The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Pigs and Dogs Rule Again

By Alexei Bayer

September 05, 2010



George Orwell's anti-utopian novel "1984" enjoyed a revival during the presidency of George W. Bush. Even though Orwell's totalitarian future is now more than a quarter-century out of date, the book read like a collection of newspaper headlines. The current government in Washington also pays homage to "1984." The recent U.S. withdrawal from Iraq can be described in Orwellian newspeak, "peace is war."

Orwell's other masterpiece, "Animal Farm," is a wickedly funny look at the Bolshevik Revolution and Stalinism. But since communism has collapsed and its hypocrisies and evils have been condemned by most thinking persons inside and outside Russia, there seems little point in revisiting this work.

Not so. Published in 1945, "Animal Farm" satirizes Soviet history through World War II but also takes it far into the future. With extraordinary prescience, it paints a picture of post-Communist Russia that is extremely accurate even for our own times.

The book's allegorical plot is deceptively simple. Fed up with appalling conditions at Farmer

Jones' Manor Farm, barnyard animals rise up, expel humans and rename the place Animal Farm, setting up an all-beast republic under the leadership of the pigs. Eventually, the animal paradise turns into an oppressive dictatorship.

The parallels are transparent. The pigs, who arrogate a supervisory role, are clearly Communist Party officials. The dogs, who protect the pigs and terrorize other animals, are state security personnel, the siloviki. After the animals repel a bloody invasion by humans, both pigs and dogs grow extremely numerous and fat, while other animals work hard and eat less and less.

But the real clincher comes at the end, when the pigs abandon their animalistic ideology, learn to walk on hind legs and begin to trade with humans, buying luxuries for themselves. They bring back religion and restore the old Manor Farm name — just as the Soviet Union has been renamed the Russian Federation.

Since the establishment of the Bolshevik state, Russia's history has been the story of the rise of bureaucracy. Freed from the constant threat of purges by Stalin's death, the Soviet bureaucracy grew increasingly corrupt under the leadership of Leonid Brezhnev, but for a while had to settle for relatively puny bribes and shoddy Soviet goods. In the 1990s, moreover, the bureaucrats were briefly eclipsed by the new class of private-sector oligarchs. Since Vladimir Putin became president in 2000, bureaucrats have rallied as never before. On the wave of mind-boggling corruption and crony deals, they've now joined the world's moneyed elites —precisely as Orwell predicted.

What Orwell failed to foresee is that the pigs' golden age would dawn when the dogs — the siloviki —took control of Russia.

"Animal Farm" is truly an angry book. It was banned in the Soviet Union. Anyone caught with the novel faced criminal charges. I first came across it in 1972 in a samizdat translation. I had an hour to read a dog-eared carbon copy, my heart pounding the entire time. Fifteen years old at the time, I then had to recount the plot several times to my parents' friends.

The full text, of course, is now freely available in Russia. The Kremlin clearly has little to worry about. While the Communist leadership feared for their lives — that if millions of Soviets read Orwell's works, they might rebel — it is not so today. In post-Communist Russia, the dogs and the pigs clearly regard their countrymen as a bunch of sheep.

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Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2010/09/05/pigs-and-dogs-rule-again-a1169