

DOES BIG BROTHER REALLY EXIST?

"In the few decades since Orwell wrote *1984*, we have gone a long way toward domesticating the idea of the total state," Irving Howe, coeditor of *Dissent*, wrote last year, "indeed, to the point where it now seems just one of a number of options concerning the way people live." George Orwell's classic anti-utopian novel, published in 1949, shocked and depressed Western readers in the heyday of Stalinism. Later, some of its phrases became common shorthand for horror—Newspeak, double-think, Thought Police, the Ministry of Love, Big Brother. More recently, scholarly arguments have raged over the importance of the differences between "authoritarian" dictatorships (Chile, South Korea, Franco's Spain) and "totalitarian" regimes (Russia, China, Cuba, North Korea, Vietnam) where, in near-Orwellian fashion, party cadres seek to shape the ordinary citizen's everyday life. What makes *1984* so shocking today, Howe observed, is that in its fundamental conception, it now seems "so familiar, so ordinary, so plausible." Here Robert Tucker suggests that it takes a flesh-and-blood Big Brother to make Orwell's vision really come true.

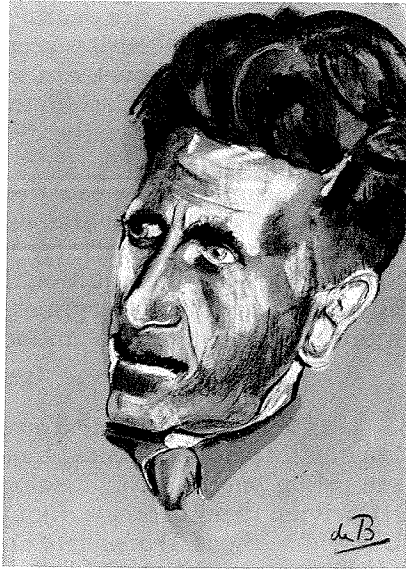
by Robert C. Tucker

Everything about totalitarianism, starting with the name, is problematic.

Whoever invented it, the name was put into currency by Benito Mussolini when he published an article in the *Enciclopedia Italiana* in 1932 in which he proclaimed himself a "totalitarian" and called the Italian Fascist state *lo stato totalitario*. That claim is widely taken by historians as more of a boast than a description of Italian Fascist reality.

Beginning in the later 1930s, the name was picked up by scholars, some of them refugees from the real, Nazi version of totalitarianism that took over in Germany in 1933. These scholars and others who wrote tracts about totalitarianism, of which

Born in colonial India, Eric Arthur Blair (1903–1950) took the pen name George Orwell. Besides 1984, his best-known books include *Burmese Days* (1934), *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), and *Animal Farm* (1945).



Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) is the best known and most influential, took Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia as the two indubitable historical cases of the totalitarian phenomenon. Arendt wrote that 1929, the year of Stalin's advent to supreme power, was "the first year of clearcut totalitarian dictatorship in Russia." Under his predecessor, Lenin, the Soviet order was, she said, a "revolutionary dictatorship," hence by implication, at most, pre-totalitarian.

Scholars had an understandable reason for adopting Mussolini's term for their uses. They needed a word to convey what they considered a very important fact: that Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia represented something distinctively, even radically novel, and in Arendt's phrase radically evil, which had come into existence in the political world; something qualitatively different from the many forms of authoritarian rule, dictatorship, tyranny, or despotism that the world had seen in earlier times, all the traditional authoritarianisms.

Although I will use the term "totalitarianism" now and then, I'm not sure that it is a good one for scholarly purposes and I won't be bound by it. My real inclination is to drop Mussolini's neologism and use the phrase: "the nightmare state."

But the words we choose are ultimately of secondary importance. What matters is that the phenomenon the scholars meant to denote by the term they used has been real and may again be-

come real; that we need to understand it better; and that this is difficult because we are dealing with something elusive.

The scholarly theorists seem to have sensed its elusiveness. For their writings show them seeking to define the diverse ways in which the totalitarian dictatorship, as seen in the cases of Stalin and Hitler especially, differs from traditional authoritarian states.

Thus, Emil Lederer saw the totalitarian party-state as being uniquely a "state of the masses," ruling in their name and possessing some sort of affinity with them. Sigmund Neumann found that whereas traditional authoritarianisms have generally been conservative regimes, the totalitarian state was revolutionary, indeed, that it embodied "permanent revolution."



Revolution for what? To remake the world according to a fanatically held ideological blueprint shared by the members of the ruling party (their "ideological supersense," Arendt called it), driving them to create, for example, a world without Jews or a world without Trotskyists and capitalists, depending on the ideology's content. And, of course, the totalitarian state, unlike traditional authoritarianisms, sought totality of control over its subjects, including their minds, although a few scattered "islands of separateness," Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski allowed, might exist in the family and the Church. The search for totality of control meant that the totalitarian state was a bureaucratic colossus, whose bureaucracy showed a "radical efficiency," Arendt suggested, as in the operation of the Nazi death factories. Franz Neumann differed on this point, seeing a constant collision of different bureaucratic machines in the totalitarian leviathan state that he called *Behemoth*.*

Finally, all the theorists emphasized that totalitarian rule

*See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951; Emil Lederer, *State of the Masses*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1940; Sigmund Neumann, *Permanent Revolution*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1942; Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*, New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1956; Franz Neumann, *Behemoth*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1942.

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was terroristic in a novel way that Arendt sought to conceptualize by saying that totalitarianism pursues “total terror” rather than the selective, realistic “dictatorial terror” that strikes at actual or suspected enemies of a regime. Such total terror was, she said, “the very essence” of totalitarian government. The source of the terror seemed to reside in the ideological fanaticism that inspired the ruling party to remake the world in its fashion.

Perhaps, by this point, you have been forcibly struck, as I am, by a certain characteristic of this theoretical thinking about totalitarianism: its utter impersonality.

In this picture of totalitarianism, a ruling party is actuated by an impersonal “ideological supersense” to practice “total terror” through institutions that are “bureaucratic machines.” There are *no persons* doing things. There is, briefly, an “it,” totalitarianism, which does things through persons to persons; but the subject of the action is the “it.”



It will come as no surprise, therefore, when I add that the scholars' theory of totalitarianism did not treat the personal needs of the totalitarian dictator as a motivating force in the radically evil behavior of the “it.” The needs being fulfilled were those of the system. Brzezinski, who conceived of the terroristic purge as the core of totalitarianism, explained that “it satisfies the needs of the system for continued dynamism and energy.” The theorists did not overlook the presence of a totalitarian leader. But they saw him as a function of the system and the fulfillment of its needs—not vice versa. Thus, Arendt wrote that in the view of the leader's lieutenants—which she seemed to accept—“he [the leader] is needed, not as a person but as a function, and as such he is indispensable.” From this perspective, *Fuehrers* have the function of assuming blanket responsibility for everything done in their names, of enabling the Eichmanns and others to perform their criminal actions in good conscience and without any sense of individual responsibility.

“Not as a person but as a function.” This phrase takes us to the heart of the issue I wish to pursue. There was, I believe, a fundamental flaw in the scholarly theory of totalitarianism: However impersonal the institutional workings of the nightmare state may be, the needs being fulfilled by its radically evil behavior are ultimately those of a person—the totalitarian dictator. And this flaw helps explain why the theorists were baffled in their persistent effort to identify the driving force of the “it.” They did not grasp that the actions of the “it” must be traced to

their source inside a "him."

One of the most important contributors to our thinking about the nightmare state wrote the following:

Totalitarianism has abolished freedom of thought to an extent unheard of in any previous age. And it is important to realize that its control of thought is not only negative but positive. It not only forbids you to express—even to think—certain thoughts, but it dictates what you *shall* think, it creates an ideology for you, it tries to govern your emotional life as well as setting up a code of conduct. And as far as possible, it isolates you from the outside world, it shuts you up in an artificial universe in which you have no standards of comparison. The totalitarian state tries, at any rate, to control the thoughts and emotions of its subjects at least as completely as it controls their actions.

I count seven uses of "it" here, plus one reference to "totalitarianism" and one to "the totalitarian state."

The passage just quoted was written by George Orwell in an article, "Literature and Totalitarianism," published in *The Listener* on June 19, 1941, three days before Hitler's armies invaded Stalin's Russia—since the accord of August 1939 Germany's ally. Earlier in the article, Orwell referred to Germany, Russia, and Italy as the three extant totalitarian states, and said: "I think one must face the risk that this phenomenon is going to be worldwide." To illustrate the effort of the "it" to control its subjects' emotional life, he also said:

Every German up to September 1939 had to regard Russian Bolshevism with horror and aversion, and since September 1939, he has had to regard it with admiration and affection. If Russia and Germany go to war, as they may well do within the next few years, another equally violent change will have to take place. The German's emotional life, his loves and hatreds, are expected, when necessary, to reverse themselves overnight. I hardly need to point out the effect of this kind of thing upon literature.

From this, it is clear why Orwell, though no theoretician, was nevertheless a significant contributor to thinking about totalitarianism. As a writer, he was concerned about emotions, and although he kept speaking of the "it," he was interested in

the thing's effect upon people's emotional life. Very likely this was the impulse that led him to imagine the phenomenon of totalitarianism in a vividly concrete way and to portray it in his novel, *1984*, published in 1949. Orwell accepted the idea of totalitarianism's impersonality, yet did more than anyone else to dispel its elusiveness. By producing a work of creative literature rather than a theoretical tract, a picture instead of an abstract description, he achieved something that none of the theoreticians did: He made his imagined world real for us, whereas very much of the scholarly literature made the real seem remote.



1984 is about a society, Oceania, or one part of it, Airstrip One, whose name in 1948 had been England. Oceania is ruled by an Inner Party with the help of a larger Outer Party of which the hero, Winston Smith, and his illicit lover Julia are working members. Their love is illicit, and hence secret, because in Oceania's antisex ideology, all erotic emotion is to be fixated on the figure of the leader, Big Brother.

Winston and Julia are employed in the Ministry of Truth, whose function is to falsify the past in accordance with the needs of present policy. Thus, when Oceania suddenly shifts alliances, becoming the ally of Eurasia and the enemy of Eastasia, with which it had been in alliance against Eurasia, the Ministry of Truth falsifies all past records to show that Oceania never had been an ally of Eastasia and never an enemy of Eurasia.

The Ministry of Truth thus helps the citizens respond appropriately to the philippics against Eastasia that they now see and hear over their telescreens, and to the friendly references to Eurasia. And if they fail to think the proper new political thoughts as commanded, these telescreens, which are two-way affairs, enabling unseen authorities to spy on their doings and feelings inside their apartments, may detect in them evidence of "thoughtcrime." Offenders are taken to the torture chambers of the Ministry of Love, from which, if they emerge at all, they do so transformed into robot-like receivers of the telescreen's signals. Those who do not re-emerge have their names eliminated from all past records by the Ministry of Truth, so as to make it appear that they never existed. They become unpersons.

In a 1955 essay, historian Isaac Deutscher argued that Orwell borrowed "the plot, the chief characters, the symbols, and the whole climate of his story" from an earlier book, *We*, written in 1920 by the Russian, Evgenii Zamiatin. But that judgment is too sharp. For *1984* quite clearly reflects the deep impact on Or-

well of the contemporary political pageants of Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany, especially the former.

Thus, the sudden switch of alliances by Oceania resembles the switch by Stalin in 1939 to his accord with Hitler. The objects of the Two Minute Hate sessions on public squares and on everybody's home telescreens, Emmanuel Goldstein and "Goldsteinism," recall Trotsky (whose original name was Bronstein) and Trotskyism. Above all, the Big Brother who is both omnipresent and invisible, who never makes a personal appearance but whose portrait looks down on you everywhere, in public and in private, with his moustache and his enigmatic smile, evokes the reclusive Stalin. Hitler had a moustache, but no enigmatic smile.



When I first read *1984* soon after its publication, I was living in Moscow as a member of the American Embassy, and the story seemed very real to me. It portrayed things I had seen happening, such as individuals disappearing overnight and nobody even daring to try to find out from Stalin's secret police, the NKVD, what was happening to them. Terror at that time was universal in Russia. By contrast, today's Russia is no more than a repressive authoritarian police state of one particular kind. It is not the nightmare state of *1984* that actually existed in Russia in 1949.

The question then arises whether terror in an extreme form is in fact the "very essence," in Arendt's words, of the nightmare state. There are two issues here. First, her distinction between "dictatorial" and "total" terror, although important, is not one of kind, but one of degree. Dictatorial terror deliberately spreads fear among a far greater circle of people in a society than those actually victimized, their relatives, and their associates. Indeed, it is in the nature of state terror, which aims, by victimizing the relatively few, to paralyze the many by showing them that they too are in deadly danger if they speak out or resist the government in any way. Hence, "total" terror is but an extreme form of "dictatorial" terror. The distinction is nevertheless of huge significance to the people of a society, as evident in the difference between today's Russia and Stalin's. For example, anti-Brezhnev anecdotes were rife in the Soviet Union during the 1970s and could be repeated in conversation with impunity. But people overheard telling an anti-Stalin anecdote in 1938 or 1948 were often sentenced to ten years in a concentration camp.

The second issue is whether extreme or "total" terror is in fact the very essence of the totalitarian phenomenon. It belongs to the essence, but is not the whole of it, and perhaps the greatest merit of *1984* is that it shows what else belongs there. People are ruled by fear in Oceania, as in any authoritarian police state where terror is practiced by the government. But this fear is not the peculiar reality, the distinctive feature, of life in the nightmare state. Orwell depicts two other emotions as salient in the public and, to a great extent, the private life of Oceania: love and hate. Boundless love and adoration of Big Brother and, by association, anyone or anything closely linked with him; and fierce, sadistic hatred of those declared to be Big Brother's, and hence everyone's, enemies.

Orwell suggests that the ultimate distinction between an authoritarian and totalitarian state depends on the role and significance of love and hate in the controlled public life of the state in question. A land where people live in fear of the authorities because one can be made to disappear unaccountably and torture is practiced is not the full-fledged nightmare state, however nightmarish for those who fall victims to the dictatorial terror and those associated with them. A society that compels love for the leader and hate for those identified as his (and hence all society's) enemies, is the real nightmare.

Applying this criterion, we can see that the two cases of Stalin and Hitler are not the only ones on the record. Another was Mao Zedong's China of the so-called Cultural Revolution, beginning in 1966, when Chairman Mao appeared on Tien An Men Square in Beijing at dawn, like the sun with which he was compared in a then popular song from a show called *The East Is Red*:

From the Red East rises the sun,
There appears in China a Mao Zedong.

This dawn appearance was the first of eight occasions when Mao reviewed troops of Red Guards whom he launched into the "Cultural Revolution" (Orwellian Newspeak for what might better be called the revolution against culture). When he appeared, a hundred thousand Red Guard throats opened to greet him in frenzied adulation. "Teenage girls became hysterical, their faces contorted; they wept uncontrollably and, half-fainting, had to be supported by those next them."

The account just cited comes from a Chinese-speaking Englishman, Roger Garside, who later became First Secretary of the British Embassy in Beijing. In 1966, he was living in Hong Kong. In the midst of this rally, which was being broadcast from

Beijing over a station heard in Hong Kong, Garside walked into the living room of Chinese friends and found them "listening in silent horror as a high-pitched voice whipped a crowd to a delirium of fury." The voice was that of Lin Biao, then a close companion of Chairman Mao (later an unperson). Mao was beside him as he spoke, "glancing over his shoulder at the text and smiling approvingly." Garside recalls: "The savage frenzy made me think of Hitler's Nuremberg rallies," and when Lin Biao shouted: "All our victories are victories of the Thoughts of Mao Zedong," Garside was struck by the thought that he was "unconsciously echoing the propaganda for Big Brother in George Orwell's 1984."

He notes that little children during the Cultural Revolution were being taught to sing a song that went:

Father is dear, mother is dear
But Chairman Mao is dearest of all.

And during three years of exaltation, when people were exclaiming "Chairman Mao has come among us!", hundreds of thousands of people, old and young, were killed, maimed, and tortured as enemies of Chairman Mao—"freaks and monsters," they were called. Mao saw them as ghosts from the past, and called the Ministry of Culture the "Ministry of Ghosts" because it allowed figures from history and legend to crowd the theatrical stage and the pages of books. The scale of the repression that accompanied the adulation is suggested by the fact that nearly three million people purged or imprisoned during the Cultural Revolution had been rehabilitated (of course, in many cases posthumously) by 1979—this according to figures released by the present leader of China, Deng Xiaoping. The numbers of those done to death alone are estimated by usually reliable sources at 400,000.

Like Russia after Stalin, China after Mao remains an authoritarian state with a tightly controlled population; but it is not the nightmare state of Mao's last period. The nightmare vanished when Big Brother died. No more frenzied eroticism, no more paroxysms of hatred, and no more extremes of paralyzing fear.

The nightmare can exist in small forms as well as large, in little assemblages as well as great states. And it can come into existence among us, as is shown by accounts of the People's Temple Colony of Americans, transplanted to Guyana and ruled by a Big Brother named Reverend Jim Jones, whose megalomaniacal feelings drove him, finally, to ask the collective suicide of

his little flock of 900 men, women, and children. It was an act reminiscent of Hitler's effort to bring Germany down to destruction when he saw his cause was lost. In his limitlessly egocentric mind, the Fatherland, not having proved worthy of its *Fuehrer*, deserved to be destroyed.



In 1984, Winston Smith is obsessed by an overwhelming question. As a functionary of the Ministry of Truth, he knows how the system works, but he can't puzzle out why it does the things that it does. He says: "I understand *how*; I do not understand *why*." This is Orwell's question, I think, expressed through his hero.

Winston suspects that the mystery of the *why* is bound up with the answer to a further question: Does Big Brother really exist?

Reading Emmanuel Goldstein's forbidden book, *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism*, Winston finds a negative answer: "Big Brother," writes Goldstein, "is the guise in which the Party chooses to exhibit itself to the world. His function is to act as a focusing point for love, fear, and reverence, emotions which are more easily felt towards an individual than towards an organization."

Winston isn't satisfied: "He had still, he reflected, not learned the ultimate secret. He understood *how*; he did not understand *why*."

Then, when he and Julia are found to be lovers and to be secret followers of Goldsteinism, and are taken to the Ministry of Love for interrogation under torture, he takes the opportunity to ask the interrogator, O'Brien: "Does Big Brother exist?" O'Brien replies: "Of course he exists. The Party exists. Big Brother is the embodiment of the Party." Winston: "Does he exist in the same way as I exist?" "You do not exist," says O'Brien. As for the secret *why* of it all, O'Brien says to Winston: "The object of persecution is persecution. The object of torture is torture. The object of power is power."

O'Brien was either misinformed or lying. For the truth that history has revealed about the *why* is that *Big Brother really existed*. He exists in every instance of the nightmare state, and it is his needs—above all the colossal grandiosity, the need to be adored, worshiped by millions of subjects, and to gain never-ending vindictive triumphs over hated enemies—that motivate, under his near-total domination, the life of the society and the workings of the state. They motivate its repression of every fact that contradicts a Big Brother's monstrously inflated image of

himself as one who could never err; its insistence on a culture of antisex so that all erotic emotion can focus on the single object at the center of it all; its projection of violent hatred upon the collective and individual enemy figure; and its twisting of historical reality to conform with the demands of Big Brother's demented self. Understandably, the fulfillment of such a set of needs necessitates virtual totality of control by the state over the private as well as public lives of its subjects. It has to be a total state, or something very close to it.

Orwell did not see the "him" at the source of the "it." Yet his genius broke through the obstacle of abstract sociopolitical reasoning at the end of the book, where Winston Smith, having been utterly broken by unbearable torture,

gazed up at the enormous face. Forty years it had taken him to learn what kind of smile was hidden beneath the dark moustache. O cruel, needless misunderstanding! O stubborn, self-willed exile from the loving breast! Two gin-scented tears trickled down the sides of his nose. But it was all right, everything was all right, the struggle was finished. He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother.

In the person of his creation, Winston Smith, Orwell showed that the real purpose was not power for power's sake or torture for torture's sake or persecution for persecution's sake; it was to get everybody who counted to love Big Brother and to hate everyone Big Brother hated.

But while Orwell the artist understood, Orwell the political thinker failed to comprehend the *why*. His failure was manifestly not his own but that of a generation of powerful, uncomprehending theorists who influenced his thinking about the elusive phenomenon.

Had not the real-life Goldstein, Trotsky, written in his book *The Revolution Betrayed* in 1937: "Stalin is the personification of the bureaucracy. That is the substance of his intellectual personality." Orwell certainly read that book.

Had not Franz Neumann written in his *Behemoth* in 1942 that the totalitarian state must *not* be seen as a *Fuehrerstaat*, despite its proclamation of the *Fuehrerprinzip* and its ruler cult? For the doctrine of one-man rule was, he wrote, "merely a device to prevent insight into the operation of the social-economic mechanism," in which "the decisions of the Leader are merely the result of the compromises among the four leaderships." Orwell very likely read this book too.

These and other brilliant minds resisted the thought that Big Brother as a person might be "the very essence" of the phenomenon with which they were dealing, although acceptance of that thought would in no way absolve the Eichmanns, the Berias, and thousands of other executors of Big Brother's will of their full share of responsibility for the misdeeds they committed in the leader's name.

But all credit still goes to Orwell for what he did do in his book: He showed us this infinitely evil thing in action. He gave us the *how*, without which the answer to the *why* wouldn't really take us very far. In his own way, he told us the truth about the nightmare state, where, by virtue of various techniques of control and manipulation, the inner workings of a dictatorial leader's mind are institutionalized in political life. The fantasies of a Big Brother—fantasies of being loved by the multitude of people, of being the savior, the hero, of being omnipotent, and of wreaking a terrible vengeance upon those he has come to hate as enemies—are enacted for him by servile functionaries and masses of often deluded men, women, and children.

Perhaps a better name for it would be Big Brother's "fantasy state." The fantasies are enacted for him in the most diverse settings and forms: in courtrooms, where purge trials take place and the victims, after confessing their crimes, abase themselves by paying a final public tribute to him, their murderer, upon pronouncement of the death sentence; in theaters, where idealized versions of his fantasized hero's life are performed for him by talented artists; in mass rallies, where people by the tens of thousands enact their adoration of him; in schools, where children are taught to thank him for their happy lives and, if need be, to denounce even their parents as his enemies; in concentration camps, where hated ones are destroyed in awful ways for whatever he fancies their crimes to have been; and perhaps on battlefields, where soldiers go into combat for his greater glory.

It is his fantasies that are being enacted by contrivance of the organs of the state. And he, in whose mind the fantasies arose, is not only the author but also the appreciative spectator of the performance, because he believes it. When he dies or is displaced, the show is over. Left behind are death and misery, guilt and the denial of guilt, wasted lives, memories of horror, another authoritarianism with its army, police, and other institutions—the ruins of the fantasy state.