

Loosening the Knot: How World War Two Censorship and Propaganda Influenced George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-four*

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Abstract

The British government's censorship and propaganda efforts in World War Two impacted George Orwell's political titles *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-four*, resulting in suppressed freedom of speech and publishing embargoes. In the 20th century these titles were censored in Britain and America and banned in Russia for their political subject matter, but subsequently became among the most influential political classics, as voted during Academic Book Week (Mansfield 2019).

This article focuses on government censorship and propaganda during World War Two and the Cold War, which domestically and globally impacted Orwell's titles and his publisher relationships. This article will also focus on misrepresentations of Orwell's democratic socialist beliefs by governments and publishers. Under consideration will be Orwell's titles, *The Lion and the Unicorn* (1941), *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1949).

Keywords

George Orwell, *Animal Farm*, *Nineteen Eighty-four*, WWII, Censorship, Propaganda.

Introduction

During World War Two, 1939–1945 (WWII), propaganda and censorship strategies were implemented by the British government to either control, suppress or provide publications

in circulation to influence the public's understanding of the WWII operation and their political persuasions towards the allied forces. This resulted in Britain closely censoring all outgoing publications within the publishing industry. Likewise, the ensuing Cold War, primarily involving America and Russia, also gave rise to similar propaganda and strict censorship measures.

George Orwell (Eric Arthur Blair 1903–1950) was one of many authors who was writing during WWII and assisted the British government in their propaganda operations. However, Orwell's polemic writing and political ideologies were often misrepresented by warring governments in ways he did not intend. This impacted the reception and publication of his titles.

Many debates in circulation have failed to establish Orwell's own singular literary political stance and the meaning in his titles (Wilkin 2013). This article will demonstrate how war-time political interventions by governments, for their own propaganda and political purposes, endeavored to influence, bind and twist the meaning of, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-four*. Additionally, it will be shown that despite Orwell's political ambitions for a democratic socialist society and a disinterest in capital which he maintained, the wider misrepresentations and government interventions led to the global success of *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-four*.

Research undertaken in this article is obtained from discussions pertaining to WWII and the publishing industry's propaganda involvement, supported by Victoria Holman (2008), with insights surrounding the publishers' cultural rationale from Pierre Bourdieu (1993). Supporting censorship and control theories are offered by Sue Currey-Jansen (Jansen, 1988), with Orwell's biographical details drawn from Fredric Warburg (1959) and Taylor (2003).

The British government's WWII Censorship and Propaganda Operation

In response to the declaration of WWII on the 1 September 1939, Britain drew upon the powers of its Conservative party government and revived the British Propaganda and Censorship strategy as a defence mechanism for British national security, which impacted much of the British publishing industry.

The propaganda and censorship campaign necessitated that the British government control sensitive information reaching the British public and the axis powers (Germany, Japan and Italy). For the British government to justify their censorship to suppress the freedom of public speech, they circulated the idea around Britain and overseas that Hitler's Fascist Germany threatened Britain and Europe with an unlimited invasion and expansion plan. However, as Weisiger argues, this was not Hitler's plan, and therefore an exaggeration by the British government and its Allies (Russia, America and France) (2013, 108).

The British propaganda and censorship strategies were inaugurated by Charles Masterman in World War One at the Ministry of Information (MOI) head office (Buitenhuis 1989, 14). However, the British government developed the strategy during WWII, when the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID) duly created the *Regulations for Censorship* legislation in 1939, which established 'the government's right in the interests of defence to examine all communications and publications and modify or dispose of them... to promote [government] interests' (Holman 2008, 91). The CID established specific departments to apply the legislative power to oversee all telegraphs, press, films, broadcasts and books (91-92). Jansen clarifies that the nature of regulative censorship such as this is flexible and when used in times of national security it allows for control of the 'numbers of books banned' (1988, 8). Therefore, mandatory legislation impacted the publishers' book publication choices by making it 'an offence to obtain, possess or publish information on military matters in any manner likely to prejudice the efficient prosecution of the war' (Holman 2008, 92). Any publications found in circulation were confiscated and 'quickly' returned to the MOI (92).

The British government also gathered propaganda feedback from the British public through a 'massive civilian questionnaire campaign' with the results being used to modify attitudes towards the war and the enemy operations (Holman 2008, 94). Effectively, through the questionnaires the government promoted a 'reflexive-power talk' campaign, which, as Jansen explains, can be a tool for identifying, encouraging or silencing voices in a given minority or majority (1988, 9). However, Rose provides that this type of government strategy is capable of 'reinforcing or unleashing political and institutional currents that run counter to it' (cited in Fox 2012, 937). Therefore, these strategies created within the wider publishing industry a controlling fear of publishing choices.

Orwell's Early Political Resistance and *The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Gentleman*

The MOI called upon volunteer authors to help create propaganda material. Orwell, a 'political writer and essayist' of a left-wing, democratic socialist persuasion bearing a dislike of communist regimes and totalitarian governments, 'volunteered' his support to the MOI to suppress Hitler's Nazi Fascist expansion plan (Crick 2017, Holman 2008, 108-109). However, Orwell's expansive and complex underlying political persuasions conceived of a belief that the British people had not, 'grasped the difference between democracy and despotism well enough to ... defend their liberties' and that totalitarianism was based on 'lies displaced' and 'extinguished religious sensibility' (Taylor 2003, 279, 342). Orwell's passion for revealing the truth ultimately determined his writing.

In February 1941, Orwell, in collaboration with his left-wing publisher Fredric Warburg, edited and helped produce a series of hardback political essays entitled *Searchlight Books* (Costello 1989, 257). The *Searchlight Books* were considerably 'more than just a collection of political pamphlets' (258). Indeed, Warburg advertised that *Searchlight Book* essays would be written in 'simple language without the rubber-stamp political jargon

of the past' (Crick cited in Costello 1989, 257), which was unquestionably subversive of the British government campaign.

Orwell's early political views emerged in the *Searchlight Book* essay, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, described as 'a high-class piece of war propaganda' (Woodcock cited in Claeys 1985, 186). Orwell reminds an averagely educated reader of Britain's liberal socialist values where he begins the essay with an oxymoron, 'As I write, highly civilised human beings are flying overhead, trying to kill me', and asks the reader, 'Are we not forty-six million individuals, all different?' (Orwell 1941, 173). In juxtaposing the WWII effort with a loss of national liberal identity, Orwell contradicts the British censorship campaign. Claeys clarifies this by suggesting that the goal of

The Lion and the Unicorn was to outline... a new form of socialism based upon the liberal heritage of Great Britain... [T]his goal remained crucial for Orwell up to the time of his death... to dismiss the book too lightly is to misinterpret a crucial segment of Orwell's political development. (1985, 193)

Orwell's *The Lion and the Unicorn's* was well-received by the publishing industry in Britain and was published and circulated without confiscation by the MOI. This is surprising considering the MOI overlooked a 'vital stage in the early development of both Orwell's socialist beliefs and his early critique of Fascist and Stalinist totalitarianism' (Claeys 1985, 186), but it does, perhaps, represent an example of a clear political appropriation and an emerging political divide.

***Animal Farm* (1945): War-Time Censorship of an Anti-Stalin Novel**

Animal Farm, published one month before the end of WWII in August 1945, is an allegorical novella depicting farm animals revolting against their regime. Essentially satirising the Russian revolution and the communist regime under Joseph Stalin, *Animal Farm* portrays the inequality and brutality experienced by the animals who are governed by the humans

(representing capitalists and aristocrats), which cause the animals (representing the proletariat) to revolt. Initially, the animals are satisfied with their new life, but find that conditions degrade under their new leaders, Napoleon (representing Stalin) and the pigs, who ultimately betray them by reinstating the greedy capitalist regime against which the animals had originally revolted (British Library, n.d.).

Orwell's political persuasions reflected in *Animal Farm* emerged during the time he worked for the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) from 1941 to 1942 while disseminating MOI-approved propaganda to India. Orwell resigned from the BBC owing to his growing dissatisfaction with the British government for suppressing critical public opinion about the realities of the WWII Russian Ally (Mwiggam 2017).

Animal Farm created a censorship scandal among the publishing industry and the British government. The first signs of its controversial impacts were evident within the industry even before its publication. Four publishers, Victor Gollancz, Andre Deutsch, Jonathan Cape and Faber and Faber, refused to publish the book owing to its anti-Stalin message (Letemendia 1992, 130). Until 1944, except for *Homage to Catalonia*, Orwell had been published in the UK by left-wing publisher Gollancz. Gollancz, however, 'rejected' the publication of *Animal Farm* owing to the nature of its 'anti-Stalinist' message (Warburg 1959, 231, 206). At that time, Gollancz was a publisher for the Independent Labour Party (ILP), a party which then voiced that the fight against 'Fascism could only be built with a Soviet Union alliance' (200). Furthermore, Gollancz had nearly 'monopolised' the left-wing market following the creation of the Left Book Club (223) and was therefore undoubtedly amassing 'economic capital' by complying with the British government's censorship and the political climate (Bourdieu 1993, 68). *Animal Farm* was also intercepted by Peter Smollett, a Russian agent from the British MOI, who advised Cape not to print it because in *Animal Farm*, 'the dominant class as a race of pigs was thought to be especially offensive' (Taylor 2003, 337).

Notwithstanding *Animal Farm*'s political sensitivity and its long road to publication, Orwell finally left Gollancz in 1944 following his rejection of *Animal Farm* (Warburg 1959, 231-32) and signed with Warburg who offered Orwell a '£100 royalty advance' to publish *Animal Farm* in March 1945 (Taylor, 2003, 340). Despite Warburg's occupation with his own company's 'dire finances' and requirements for a best-seller, Warburg sought titles with a 'precise quality' (243, 223) which could ostensibly accumulate 'symbolic capital' and thus locate his firm and Orwell's reputation within an autonomous and dominant 'cultural field' (Bourdieu 1992, 37-38). Sharing Orwell's ideologies, Warburg was an anti-fascist publisher who rejected the ideas of communism (Warburg 1959, 221), and published lists comprised of 'liberal and socialist' political genres (224). Ostensibly, Warburg signed up Orwell's *Animal Farm* to accumulate symbolic capital for publishing prestige and for accumulation between a producer and writer in his firm.

The publication of *Animal Farm* in 1945 became a success selling '4500 copies in the first six weeks', with '10,000 copies ordered for October' and 'nine translations' organised across Europe and beyond (Taylor 2003, 355). However, the publication coincided with the end of WWII, the onset of the Russian cold war and a change of British government from Conservative to Labour. The left-wing Labour party raised Orwell's hopes of revised political moves towards a more liberal anti-communist mentality in Britain. However, Orwell's fears of becoming a 'talisman' for the Conservative right-wing were realised when a British left critique of *Animal Farm* resulted in a 'misrepresentation' by the Conservative right as Orwell's attack on anti-Stalinism (Taylor 2003, 356).

A further notable example of misrepresentation occurred after the death of Orwell in 1950, whereby the American Office of Policy Coordination (OPC) of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), with aims of inhibiting the spread of communism (Senn 2015, 149), seemingly acquired the film rights for *Animal Farm* from Sonia Orwell (151). It is held that the CIA and 'interested investors' requested several changes to the script, one of which was to depict a

happy ending portraying the Animals overthrowing Napoleon and the pigs (152). Although the rewriting aligned with Orwell's ambitions of social liberation from suppression and capitalism, the CIA's adaptation, however, encouraged the American public to dislike Communist leaders and promoted the idea that the Russian proletariat should overthrow the Communist leaders (152). Orwell was not advocating war. Nonetheless, the CIA's right-wing misrepresentation effectively cast Orwell as a warmonger, when in fact Orwell's original ending provided a humanitarian view of how the farm animals are exploited and suppressed by the Western Capitalists and the Eastern Dictators (Taylor 2003, 226).

***Nineteen Eighty-four* (1949): Cold War Propaganda Used by the Left- and Right-Wings**

Despite the political and publishing industry opposition to *Animal Farm*, Orwell proceeded to write *Nineteen Eighty-four* feeling 'unshakeably convinced that Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt consciously plotted to divide the world... and share it among themselves' (Deustcher cited in Taylor 2003, 193). Orwell's democratic socialist ideals of freedom from poverty and inequality were born when he was living as a tramp among the poverty stricken working-class in 1927-28. Orwell wanted to promote class equality and communicate this to his middle-class readership through *Nineteen Eighty-four* (Newsinger 2018a, 8), because Orwell feared Britain was verging away from his idealised society towards a totalitarian state. This is reflected in his beliefs that he was being observed and having his personal letters censored (Taylor 2003, 192). These concerns were increased during his journalistic career in 1937 with British newspapers, during which time Orwell witnessed a reportage, a review and a book proposal turned down on ideological grounds (245). Naturally, these factors, plus events in the BBC and the recent WWII censorship activities, weighed on Orwell when he wrote *Nineteen Eighty-four*.

Nineteen Eighty-four is a dystopian novel in a fictitious setting which portrays the life of Winston Smith. Smith dislikes the totalitarian government which censors all aspects of

one's life and thoughts. Society is told what to think, or not to think and is monitored constantly through television screens which report undesired behaviour back to the 'Ministry of Thought'. History is rewritten through the destruction and commissioning of publications, and fellow civilians report non-conformers to the Ministry, who issue severe penalties (Senn 2015, 155).

Comparable with *Animal Farm*, Orwell was concerned about *Nineteen Eighty-four* being used as propaganda. On the 22 July 1949 Orwell issued a press release through his agent Leonard Moore, stating clearly that 'Nineteen Eighty-four was not intended as an attack on Socialism', and that he was concerned about a recurrence of 'right-wing' meddling (Newsinger 2018b, 137-138). Shortly before publication in August 1949, and during the developing cold war between America and Russia, a left-wing American publisher, Harcourt, Brace and Co, obtained rights to sell *Nineteen Eighty-four*. On the 22 April 1949 Harcourt sent an advanced copy and letter to the United States's Department of Justice, requesting assistance in promoting *Nineteen Eighty-four*: 'We thought you might be interested in helping sell this book for the attention of the American public - and thus, helping to halt totalitarianism' (Internet Archive n.d, 2). Subsequently, the right-wing British government and the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), 'in defence of their own global imperial interests', proceeded to market *Nineteen Eighty-four* as an exposé of Russian totalitarian government (Newsinger 2018b, 138). Rossi (1981, 577) suggests that Orwell was now being depicted as 'a virtual saint by the American Right-Wing press' and that *Nineteen Eight-four's* left-wing message 'pointed up the dangers of confronting a free world' by which a common man could be trapped in misery.

Naturally, America and Britain exploited Orwell's recent employment with the left-wing publisher Gollancz and Orwell's previous fighting with the left-wing Trotskyist POUM in the civil war, which effectively positioned Orwell as a rebel Tory anarchist (Rodden 2001, 158). Notwithstanding the political involvement, the impact on the publishing industry was

minimal: Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four* and *Animal Farm* sold well overall, but better in America than Britain (Rossi 1981, 578).

Meanwhile in Russia, despite *Nineteen Eighty-four* sales being banned from 1959 until 1988, Orwell's left-wing beliefs were misrepresented in Russian propaganda promoting anti-Americanism. In 1959 the right-wing Soviet newspaper *Return to Homeland* hijacked *Nineteen Eighty-four* to encourage Russians to return to Russia, suggesting that the title prophesied that by the year 1984 the 'private life of all Americans will be viewed by means of secretly placed television screens [portraying] a grim picture of a completely totalitarian state' (Rodden 2001, 204, Internet Archive 2016, 8).

More recent misrepresentations of *Nineteen Eighty-four*, in 1983, involve a weekly newspaper of the Soviet Writer's Union comparing the Ministry of Truth with the American Defence Department during failed 'Cold war disarmament negotiations' (Jackson 2012). Effectively, Russia 'recast' their version of *Nineteen Eighty-four* depicting 'Big Brother [as] ... Ronald Reagan and [the] proposal of disarmament... as "double think"' (Rodden cited in Senn 2015, 157). In Orwell's original, the ruler 'Big Brother' is based in Oceania, which represents London, England, and 'double think' is 'The mental capacity to accept as equally valid two entirely contrary opinions or beliefs' (OED 2019).

Conclusion

This article has revealed how during WWII the British government introduced legislative powers to promote the publication of specific political genres and responses from the publishing industry. Publishers, such as Gollancz and Cape, conformed with the political sensitivities by publishing tolerated war-time genres, thus ensuring continued economic capital and government support, while rejecting dissenting authors like Orwell. Conversely,

Orwell maintained his opposing democratic socialist beliefs in favour of capitalising on symbolic capital with Warburg. However, national governments' censorship effects revolted against Orwell's titles *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-four* with an explosion of rejections, misrepresentations or alerts raised to the British MOI and American CIA.

This article has also demonstrated how governments and publishers switched their political stance during the ensuing Cold War. Gollancz continued to publish for the ILP which went from communist to being subsumed into the Labour Party from 1947, and Russia had become an axis power resulting in both Orwell's titles *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-four* being used as propaganda by Britain and America against Russia. While this brought strong sales and film adaptations for Orwell, the symbolic political attention these titles acquired attracted more political attention, resulting in misrepresentations of Orwell's titles and a repositioning of his political stance to that of a Tory anarchist.

In further complications, Orwell's *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-four* were then used as propaganda by Russia against America, who drew on Orwell's democratic socialist persuasion to encourage their citizens to return, arguing that *Nineteen Eighty-four* was warning of the American totalitarian lifestyle.

This article concludes that Orwell failed to 'loosen' the political censorship knots after persevering and switching to Warburg, and that the political interventions of the governments did impact Orwell's titles and the publishing industry in the form of misrepresentations and rejections for their own financial or political purposes. But despite this, Orwell maintained his political ambition to spread the word of democratic socialism throughout. Bourdieu (1996, 229) usefully provides that, 'the producer of the value of the work of art is not the artist, but the field of production as a universe of belief which produces the value of the work of art'. Thus, the political interventions and attention accumulated around Orwell's *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-four* assisted them in becoming symbolically and capially rich global classics.

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