1984: Social and Political Background

The origins of 1984 lie in the years 1914 to 1945, a period of two world wars linked by a major economic slump which one historian has labelled the "Age of Catastrophe". The era began with the Great War of 1914 to 1918, which killed over eight million people, more than thirteen million if consequences are included such as the Russian Revolution and the epidemics which raged through Europe's weakened population.

As a schoolboy whose father had gone off to battle, Orwell supported the war enthusiastically. Later, when he realised how little the peace settlement had achieved, he became disillusioned both with the war itself and with the political system which had produced it. Many shared this disillusionment. The returning soldiers had been promised "a land fit for heroes" , but the European economies struggled to recover from the damage that had been done to them by the war and by the peace treaties. In the worst case, German money in 1923 was worth a million millionth of its value ten years before. although life had begin to improve by the end of the decade, the Wall Street Crash in the USA threw world capitalism into a further recession. By 1933 almost two and a half million breadwinners were unemployed in Britain and the normal political system had been replaced by a coalition government. Elsewhere extremist groups, the Italian Fascists under Mussolini and the German Nazis under Hitler, managed to deliver their nations a degree of order and prosperity, but only at a high cost in intolerance and aggression. To some people these regimes seemed to represent a vicious new type of society, firmly directed by a heroic leader and based on racial "purity", a type of society which was bound to overthrow the ailing and directionless democracies.

Others who thought that capitalism had now run its course looked to Socialism for an alternative. Socialists thought that the nation's wealth should be owned by the whole community. Some of the most radical socialists, Communists, believed that such a profound change could only come about through violent revolution and took Soviet Russia as their model. The Russian leaders claimed that, by seizing power in the Great War and ruthlessly controlling the whole of society from the top, they had turned their country from a backward state into a major industrial nation. They dismissed as exaggeration the deaths and torture of millions under Stalin's leadership. If Communism had not yet delivered what it promised, either in terms of democracy or of a good standard of living, it was bound to do so eventually, so they claimed.

Many socialists, not just the Communists, believed that capitalism was currently in the process of destroying itself. They thought that competition for markets between imperial nations had lead to the Great War and that now the ruling classes would probably turn to Fascism and fight a second World War among themselves. This would be followed by the final battle between Fascism and Communism. The Spanish Civil war of 1936 to 1939, in which one side was supported by the Fascists and the other by the Communists, was interpreted as the first skirmish in this conflict.

Orwell was a socialist who shared some of these assumptions and went to fight for the Spanish republic, but he was too sincere a rebel against authority to feel comfortable with the Communists' idea of an intellectual elite taking power on the workers' behalf. He wished to see the ordinary people themselves in control, and cherished the brief period of worker solidarity which he glimpsed while in Barcelona. Having almost been killed there by the Spanish Communists, he came to realise that Soviet Communism and Fascism were in many ways similar totalitarian systems, even if they gave opposite excuses for their behaviour. In a book review of 1940 he wrote: "The two regimes, having started from opposite ends, are rapidly evolving towards the same system - a form of oligarchical collectivism", a classification to which he returns in the title of Goldstein's book. The resemblance between Communism and Fascism became widely recognised when in 1939 Russia and Germany made a pact to refrain from attacking one another in order to be free to invade their neighbours, which they rapidly proceeded to do, dividing up Poland between them.

When Germany suddenly reversed its policy and invaded Russia in 1941, hoping to catch the Soviets off guard, it was the Allies' turn to make friends with the Communist regime. Orwell could see that it was necessary to work with the Russian government, but he still found the situation disturbing. Retaining the socialist view that capitalism could easily mutate into Fascism, he mistrusted all governments, especially wartime ones which were controlling everything from what people could buy in the shops to what they could hear in the news. He wrote *Animal Farm* in order to remind people how cruelly the Russian government had reneged on Socialism, but also to make them alert to any dictatorial tendencies in their own rulers. The book ends with the pigs (the Communist leaders) who have enslaved the other animals (the workers) negotiating and arguing with the humans (the capitalist leaders). Orwell intended this as an allusion to the 1944 Tehran Conference the first of several meetings which the Russian, British and American governments held to decide who was going to control which parts of the world after the war.

In a sense 1984 begins where *Animal Farm* left off. The world has now been divided into power blocs and, using the excuse of continued international hostility, the governments who control these areas have held on to, and refined, their wartime powers of control. Orwell genuinely feared that this was a possibility, although he referred to an element of parody in 1984, indicating that not all the features envisaged in the book are meant to be taken literally. Allowing for some satirical exaggerations, his prophecy did prove accurate in describing the fate of Eastern Europe, which for almost the next half-century was subject to totalitarian rule by regimes controlled by Russia. In the event, Western Europe and the USA did not go the same way, but Orwell had had enough experience of censorship and propaganda during the war years to fear that the potential was there.

As a socialist, Orwell himself advocated collectivism, though not of the oligarchical kind. He believed that only through the state taking wealth and power from the ruling class and redistributing it could society become more equal and just. He supported the Labour government of 1945, with its policies of nationalisation and rationing, and indeed thought they did not go far enough. Yet in attacking the collectivism of the Communists and the Fascists, he ran the risk of seeming to side with the Conservatives under Winston Churchill. Churchill had warned in a radio broadcast of 1945 that Labour could not implement such policies as he creation of a National Health Service without introducing "some form of Gestapo". Even 198's very first reader, Orwell's publicist Frederic Warburg, thought that the book might win the Tories a million votes at the next election and wondered whether Churchill might be persuaded to write a preface to his namesake's tale.

It is not surprising that some readers interpreted the book as an attack on the Labour government. The descriptions of a wrecked and impoverished London in the opening pages of the book are highly reminiscent of the late 1940s. Because Lend-Lease aid from America had now ceased, conditions were in some respects worse in 1949 than they had been during the war and there was widespread frustration at the country's failure to get back to normal. In the context of the period, the book's original readers would have quickly realised that "Victory Mansions" and "Victory Gin" implied state housing and the nationalisation of distilleries, with the poor quality of the "Victory" brand suggesting that state ownership is a bad thing. The triumph of Ingsoc (a contraction of "English Socialism", just as "Nazi" was of the "National Socialist Party" had brought about a system resembling Russian Communism, with Three-Year Plans like the Soviet Five-Year ones and Party members forbidden to buy on the free market.

Orwell tried several times to dissociate himself from this apparent rejection of Socialism. In a letter of 1949 he declares:

My recent novel is NOT intended as an attack on Socialism or on the British Labour Party (of which I am a supporter) but as a show-up of the perversions to which a centralised economy is liable and which have already been partly realised in Communism and Fascism ... The scene of the book is laid in Britain in order to emphasise that the English-speaking races are not innately better than anyone else and that totalitarianism, if not fought against, could triumph anywhere.

For decades after its publication, however, the book was still interpreted by many on the political right wing as anti-socialist and by many on the left (who, curiously, seem to have accepted a resemblance between their policies and Big Brother's) as a betrayal. Perhaps today it is easier to see it as an attack against all forms of totalitarianism, which merely takes conditions at the time it was written as its natural "jumping-off" point.

After the Age of Catastrophe came what we might loosely call the era of the Cold War, though Orwell himself lived to see only the start of it. For most of the period 1945 through to 1989 he seemed to be an impressive prophet. States with features reminiscent of Oceania were to be found on several continents. Even in the liberal democracies, state power was greater than anyone could have imagined a few decades previously. As Goldstein's book predicts, there were several power blocs, notably those led by Russia and the USA, which did not dare use nuclear weapons but made use of wars in disputed countries to apply military pressure to each other.

The fall of European Communism in 1989 seems to have opened a new phase of history and few people now advocate old-style Socialist control of the economy from the centre, but it is probably an error to think that 1984 is now "dated". After all, there are still many one-party states which aspire to control their citizens' lives in a way that would warm O'Brien's heart. There are still plenty of thinkers who argue that the individual human being is merely a product of larger forces and is therefore of little account. Language is still systematically abused by politicians, journalists and advertisers in order to manipulate emotion and distort truth. Improvements in surveillance technology continue to present civil liberties. People still struggle to be their full selves in societies which deny their aspirations. Although 1984 may be less topical than it once was, it is hard to imagine a time when it will not be relevant to a large body of readers.