

To Understand Putin, Read Orwell

Ukraine, Russia and the Big Lie

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Anyone who wants to understand the current Russian position on Ukraine would do well to begin with George Orwell's classic, *1984*. The connections go deeper than the adjective "Orwellian": the structure and the wisdom of the book are guides, often frighteningly precise ones, to current events.

The easiest way to begin, in light of the now entirely open Russian invasion of Ukraine, is with "War is Peace," one of the slogans of the imagined empire in Orwell's tale. After all, every attempt thus far at negotiation and cease-fire has been accompanied by a Russian escalation, to the point where we can be certain that this is not a coincidence. If Russian President Vladimir Putin meets with other leaders, we must simply expect that this is cover for the latest outrage, as with the entrance of Russian troops, armour and artillery during the recent talks in Minsk.

But we need to dig a bit deeper into the plot for the three concepts needed to understand this very strange war, in which Putin has radicalized Russian politics, destroyed a European peace order, challenged Europeans' assumptions about their entire future — and even threatened nuclear war. Every reason proffered to explain a war that is pointless to the point of nihilism is obviously bogus or self-contradictory or both. To grasp this horrible event in which people are killing and dying for no discernible reason, we need to remember some key concepts from Orwell: Eurasia, doublethink and learning to love Big Brother.

In Orwell's *1984*, one of the world powers is called Eurasia. Interestingly enough, Eurasia is the name of Russia's major foreign policy doctrine. In Orwell's dystopia, Eurasia is a repressive, warmongering state that "comprises the whole of the northern part of the European and Asiatic land-mass, from Portugal to the Bering Strait." In Russian foreign policy, Eurasia is a plan for the integration of all the lands from—you guessed it—Portugal to the Bering Strait. Orwell's Eurasia practices "neo-Bolshevism"; Russia's leading Eurasian theorist once called himself a "national Bolshevik." This man, the influential Alexander Dugin, has long advocated that the Ukrainian state be destroyed, and has very recently proposed that Russia exterminate Ukrainians.

Orwell can help us understand what is happening to us as if we make a good-faith effort to use Russian media official sources to try to understand the world. Russian propaganda about Ukraine

is today's doublethink: it requires that people, as Orwell put it, "hold simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing both of them." Russian propaganda daily pounds out two sides to every story, both of which are false, and each of which contradicts the other. Consider the propositions in italics below, all of which should by now, after eight months of repetition, sound familiar.

On the one hand, Russia must invade Ukraine because *the Ukrainian state is repressive*. (In fact, Ukraine is a democracy with free expression and is in every respect a freer country than Russia.) On the other hand, Russia must intervene because *the Ukrainian state does not exist*. (In fact, it is just as functional as the Russian state, except in the problematic spheres of war, intelligence and propaganda.)

On the one hand, Russia must invade Ukraine because *Russians in Ukraine are forced to speak the Ukrainian language*. (This is not the case: Russians in Ukraine are far more at liberty to speak as they please than are Russians in Russia. Most speakers of Russian in Ukraine are not actually Russian, in any case, any more than Americans who speak English are English.) On the other, *there is no Ukrainian language*. (There is. It has a proud literary tradition and is spoken by tens of millions of people.)

On the one hand, *Ukrainians are all nationalists*. (In fact, the Ukrainian far right polled at 2 percent in the last presidential elections, far less than in any other European country you care to name.) On the other hand, *there is no Ukrainian nation*. (In fact, opinion polls always show the contrary, even in the regions now under Russian occupation. Millions of Ukrainians were willing to take risks for their nation in the recent revolution, and thousands of volunteers have chosen to risk their lives on the front lines—far more than can be said of most people in the United States and elsewhere who regard themselves as patriots.)

Feeling dizzy yet? One more time: *Russia is making war to save the world from fascism*. (In fact, it is in Russia where the far right it exerts dictatorial power, the head of state enunciates a Hitlerian doctrine of invading another country to protect ethnic brethren. Russia's political allies are Europe's far right parties, including the fascists and neo-Nazis.) Meanwhile: *fascism is good*. (In Russia, Hitler is now being rehabilitated as a statesman, the Jews are being blamed for the Holocaust, gays are presented as an international conspiracy, Russian Nazis march on May Day and Russian Nazis in Ukraine are presented as heroes.)

Russian propaganda provides both sides of the story. We assume that the truth is in between. But no truth lies between propositions that are individually false and mutually contradictory. There is only insanity—or, as Orwell calls it, learning to love Big Brother, the novel's distant, impersonal totalitarian leader. In 1984, one learns to love Big Brother by sacrificing the thing that one loves the most. In Ukraine, this would be statehood, as Putin has just demanded by endorsing the partition of the country and the formation of a Novorossiia (New Russia) in its southeast; in

Europe, this would be peaceful integration, the achievement that Putin threatens; for all of us, reason.

All too often, we try to guess what is in Putin's mind. We try to dwell in the mind of Big Brother rather than in the world of discoverable facts. But, fundamentally, who really cares what is in Putin's mind? Does anyone really know, including Putin himself? Even if we did know what was in Putin's mind today, is that a reliable guide to what will be in his mind tomorrow? And what chance would we have of defending freedom and decency if we begin from the brain of one individual? This is, after all, a man who intervenes in children's cartoons and presides over television programs that raise the question of his possible divinity.

At the end of 1984, a member of Big Brother's regime, in the midst of carrying out torture, makes a certain admission: "power is not a means, it is an end." Whatever is in Putin's mind, whatever he says and does, all he is really defending is his own power, something that will come to an end before very long in any event. Oppression in Russia, war in Ukraine and the destabilization of the West are grotesquely high prices to pay for one man's preferences. Rather than beginning from these, rather than staring into the troubled eyes of the doublethinker, we had better think instead about what we value and what we can do to protect it. If Ukraine becomes Novorossiia, Europe becomes Eurasia, and the West collapses, it will not be because of Russia's physical strength, but because of our mental weakness.

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