

Self-preservation or Self-condemnation?

At the height of Stalin's power in the U.S.S.R., people remotely suspected of infidelity to Stalin's regime disappeared. These "traitors" were executed by the thousands. Fear was the dominant emotion of the majority of the population. Fear of saying the wrong words. Fear of performing actions that would be interpreted the wrong way. Fear of constantly being watched. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, a novel by George Orwell, explores one man's rebellion against what is arguably the most significant totalitarian regime in fiction, and how this man's instinct of self-preservation is ultimately used to manipulate him against his ideals. Orwell develops the notion that societies demanding conformity encourage conformity by appealing to the instinct of self-preservation in individuals who desire survival.

In totalitarian societies, individuals will do what is required and expected of them by higher authority in the interest of self-preservation. Usually they are required to conform in various ways with their demonstrations of loyalty to the governing authority. For most of his life, Winston Smith has been such a man. He attends work regularly, spends most of his evenings at the Community Centre, and behaves accordingly while under the surveillance of telescreens. His only crime had been sleeping with a prostitute from the primitive, disregarded lower class (the proles), which is something that even those most loyal to the Party, the self-proclaimed perfect and completely benevolent ruling authority, have been rumored to do. But Winston's façade of loyalty and conformity to the Party does not last. His first physical act of rebellion is the purchase of a diary from a prole shop, yet this act is preceded by *thinking* of rebelling against the Party; *thoughtcrime* they called it. Winston knows of the punishment for all crimes

against the Party: vaporizations. People disappear off the face of the earth as if they had never existed. He reflects on this when he writes in his diary: "Thoughtcrime does not entail death: thoughtcrime IS death." But one need not even to commit an evident crime against the Party to be susceptible to vaporization. In Winston's words, his friend Syme "sees too clearly and speaks too plainly. The Party does not like such people." Winston later thinks to himself, "Syme would be vaporized. Winston would be vaporized. O'Brien would be vaporized. Parsons, on the other hand, would never be vaporized. The eyeless creature with the quacking voice would never be vaporized. The little beetle-like men who scuttled so nimbly through the labyrinthine corridors of Ministries—they, too, would never be vaporized." By creating the illusion that conforming to the Party's will ensures survival and self-preservation under the leadership of an omnipotent, indestructible paternal being (Big Brother), the Party obtains the unanimous loyalty of many people, especially the aforementioned beetle-like men.

Totalitarian regimes have always received some level of opposition from the citizens they dominate, usually from educated people. Winston, although a product of years of mental decline under the leadership of Big Brother, is perhaps one of the more talented workers in his department. He is too smart to believe everything the Party tells him, especially since he works for the Party falsifying historical records. This is evident in the following passage: "And only yesterday, [Winston] reflected, it had been announced that the [chocolate] ration was to be *reduced* to twenty grammes a week. Was it possible that they could swallow that, after only twenty-four hours? Yes, they swallowed it. Parsons swallowed it easily, with the stupidity of an animal. ... Was he, then, alone in the possession of a memory?" So then, how does the Party win Winston's

conformity? The answer is, and has been for centuries, torture. What better way to win the loyalty of a man than by rendering him helpless and pushing him to the brink of death while telling him that easy way to make it all stop is simply by doing as he is told? The Party takes torture as far as convincing the individual in question that he alone is responsible for all his suffering:

‘You did it!’ sobbed Winston. ‘You reduced me to this state.’

‘No, Winston, you reduced yourself to it. This is what you accepted when you set yourself up against the Party. It was all contained in that first act. Nothing has happened that you did not foresee.’

Now, if Winston wants to survive, he must be willing to be taught by the Party and believe in its principles. The ultimate appeal to his self-preservation is when he is faced with a gruesome death by his worst fear, rats, and the final knowledge that there is only one way to avoid this horrible death: succumb to the Party’s will by betraying Julia. Once Winston betrays Julia, he later reflects that he was actually sincere in his desire of betraying Julia to an awful death instead of him. Winston’s conversion is finally complete.

Ignorant individuals are willing to conform to a totalitarian society’s demands when they are told that doing so is in their best interests and will ensure their survival. More intellectual people are less ready to succumb to authority until their self-preservation is appealed to via more extreme means such as torture. Either way, individuals can usually be manipulated into doing things against their ideals if their survival is at stake.