

George Orwell's Life and Times: 1903–1950

Critic and biographer, Tom Hopkinson, writes in his introduction on Orwell that all of Orwell's works are similar in that they reflect the life experiences of the author.

"They are all tales of solitary characters, each in one way or another an expression of Orwell himself, seen against backgrounds that are taken from his own experience."¹

Although there is a danger in looking for similarities in an author's life and his or her fictional work, an examination of the important personal and world events that shaped Orwell's life and thought is helpful in gaining insight into the political and social ideas found within his novels.

Directions: Answer the questions below using the time line on pages 2–3 of this handout. Write your answers on a separate paper.

Questions

1. Which personal events seem to have affected Orwell the most? Explain your reasons.
2. What three wars had a powerful influence over Orwell? In which war did he actually fight?
3. Which fascist dictators rose to power during Orwell's lifetime?
4. Which novel by Orwell was a direct satire about Stalin and his political practices?
5. Which "totalitarian" event occurred in the United States during World War II?
6. Which book gives evidence that Orwell's experiences at boarding school developed in him a sympathy for the poor and a lasting dislike for social status and power based upon wealth?
7. Into what social class was Orwell born? Was Orwell ever truly poor?
8. Looking at the themes and topics of Orwell's novels, is Hopkinson's statement above valid? Why or why not?
9. Which world event do you think had the most profound influence on Orwell as he wrote *1984*? Why do you think this?
10. Was Orwell ever married? Did he have any children?
11. Why didn't Orwell fight against the Nazis in World War II?
12. What did Orwell decide to do after he graduated from a prestigious preparatory (high) school? Why do you think he disliked this job?
13. Was Orwell's first book based on his own experiences? Explain.
14. In what book did Orwell express a concern for the poor working class in England?

¹ Tom Hopkinson, "George Orwell," *British Writers Vol. VII* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1984), 273.



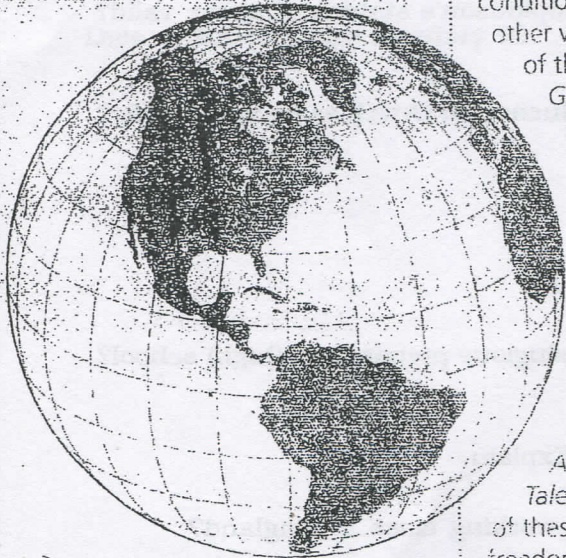
1984

BACKGROUND

Writing Amid Illness

Eric Arthur Blair—known to the world as George Orwell—began *1984* in August of 1946 and finished it 27 months later in November 1948. He was ill with tuberculosis (TB) for much of that time. He stayed in bed, was in and out of sanatoriums, and even corrected the final version of *1984* from a hospital bed.

A month before completing *1984*, Orwell wrote, "I am not pleased with the book, but I am not absolutely dissatisfied. . . . I think it is a good idea, but the execution would have been better if I had not written it under the influence of TB." Orwell died of tuberculosis in January 1950. He was 46, only seven years older than his main character, Winston Smith.



The Conditions Behind the Vision

In 1946 when George Orwell began to imagine a future world, he had just witnessed the defeat of two dictators, Adolf Hitler in Germany and Benito Mussolini in Italy, and the success of two others, Francisco Franco in Spain and Joseph Stalin in the former Soviet Union. He had also just lived through the most devastating war in history and seen its victors almost immediately turn on each other in a tense Cold War—Britain and the United States on one side and the Soviet Union on the other.

Orwell's vision of the future came from what he knew of the recent past, a past that still affects us today. Don't think of *1984* as a mere prediction of a date that's come and gone. Think of it as a warning against the twin evils of Nazism and Stalinism, whose influence, although diminished, is still a threat to human virtue and liberty everywhere.

Here, There, and Nowhere

Orwell's *1984* belongs to a long tradition of utopian literature, a class of writing that takes its name from Thomas More's philosophical romance, *Utopia* (1516). On a fictitious island called Utopia—the word literally means "nowhere"—More had imagined an ideal society marked by a spirit of community and toleration which contrasted sharply with the conditions in England at the time. The success of *Utopia* encouraged other writers who wanted to expose the political and social problems of their times. Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1626), Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872), and Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888) all criticized contemporary society by detailing the ideal customs and manners of imaginary places.

In the 20th century, many writers began writing "negative utopias." Optimistic descriptions of ideal societies on earth from earlier utopias gave way to dark, foreboding predictions of the future. Orwell's *1984* fits into this new 20th-century negative utopian, or anti-utopian, literature, along with Jack London's *The Iron Heel* (1907), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), Eugene Zamiatin's *We* (1959), Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986), and numerous science fiction stories and novels. In most of these works, the future is a depressing, desolate place devoid of the freedoms we take for granted today.

Time Line

Personal data

Born **Eric Blair** in Motihari, India, to British civil servant (lower-upper middle class)

Attends St. Cyprian's boarding school in England, age 8; experiences terrible brutality and torment from wealthy peers, detests loss of privacy

Accepted at Eton Academy as a scholarship student; called a rebel and intellectual by peers

Graduates from Eton; decides not to attend Cambridge University

Joins the Imperial Police Force in Burma, India

Quits the Imperial Police Force and attempts to become a writer; Lives in poverty for the next few years working as teacher, writer, bookstore clerk in London and Paris

Publishes first book, *Down and Out in Paris and London*; takes pen name **George Orwell** because he doesn't think work is good

Publishes *Burmese Days* in United States about his police experiences

Publishes *A Clergyman's Daughter*

Marries Eileen O'Shaughnessy, a teacher and socialist; publishes *Keep the Aspidochelone Flying*; commissioned to write a book about the poor working conditions in northern England; leaves for Spain in December to enlist in P.O.U.M., a communist militia fighting Franco

Fights in Spain against Franco; wounded in throat; he and his wife escape Spain; publishes *The Road to Wigan Pier* about northern coal miners in England

Publishes *Homage to Catalonia* about Spanish civil war; becomes ill with tuberculosis

Selected world events

1903

1911

1914

1917

1921

1922

1927

1929

1933

1934

1935

1936

1937

1938

World War I begins (1914-18)

Russian (Bolshevik) Revolution led by Lenin and Trotsky; Communist Party replaces czars

Mussolini, fascist dictator, takes control of Italy; Stalin appointed Secretary General of Communist Party by Lenin. (Lenin dies 1924.)

Stalin expels Trotsky and opposition leaders; becomes dictator of U.S.S.R.

Hitler is elected Chancellor of Germany; a fascist dictator, Hitler enacts laws revoking the rights of Jews in Germany

Spanish General Franco, a fascist, revolts against the "popular front" government of a coalition of workers and capitalist parties; aided by Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini

Stalin conducts "purges" and forces political leaders of the Bolshevik revolution to confess treason and executes them; purges are carried out on a massive scale

"Kristallnacht"—Jewish homes and businesses are destroyed; Jews sent to concentration camps

Personal data

Publishes *Coming Up for Air* about the approach of war and totalitarianism

Publishes *Inside the Whale*; tries to enlist in British Army but is medically unfit; joins Home Guard

Does radio programs about war to India for the B.B.C.; publishes pamphlet *The Lion and the Unicorn* about liberty, his faith in common people, and English victory in WWII

Starts writing *Animal Farm*; works as a journalist, editor, and broadcaster

Adopts a son, Richard; wife dies during a simple operation; *Animal Farm* published; begins writing *1984*

Writes *Such, Such Were the Joys*, about his terrible experiences at St. Cyprian's boarding school; completes first draft of *1984*; suffers from tuberculosis attacks

Writes second draft of *1984*; illness continues

Marries Sonia Brownell who was a great help to him; publishes *1984*

Dies of tuberculosis January 21

Selected world events

1939 Germany invades Poland; World War II begins

1940

1941 Hitler Begins the "Final Solution," the mass extermination of the Jews in death camps

1942 110,000 Japanese-Americans on West Coast placed in Relocation Camps by U.S. army until 1944

1945 Hitler defeated; World War II ends; U.S. drops atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, in August

1947

1948

1949

1950