Orwell, like no one else, managed to convince the English and American elites of the unsuitability of communism to realize human hopes for well-being. After the great success of *1984* in Great Britain and the United States, many politicians freed themselves from the blinding influence of Bolshevik propaganda. In the first two-thirds of the work, they read a vivid description of the anti-humane consequences of totalitarian ideology called "Ingsoc." Material impoverishment, intellectual degradation, loss of privacy, constant fear, and the cult of war – Orwell managed to be very convincing in depicting these phenomena. But the last third of the novel, according to Rorty, was special. It features an interaction between O'Brien and Smith that is essentially an elaborate example of cruelty and humiliation. The scale of O'Brien's torment of Smith is astounding. With each subsequent page, new aspects of this terrible act are revealed. O'Brien physically tortures Smith. Against this background, he also tries to break apart his victim's personality, to make sure that Smith can never piece together the idea of himself as someone who loves Julia and at the same time as someone who sincerely wants her face eaten by rats. Eventually, O'Brien's goal is the most terrifying: he seeks to excruciate his victims just for the sake of excruciation. The purpose of torture is torture. This is pure sadism, with which the political elites of this dystopian state are obsessed. According to Rorty, Orwell showed

13 Orwell, "Nineteen Eighty-Four," 897.

14 Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 173.

the reader the real possibility of people like O'Brien coming to power in the West. The last third of *1984* served to destroy the illusions that such a scenario would be too radical or fantastic. This part focused human attention on the problems of politically motivated cruelty and humiliation.

For the Party, power is not a means to an end, but an end in itself.¹⁵ Power is exercised for the sake of power, or rather for the expansion of power. Previously, such an understanding of power could be considered a manifestation of madness. Why make the ultimate goal of your efforts only power, if the latter can be used to obtain various benefits? This question is quite appropriate in the context of the more distant past, but in the 20th century, there was a change. Orwell believed that the 20th century opened hitherto unknown possibilities of power thanks to newspapers, radio, television, and new ideologies. Previously, the ruling groups were limited in the exercise of their power due to a lack of resources and could allocate their time and efforts to achieve various benefits, such as wealth or prestige. However, the limitation of their power sooner or later led to its loss. While the 20th century provides almost unlimited opportunities for control, and at the same time, to maintain power indefinitely, the ruling groups must direct all their resources to deepen and expand control. This era produces power fanatics. They tend to give up excessive individual wealth, fame, or ambition in order to be part of collective power.

The French philosopher Alain Besancon argued that *1984* primarily helps to draw attention to the problem of evil.¹⁶ The latter has always been one of the main themes of fiction, especially after the spread of Christianity, when the images of hell and the devil became an integral part of European culture. The peculiarity of *1984* is the depiction of evil as undisguised, open, and confident in its triumph. Orwell portrayed O'Brien and the members of the Party as obsessed with the desire to become God because God is power, pure power, and absolute power. God can infinitely define what is good and what is evil. And in O'Brien's case, it's about infernal power. O'Brien does not offer a pseudo-paradise but openly guarantees hell. He is the devil who, without temptation, tries to turn the world into hell: to destroy the created natural order, to replace it with another, or to turn it into nothing. According to Besancon, the unique tonality of the novel *1984* consists precisely of the fact that pure evil triumphs in it, and everything that exists collapses.

Why O'Brien and members of the Party can be called the embodiment of evil, which tends to the absolute? Because they chose the path of destruction. Their power does not serve to create well-being, just as it does not serve mercenary goals such as wealth or fame. They destroyed the free market and keep the economy of Oceania at a degraded level, where the majority of the inhabitants barely survive, impoverished. They destroyed civil society and turned citizens into obedient slaves. And the main thing is that it is thanks to such destruction that they can feel their infinite power.

15 Orwell, "Nineteen Eighty-Four," 895.

16 Alain Besancon, *The Falsification of the Good: Soloviev and Orwell*, trans. Matthew Screech (Claridge Press Ltd., 1994).

Unstoppable Orwellization of Russia

1984 is a hopeless dystopia, both in ideas and in the plot. Orwell seems to have deliberately painted a mostly bleak picture so that the liberal reader can fully imagine the horrors of totalitarianism. And with caution, we can conjecture that the writer had in mind not only defeating German Nazism and strengthening Russian communism but also the Anglo-American totalitarian challenges of the future. Fortunately, in the following decades after the publication of the novel, anti-totalitarian tendencies in the West only grew stronger. In contrast, after the death of Joseph Stalin, Russia began to play with endless variations of the same system of government, only in a softened form. Russia of the 21st century is no exception. Today, it has become both harder and easier for Ukrainians to read Orwell's novel than before. It is more difficult because, for contemporary generations of Ukrainians, the writer's totalitarian dystopia ceased to be a fictional story on the pages of a book and began to resemble the real state of existence of a neighboring country. It's easier because millions of Ukrainians experienced the war directly on themselves, and what is described in the book does not seem so terrible, compared to the personally suffered events.

But are the ideas expressed in the novel really relevant for understanding the situation in contemporary Russia? As you know, it is difficult to find a work of fiction that would be referred to more often in order to draw various parallels in the sociopolitical plane. Lynskey has shown with numerous examples that in the decades following the publication of the novel 1984, its plot and ideas were used by representatives of different parts of the political spectrum.¹⁷ At the beginning of the Cold War, Orwell's work was exploited by the right. For example, the USA Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and anti-communists, who presented the novel in the light of criticism of communism and the Soviet Union, often distorted the content of the book. On the contrary, many leftists tried to accuse Orwell's 1984 of betraying socialism or distorting communism, and at the same time, their accusations were completely unfounded. Some time later, Orwell's work became a reference book for counterculture followers, especially rock musicians who responded to economic crises, wars, political scandals, and the like. In 1984, there was such an "Orwellomania" that 1984 turned from a novel into a meme. For example, Oceania slogans were used in carpet advertisements.

Nevertheless, the numerous facts of the use of unjustified comparisons should not hide several important things from us. Firstly, Orwell was most motivated to write the novel by his own experience of escaping from the Russian communist secret police at the end of the Spanish Civil War, as well as by reading the numerous testimonies of political refugees from the USSR. Secondly, in the novel itself, Oceania is depicted based on the example of Communist Russia, not Nazi Germany or Fascist Italy. For instance, Besancon substantiates this observation with a number of parallels between communist Russia and Ingsocialist Oceania: the slogans of Stalin and Big Brother, the self-sacrifice of Stakhanov and Ogilvie, the devotion of Pavlik Morozov and the Parsons

17 Lynskey, *The Ministry of Truth*.

children, the collectivization of the USSR and Oceania, the three-class division into the party leaders, party bureaucrats, and the proletariat in both states, etc.¹⁸ So Orwell's novel was primarily about Russia, about such examples of abuse of power there, which after the Second World War had the prospect of spreading across the planet. During the second half of the 20th century, this prospect became a reality only partially: authoritarianism under the guise of communism penetrated Europe, China, and other parts of the world, but the resistance of democratic countries quite effectively restrained the spread of this disease. After all, by the end of the century, a number of authoritarian regimes and their allies in democracies had been defeated. At the same time, in Russia, after the collapse of the USSR, authoritarianism took a break, only to pick up pace again from the beginning of the new 21st century, albeit in a new ideological cover. A representative of those Russian punitive bodies (Special Departments), which once intended to capture and kill Orwell during the Spanish events, has been leading Russia for the past twenty years.

If we look at the extent to which the principles of doublethink, suffering, and autonomization of power described by Orwell are embodied in Russia in 2022, we can easily conclude that the work of the English writer has still not lost its critical importance for understanding Russian authoritarianism. Doublethink thrives in contemporary Russia, as evidenced by public opinion in this country. Consider at least the myth about the "brotherly peoples of Russians and Ukrainians." The absolute majority of Russians sincerely believe that Ukrainians are a "brotherly people" for them. It is about a certain moral conviction, according to which relations between these peoples should take place in the form of peaceful cooperation, a combination of political, economic, and cultural efforts for mutual benefit, albeit under the leadership of the elder Russian brother. This belief is based on a powerful propaganda narrative that tells about the historical kinship of the two peoples, and a long history of joint victories. At the same time, when the Russians are faced with numerous facts of recent atrocities by the Russian army against the peaceful Ukrainian population, the Russians have an irresistible tendency to turn a blind eye to it and continue to support the so-called "special operation" of their troops on the territory of Ukraine. It is obvious that the belief in friendly cooperation is in no way compatible with supporting the bombing of residential, maternity, and children's homes. Of course, being in a soap bubble of cynical Kremlin propaganda, the majority of Russians do not want to believe in the many documented testimonies of crimes committed by their troops on the territory of Ukraine. But that is precisely how doublethink works. Here we can recall a fragment of *1984*, when Orwell distinguishes doublethink from hypocrisy.¹⁹ The latter means a state in which an individual accepts one opinion that contradicts his other opinion and uses it for his own benefit, but at the same time knows that it is false or morally unacceptable. In contrast, in doublethink, the line between truth and error, acceptability and unacceptability is blurred. There are simply two thoughts that man is set to use at

18 Besancon, *The Falsification of the Good*.

19 Orwell, "Nineteen Eighty-Four," 866.

the behest of his unreason, his desires for submission or power. Today, Russians are affected not so much by hypocrisy as by doublethink. If propaganda has formed a mind in which Russians and Ukrainians are brothers forever, then any thoughts about Russian criminality in relation to Ukrainians are put aside. If in a certain situation, in order to preserve the idea of “brotherly peoples,” it is necessary to recognize the facts of the attack on the peaceful Ukrainian population – this does not become a problem either. After all, the bombing of maternity homes can always be justified by fake statements about the deployment of a group of Ukrainian troops in these homes.²⁰ Therefore, for the bearers of doublethink, it is not the moral quality of a certain thought and the corresponding act that is important, but the ability of this thought and act to serve as justification for them, even when they have to accept wrong thoughts or approve immoral acts.

At the same time, it is wrong to believe that the Russian people are victims of their rulers. On the contrary: rulers use stable social attitudes and values to establish their power. Putin’s long-standing statement, that “the collapse of the Soviet Union was the biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the century,” is well known.²¹ It simply reflected the reluctance of Russians to put up with the collapse of their Soviet empire and the loss of vast territories. In addition, today the rulers of Russia, like their subjects, are also affected by doublethink. An example here is their assessment of the sociopolitical mood in Ukraine on the eve of a full-scale invasion. In recent years, Russian propaganda has tried to counter the prevailing strength of pro-Ukrainian sentiments in Ukraine not only by spreading pro-Russian narratives inside Ukraine but also by portraying the general mood in this country as loyal to Russia. For example, as if supporters of a political course independent of Russia are in the minority in Ukraine and belong to the ruling political elite, as well as to subordinate paramilitary groups. The rest, it seems, seeks close cooperation with Russia. Until a certain time, Russian propagandists and their authorities managed to distinguish between the real state of affairs and their own fabrication. However, by the time of the full-scale invasion, awareness of this distinction had been lost. Russian authorities became victims of their own propaganda. They hoped to capture Ukraine in a few days with little effort but instead encountered stiff resistance from Ukrainians who did not want to see a Russian boot on their land.²² This example shows how the loss of the line between reality and fabrication, the crude instrumental use of thought leads to the collapse of plans and to self-destructive consequences. Finally, after months of full-scale war against Ukraine, the Russian authorities recognized the overwhelming support of

20 See Katie Polglase, Gianluca Mezzofiore and Livvy Doherty, “Anatomy of the Mariupol Hospital Attack,” *CNN*, March 17, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2022/03/europe/mariupol-maternity-hospital-attack/index.html>.

21 Claire Bigg, “World: Was Soviet Collapse Last Century’s Worst Geopolitical Catastrophe?,” *RFE/RL*, April 29, 2005, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1058688.html>.

22 See Mike Eckel, “Russian Officials Predicted A Quick Triumph In Ukraine. Did Bad Intelligence Skew Kremlin Decision-Making?,” *RFE/RL*, March 11, 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-invasion-ukraine-intelligence-putin/31748594.html>.

Ukrainians for their independence and European integration. But this was done again using the doublethink method: to explain one's own failures in conducting the so-called "special operation."

The principle of suffering is used by the current Russian authorities and accepted by the Russian population no less actively. The authorities are ready to regularly suppress the few public protests by force and destroy the real opposition, while the population is only capable of an indifferent, disappointed, or even approving reaction. This is how violence permeates the very culture of Russians. In O'Brien's words, Orwell wrote that one cannot be sure of the obedience of people whom one does not cause suffering.²³ There is always the possibility that they are only playing the role of submissive, but in reality, they harbored a disagreement inside their souls. In contrast, pain and humiliation turn people into voluntary and sincere slaves. So, it is not surprising why, during this year's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Russian military committed acts of genocide against Ukrainians in Bucha, Irpin, Mariupol, and other settlements.²⁴ What the Russian authorities used to apply to a small disobedient part of the Russian people, it applied even more forcefully to the entire Ukrainian nation, which refused to obey the orders of the invaders. It is also clear that for the Russian military, as perpetrators of numerous robberies, rapes, and murders of Ukrainians, the brutal acts committed did not become the basis for further refusal to carry out criminal orders. Because in Russian society, crimes against humanity no longer cause sharp moral rejection or psychological frustration. Ukrainian philosopher Volodymyr Yermolenko rightly noted that the "cult of violence" flourishes in Russian culture.²⁵

Finally, in Orwell's dystopian universe, doublethink and suffering are the means to implement power as an end in itself. Distortion of reality and humiliation of people are necessary for power, and power is necessary for itself. Or, according to Besancon's interpretation, pure power is necessary for godlikeness. During the recent wars against Chechnya, Georgia, Syria, and Ukraine, the Russian authorities constantly show that power is the supreme value for them, to which even the value of human life can be sacrificed.²⁶ The Kremlin is not interested in maintaining power in its own country because the law-making, informational, and punitive bodies in the state have been under its firm control for a long time. Enriching one's own pockets by embezzling budget funds has already turned into a familiar way of life for Russian officials. But the capture of new

23 Orwell, "Nineteen Eighty-Four," 897.

24 See George Wright, "Ukraine War: Is Russia Committing Genocide?," *BBC News*, April 13, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-61017352>.

25 Volodymyr Yermolenko, "Yevropa zhyve z dumkoiu, shcho zla treba unykaty" ["Europe Lives with the Idea That Evil Should Be Avoided,"] interview by Yelyzaveta Tsaregradska], *YouTUBE. Suspilne Kultura*, July 25, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ugizyZIH9Xc&t=1s>.

26 Anastasiya Opryshchenko, "Russian Federation Has Been Waging Wars throughout All Its History – Always Insidiously and Vilely," *ZABORONA*, April 11, 2022, <https://zaborona.com/interactive/russias-wars-en/>.

territories and the planting of the exclusive culture of the “Russian world” are effective ways of realizing the fanatical desire to impose one’s power on everything that exists. It is known that Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine was explained by Russian authorities as a way to protect allegedly oppressed ethnic Russians on the territory of Ukraine. For this, the Kremlin announced a “special military operation” for the demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine. However, as the Ukrainian historian Oleksandr Alfiorov noted, the Russians turn to the ideology of the “Russian world” when they need to disguise their own aggressive intentions.²⁷ They call the “Russian world” any remnants of Russianness in countries that were actually once forcibly Russified by Russia, in order to declare this Russianness oppressed and thus justify their invasion.

This was also the case during the Russian-Ukrainian war, which has been going on since 2014. In this case, the policy of the Russian puppet government in the occupied territories of the Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts of Ukraine is indicative of the decorativeness of the Russian-world ideology. During the years of occupation, these regions turned into areas of lawlessness²⁸ and economic backwardness,²⁹ where the dominant Russian-speaking Ukrainian population was forced to put up with the existing state of affairs. In addition, today it is clear that the Russian authorities are as indiscriminate in relation to their own population as to foreign ones. Proportionately many citizens of Russia, who are representatives of various ethnic minorities, are sent to the war with Ukraine. However, the majority of the Russian military occupiers on the territory of Ukraine are still ethnic Russians. The main selection criteria are geographical and economic. Those who are primarily sent to war to kill, and die are citizens of Russia with low material wealth from regions far from Moscow.³⁰ There are no attempts to preserve the main carriers of Russian culture. To paraphrase Orwell, for a boot stamping on a human face, it doesn’t matter who is under the sole: Chechens, Georgians, Syrians, Ukrainians, or Russians themselves.

27 Oleksandr Alfiorov, “‘Russkii mir’ Putina – tse feik. Poiasnennia ukrainskoho istoryka” [“Putin’s ‘Russian World’ is a Fake. Explanation of the Ukrainian Historian,”] *You Tube*. Oleksandr Alfiorov, March 3, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-3dQB_OTV68.

28 See Halya Coynash, “Human Rights Violations in the Occupied Parts of Ukraine’s Donbas since 2014: UI Reports on Human Rights and Security in Eastern Europe No. 1” (The Swedish Institute of International Affairs, 2021), <https://www.ui.se/globalassets/butiken/ui-report/ui-report-no.-1-2021.pdf>.

29 See Oleksandr Lashchenko, “Dehradatsiia promyslovosti ‘LDNR’. Khto ‘smotriashchy’ vid Kremli?” [“Degradation of ‘LDNR’ Industry. Who Is ‘Inspector’ from the Kremlin?”], *RFE/RL*, March 3, 2021, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/ordlo-promyslovist-kreml-medvedchuk/31130178.html>.

30 See Adam Lenton, “Who Is Dying for the ‘Russian World’?”, *Riddle*, April 26, 2022, <https://ridl.io/who-is-dying-for-the-russian-world/>.

31 See Borys Bakhteev, “Proty Ukrainy voiuiut buriaty. A rosiiany ni do choho? Analiz media” [“Buryats Fight against Ukraine. And the Russians Are Not in Business?”], *Institute of Mass Information*, April 3, 2022, <https://imi.org.ua/monitorings/proty-ukrainy-voyuyut-buryaty-a-rosiyany-ni-do-chogo-analiz-media-i45346>.

But it would be a great exaggeration to claim that the situation in contemporary Russia is as hopeless as in Orwell's Oceania. After all, the English writer depicted a totalitarian society. Even comparing Oceania with the USSR of Stalin's time, the previously discussed Besancon came to the conclusion of the difference between the first and second totalitarian systems. The Stalinist USSR was not as finished and consistent as Oceania. In addition, the Orwellian dystopian society was impossible in principle because it was incompatible with life.³² It should not be forgotten that Orwell's Oceania was a work of fiction. The writer did not try to provide a scientifically accurate description of the existing society at that time, nor did he make self-confident predictions about the future. According to Orwell himself: "I do not believe that the kind of society which I described necessarily will arrive, but I believe (allowing of course the fact that the book is satire) that something resembling it could arrive."³³ Therefore, there is hyperbolization and absolutization of many features of social life in the novel. Reflecting on them, it becomes clear that currently, Russia has not yet turned into Oceania. In Russia, the principles of doublethink, suffering, and autonomization of power prevail, but their effects are not total. After the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, they have increased, but there is still some space for freedom. For example, Russians may have any beliefs as long as they are not a direct threat to the power of the ruling elite. They may not even support the so-called "special operation." If this belief has no public expression, then it is not a problem at the moment. Another illustrative circumstance: despite the difficult situation at the front, Russia cannot afford a general mobilization because such an attack on the remnants of people's rights could lead to social unrest inside the country. Therefore, their Ministry of Defense, despite the defeat in a number of Ukrainian oblasts, has so far managed only to "covert" and official "partial" mobilization.³⁴ Russia is an authoritarian country that has been gradually moving towards totalitarianism in recent years but has not yet reached this point.

When such philosophers as Donskis, Rorty or Besancon wrote their works about Orwell and his dystopia, they had no hesitation about the moral tonality. It was about an undoubted condemnation of totalitarianism, about warning people against extreme lie, cruelty and fanaticism, which always have a chance to flood the social life of Western countries. At the same time, it is clear that in recent decades, one of the determining factors that helped Russia gradually turn into a kind of Orwellian Oceania and absorb neighboring territories was the indecision, and sometimes hypocrisy, of some Western politicians in confronting the Russian threat. While the Western public was ready to take Orwell's warnings seriously, some of their elected representatives showed political

32 Besancon, *The Falsification of the Good*.

33 George Orwell, "Letter to Francis A. Henson (Extract)," in *The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters of George Orwell: Volume IV: In Front of Your Nose, 1945-1950*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1968), 502.

34 See Mark Cancian, "What Does Russia's 'Partial Mobilization' Mean?," *The Center for Strategic and International Studies*, September 26, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/what-does-russias-partial-mobilization-mean>.

imprudence. Even the full-scale invasion of Russia into Ukraine did not become a reason for a number of European political leaders to radically change their policy of appeasement in relation to Russia.³⁵

In Orwell's dystopia, totalitarian Oceania fights against the same totalitarian states as Eurasia and Eastasia. The war is beneficial to the leaders of each country in order to maintain power and strengthen the ruling regime. Today, some Western countries would definitely not want a war that is taking place on the eastern borders of Europe. However, this war does not lead them to a full confrontation with Russia. These democratic countries hope to maintain some cooperation with authoritarian Russia at the diplomatic and economic levels. The main problem of such a policy is that in the long run, it threatens the open society in the West. The stronger Russia becomes, the more it gains leverage over the West to destabilize and control it. The subversive activities of spies, the bringing to power of lobbyists, mass flows of refugees – all these methods have been actively used by Russia in its political war against the West in recent decades.³⁶ The fictional Oceania, Eurasia, and Eastasia could hold the balance and continue a mutually beneficial war forever, while the real West could hardly hope for equilibrium in relations with Russia. This means that it is time to substantially revise the current foreign policy course. And with each subsequent stage of the war, this understanding becomes more and more clear.

Conclusions

The novel *1984* in the 21st century continues to be used as a tool of ideological confrontation. The images and ideas of this work were so many-sided that today they often become the subject of manipulation by various extremists and their propagandists. That is why *1984* needs another academic re-reading every time fateful historical events occur. The Russian-Ukrainian war, especially after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, undoubtedly became such an occasion. Not only because Orwell's novel once again began to be swept off the shelves of bookstores, but also because Russian propagandists conducted an information campaign to discredit and falsify this work. One of the main ways to blur the reader's eyes regarding the work was the statement that Orwell's dystopia actually describes not Russian totalitarianism, but the crisis of liberalism, the decline of Western civilization, with which Ukraine identifies itself.

As our study has shown, a number of indications lead to a different conclusion. Biographies about Orwell show that there were several episodes in the life of the

35 See Andreas Umland, "Why the West Is Still Not yet Helping Ukraine as Much as Possible," *New Eastern Europe*, October 10, 2022, <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2022/10/10/why-the-west-is-still-not-yet-helping-ukraine-as-much-as-possible/>.

36 See Mark Galeotti, "Controlling Chaos: How Russia Manages Its Political War in Europe," *The European Council on Foreign Relations*, September 1, 2017, https://ecfr.eu/publication/controlling_chaos_how_russia_manages_its_political_war_in_europe/.

English writer that deeply influenced his work in general and his *magnum opus 1984* in particular. These include studying at St. Cyprian's School, serving in the Indian Colonial Police, and participating in the Spanish Civil War. The experience of abuse of power was a common thread throughout Orwell's life. Even his ideological adherence to democratic socialism was an expression of deep-rooted feelings of injustice and compassion, nourished by this experience. Of course, as a democratic socialist, Orwell was not satisfied with the state of affairs in his contemporary Great Britain or the United States, but he was more wary of the complete decline of freedom, the transformation of these relatively democratic countries into totalitarian ones, their degradation to the level of Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany and, especially, Communist Russia. Russian totalitarianism impressed Orwell the most, and the dystopian country of Oceania was invented by the author based on the example of the Soviet Union with its collectivism and strict class division.

The main ideas of *1984*, discussed in our study by referring to the works of several leading philosophers of recent decades, are anti-totalitarian. Donskis pointed to Orwell's warning about the danger of abandoning reality in favor of fanatical imagination. In Orwell's novel, this warning sounded between the lines dedicated to doublethink. Rorty argued that *1984* teaches us to be more sensitive to instances of empowered cruelty. In this way, the American philosopher drew attention to another principle of establishing totalitarian power depicted by Orwell: the principle of suffering. In turn, Besancon interpreted Orwell's reflections on the totalitarian self-worth of power. In his opinion, Orwell's theological dystopia draws attention to the unnatural, diabolical essence of the desire for absolute power. When applying these ideas to current realities, it becomes clear that in contemporary Russia there is an unceasing process of Orwellization, that is, the transformation of the state and society into the models of totalitarianism described by the English writer. Although the Russian Federation has not yet fully transformed into a totalitarian country, its authoritarianism is gradually moving towards greater and greater control over the minds and bodies of individuals, as well as the transformation of its power from a means to an end in itself. In our study, this is well illustrated by examples of Russian statements and actions during the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Nowadays, the Russian-Ukrainian war has already caused global consequences. Stability and development in the democratic countries of the world will directly depend on the results of this war. At his time, Orwell wrote *1984* to warn humanity about the possible scenario of the decline of the free world. The writer was convinced that if one is not uncompromising in relation to totalitarianism, then it will spread until it eliminates the smallest manifestations of freedom and humanity. Are democratic societies and their leaders today ready to take Orwell's warnings seriously? They became more ready after February 24th. But there is no doubt that the longer Ukraine's victory in this war is delayed, the more attention will be drawn to the pages of the English writer's dystopia.

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