

MASHA KARP: George Orwell and Russia

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Seventy-five years since its first publication, George Orwell's 1949 novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has not only refused to lose its relevance, it has unfortunately proven to be more applicable than ever to real-life scenarios that have been unfolding in recent years. The novel has evolved into a ubiquitous metaphor, albeit sometimes inaptly applied to diverse situations which range from the perceived "oppressions" of Covid-19 policies to the warmongering ideology of the present-day Russian state. Notably, it is the latter that appears to be a fertile subject for drawing parallels between fiction and reality, particularly when considering Orwell's initial inspiration for writing his now seemingly prophetic novel. Masha Karp's *George Orwell and Russia* is predominantly focused on exploring these very sources of inspiration.

Masha Karp is a former BBC editor and currently freelance political journalist whose interest lays mainly in the sphere of relations between Russia and the West. This is her second book on Orwell, the previous one being the Russian-language *George Orwell: Biografiia* (G. O.: Biography, 2017). *George Orwell and Russia* was published in 2023 by Bloomsbury Academic to mostly favorable reviews. The special merit of this book is the fact that it already incorporates the current political developments in the post-Soviet region with the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Before entering into an analysis of *George Orwell and Russia*, it is important to delineate the nature of the book by clarifying what it is not. Although it encompasses a sub-

stantial part of the writer's creative life, it is not a biography. Despite mentioning and citing all pivotal works by Orwell (not only fiction but also essays, reviews, and letters), it is not a critical analysis of his style and not a "textbook" elucidating his novels. Finally, despite the title *George Orwell and Russia*, the monograph often explores themes that seemingly lack a direct connection to Orwell or Russia (not to mention the fact that Orwell was never in Russia). Nevertheless, even if the title might be perceived as somewhat misleading, paradoxically, it may be the most fitting one for this book. The only prerequisite for this perspective lies in the understanding of Russia not merely as a geographical or a political entity but also a conceptual framework, an amalgamation of social and political realities and an influential "exporter" of these ideas and social practices beyond its borders. Simultaneously, within Karp's book Orwell himself (or, rather, his ideas and writings) also transcends his biographical self. Instead, he frequently serves as an "argumentative trope", providing support to the author's discussions.

The best illustration for the latter would be the last chapter of the book, "To Arrest the Course of History". This chapter unfolds as a journalistic essay, providing an analysis of the contemporary political landscape in Russia during Putin's era. It delves into the trajectory of Putin's rise to near-absolute power, explains the ideological underpinnings of his regime, scrutinizes specific incidents that led to the implementation of censorship, and explores the case of the televised hatred directed towards Ukraine that

ultimately provided the needed support for the full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022. In Karp's interpretations, most of these occurrences are portrayed as tangible manifestations of either Orwell's ideas or the fictional scenarios depicted in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (for instance, doublethink, "Two Minutes Hate", or even newspeak).

George Orwell and Russia is divided into two parts which are further divided into shorter chapters. The leitmotif of the first part ("I have regarded this regime with plain horror...") revolves around the concept of Orwell's gradual realization of the negative nature of the Soviet regime. The author systematically examines various experiences of Orwell that guided his interpretation of the Soviet regime and ultimately led to writing both *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In this part of the book, the abovementioned indirect presence of Russia in the formation of Orwell's views becomes discernible. It commences with the disillusionment of his aunt's partner, the Esperantist Eugène Lanti, after the repressions of Soviet Esperanto adepts. This influence is then traced through Orwell's ambivalent relations with British leftists and their illusions regarding the October Revolution of 1917 as well as further developments in the USSR, culminating in the writer's direct confrontation with the actions of Stalinists during the Spanish Civil War. The latter, according to Karp, solidified the connection between the Soviet socialist experiment and totalitarianism for Orwell. These (and other) assertions are substantiated by Orwell's correspondence, columns, and essays, extensively referenced and cited throughout the book, attesting to the author's meticulous examination of the Orwell archives. For some of the better-known works such as *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Karp provides new commentaries and argues the presence of Orwell's critique towards Bolshevism and its external influence.

The first part concludes with a chapter where special attention is paid to Orwell's struggle against "the Russian myth" that

was apparent in England in the aftermath of World War II, which was one factor that complicated the publication of *Animal Farm*. This chapter also contains valuable information on how Orwell collected information about the Soviet Union, explores his correspondence with Gleb Struve, who provided him with the translation of *We* by Yevgeny Zamyatin, and delves into his experiences with Soviet "displaced persons" in post-war Europe. Addressing *We*, widely known as one of the key inspirations for *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Karp conducts a comparative analysis of themes and imagery in both novels, offering a meticulous enumeration of their resemblances and differences. Notably, Karp contends that certain apparent similarities were, in fact, ideas conceived by Orwell prior to his reading of Zamyatin's novel (141–143).

The second part of the book (aptly titled "Don't let it happen. It depends on you.") closely follows Orwell's activities against the "Soviet menace" which he felt to be threatening the whole world. Another prominent topic is the further elaboration of Orwell's stance towards Socialism, in relation to which he "remained split" throughout his life (183). Karp acknowledges Orwell's profound comprehension of ongoing social dynamics and his talent for predicting political development, whether in private correspondence, in columns such as "Toward European Unity", or in his "Review of The Totalitarian Enemy by F. Borkenau".

On another note, the chapter "Over the Heads of Their Rulers" provides valuable insights into the direct connections between Orwell's writings and the Russian cultural scene. It looks closely at the challenging journey of translations of *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in the USSR, including instances of censorship by Russian émigré publishers. Interestingly, it also delves into the not-so-surprising Soviet reactions to Orwell, labelling him as a "virulently anti-Soviet lampoon", among other expressions (218, 220). Karp then concludes the chapter by arguing that Orwell's popularity in Russia

skyrocketed “for the wrong reasons: those who read him and even those who have only heard of him found themselves in the world he described all over again” (248), which appears to be the most precise description of the current state of relations between George Orwell and Russia.

In summary, it can be asserted that Karp’s book should not be construed solely as a scholarly and documentary investigation. In this regard, it contains an abundance of journalistic elements and assertions that are challenging to prove, often put in a subjunctive tense, such as “Orwell would not have missed the signals, which had been appearing for many years before that” (262) or “There is obviously no telling how Orwell’s political views would have developed had he not died at the age of forty-six [...]. Surely, his approach could have changed later” (173–174). The latter aspect emanates from Karp’s discernible authorial stance towards Orwell as an element impossible to ignore.

In every instance of the writer’s biography where he becomes the subject of criticism – such as his infamous list of British persons suspected of Communist sympathies or sympathies toward the Soviet regime – the author consistently strives to present arguments in defense of Orwell. This consistent effort results in the portrayal of Orwell as an indisputable moral authority. Nevertheless, *George Orwell and Russia* remains a valuable and elaborate resource for those interested in Orwell’s life, his political views, his literary influences, and the connections between his work and Russian history and politics.

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