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How Russian life imitates dystopian art

Those living in Russia today wake up every morning to a new chapter of 1984. 'This must be a nightmare,' they tell themselves; yet it is all too real

The Kremlin rarely surprises me. When I read George Orwell's *1984* in the 1970s, at age 10, I immediately recognised our Soviet life. By then, everyone was used to the state insisting that everything was becoming 'better and more joyous', as Stalin had claimed in 1935, when people were dying of hunger and being imprisoned for fictitious crimes.

Later, in the 1970s, when Leonid Brezhnev was touting the Soviet model of 'developed socialism', some 300,000 Soviet citizens were defecting to the West. Yet as large as that number seemed at the time, it pales in comparison to today's figures. The mass exodus following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 is more reminiscent of the one triggered by the 1917 Bolshevik revolution. Between 1917 and 1922, up to three million aristocrats, landowners, doctors, engineers, priests and other professionals fled the new dictatorship of the proletariat.

Today, even modest estimates suggest that around 800,000 people – IT specialists, journalists, writers, scientists, actors, directors, intellectuals – left Russia in 2022 alone. As in the past, these professionals could see the writing on the wall. They left to escape Vladimir Putin's increasingly repressive security apparatus. The state in Russia has always tended toward absolutism, and its coercive and penal arms have rarely wielded as much power as they do now.

Stalin 2.0

Of course, Putin owes his authoritarian mandate to the Russians themselves. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russians – reeling from rapid, profound economic changes and the new culture of consumerist individualism – grew nostalgic for the 'strong' state. Their superpower status, historic breakthroughs in space, and grand victories on the battlefield were all long gone. Trading their new freedoms for the

promise of renewed imperial glory seemed like a good deal.

They were duped. Those living in Russia today wake up every morning to a new chapter of *1984*. 'This must be a nightmare', they tell themselves; yet it is all too real.

Consider the recent charges brought against Oleg Orlov, the co-chair of the Nobel Prize-winning human rights organisation Memorial, for 'discrediting the Russian armed forces'. During a courtroom hearing on 11 October, prosecutors, appalled at Orlov's willingness to stand up for his convictions, accused the defendant of having 'a heightened sense of justice and a complete lack of self-preservation instinct'. The prosecutors have also resorted to 'punitive psychiatry', by calling for Orlov to undergo the kind of evaluations carried out in the 1970s. They contend that his long career of advocacy (including protesting the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan in 1979) must have left him mentally 'inadequate'.

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This bizarre episode was a moment of truth for me. Witnessing such a brazen inversion of good and evil turned my despair into something closer to horror. Reason, logic and humanity have been systematically sucked out of Russian life, dragging us back to the era of Stalin and his gulag. After Stalin, the only time the state engaged so openly in such violent repression was under Yuri Andropov, who headed the KGB in the 1970s before becoming General Secretary of the Communist Party in 1982 (he died in 1984).

Putin, who regards Andropov as a personal hero, has reinstated the Andropov-era 'disciplinary check-ups' of cultural institutions. A friend of mine who works at the Russian Museum in Saint Petersburg was recently fined for not being at her desk by 9:00 a.m., even though she had a work-related excuse, and even though the institution has never maintained 9–5 working hours.

Aspiring to an Andropov-style control over every aspect of Russian life

Such repression always seems isolated and localised at first. In 2020, Yuri Dmitriev of Memorial was sentenced to 15 years in a penal colony on spurious charges of peddling child pornography, even though he had been acquitted in 2018. His actual 'crime' was no secret: as Memorial's

regional branch chief in Karelia (northwestern Russia), he had uncovered Stalin's 'killing fields', the mass graves from the Great Purge of 1938. This mattered because in 1940, Andropov became a young Communist apparatchik in Karelia, and thus may have been implicated in the cover-up. An investigation that might tarnish the legacy of Putin's hero could not be allowed.

It was this seemingly random case that set the stage for the Kremlin to shut down Memorial completely on 31 December 2021. Putin's New Year message to Russian civil society that year was clear: You are finished. Less than two months later, he ordered the invasion of Ukraine.

As the Nobel Prize-winning Belarusian writer Svetlana Alexievich recently pointed out to me, the war, the Orlov trial, and other such episodes confirm that words matter in just the way that Orwell suggested. For years, Putin has railed against Western values and European 'civilisation', emphasising 'self-sufficiency and the uniqueness' of Russia as 'not just a country, but a distinct civilisation thanks to its rich traditions … numerous cultures and faiths'. Now, that civilisation has gone beyond rhetoric to reject all cultural norms of civilised behaviour. Putin wins the 'first prize in absurdity', Alexievich notes. He 'wants to be the worst barbarian on the European continent'.

Putin's desire to please the church suggests that he fancies himself an incarnation of the Russian national spirit.

If there is a close contemporary analogy to this project, it is that of the Taliban, which also rejects modernity in favour of divinity. The Kremlin today even promotes absolute religiosity. Andrei Rublev's 'Holy Trinity', painted in 1425, had been recognised as a work of art that should be kept under special care at Moscow's Tretyakov Gallery. Yet Putin has since donated it to the Orthodox Church, perhaps hoping that God will assist Russian forces in Ukraine. Now, a masterpiece that is supposed to elevate your soul is guarded by two steely-eyed camouflaged soldiers with AK-47s.

Putin's desire to please the church suggests that he fancies himself an incarnation of the Russian national spirit. As he has said in response to criticism from US President Joe Biden, 'this is not about me personally. This is about the interests of the country. And it is impossible to suppress the interests of Russia.'

'These are the dark forces', Orlov warns. We are dealing with people who want 'full revenge for the fall of the Soviet empire'. The empire they want

to build will include Andropov-style control over every aspect of Russian life, as well as a grander claim of being anointed by God. Like the Orwellian equation '2+2=5', it is a story that you would have to be insane – or brutally compelled – to believe.

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