

How do the writers of *Stasiland: Stories from Behind the Berlin Wall* (2001) by Anna Funder and *1984* (1949) by George Orwell use personal stories to portray oppression of personal freedoms by regimes?

Stasiland: Stories from Behind the Berlin Wall and *1984* both go into detail on how oppression works under regimes, prominently covering specific ways in which personal freedoms are oppressed. Personal stories are used in both texts; *Stasiland* has many, the most covered being that of Miriam Weber and her experience with the Stasi which spans the text. In *1984* Orwell tells the personal story of Winston Smith and his experiences with the Party. The two are similar in the sense that they each explore the intimate nature of power under a totalitarian regime and the strive to manipulate human behaviour into compliance. In *Stasiland* it is the Stasi and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) during the era of East Germany. In *1984* it is the exploits of the fictional government called 'the Party' with the leader being called 'Big Brother'. *Stasiland* is Anna Funder's non-fiction account of travelling around East Germany researching the former government, whereas *1984* is George Orwell's sixth novel and explores a fictional totalitarian regime inspired by the uprising dictators like Joseph Stalin and Adolf Hitler.

Both *Stasiland* and *1984* use personal stories to present the oppression of personal freedoms. For example, in *Stasiland* Anna Funder writes about a meeting with Miriam Weber who tells a personal story of her experiences with the GDR and the Stasi. Miriam vividly describes her oppression when she was locked in solitary confinement at a mere sixteen years old. She describes the door as "thick with metal bolts across it". The image conveyed of a "thick" cell door with "metal bolts" is ominous and, considering the fragility of being just sixteen years old at the time, it is excessive and an unnecessary restraint. It shows how serious the Stasi were when it came to taking prisoners who they

believed to be breaking their laws. The apartment in which they sit as she recollects is then described as “one big light space”, which may indicate her story of imprisonment and subsequent reaction to oppressive, dark confinement.

Moreover, Funder writes “From here, you could see anyone coming.” This could reflect Miriam’s experiences with the Stasi, having lived under the threat of oppressed privacy. It was advisable to have early warning of potentially threatening people approaching; seeing “anyone coming” gave a chance of knowing if you were being surveyed, since the Stasi used to send agents to follow people if they were of suspicious interest. Funder quotes the German media when she writes “the most perfected surveillance state of all time.” This is an accurate statement considering the ratio of Stasi informants to citizens; the statistic was as high as 1 informant for every 6.5 citizens.

A similarly oppressive situation is presented in *1984* through the third person perspective of Winston Smith. He describes the ever-present legal requirement of the “telescreen”, a recurring object throughout the book, because it relates to the constant surveillance imposed by “the Party”. Telescreens are a legal requirement in most rooms in Oceania and to tamper with them would be a severe crime. Through Winston’s perspective, the reader understands that citizens are constantly being monitored for signs of self-expression. For example, in Winston’s apartment there is a telescreen, “he kept his back turned... it was safer; though... even a back can be revealing.” Under normal circumstances, someone’s back is usually anonymous and does not convey much meaning. However under the rule of the Party, a totalitarian regime, the implication is that even a back may show some kind of rejection or secrecy of intention. We are led to conclude the actions of the Party are so unpredictable that it is necessary to take precautions not to reveal your true feelings for fear of the consequences that they may bring; another example of physical and verbal oppression.

Both *Stasiland* and *1984* present oppression of personal freedoms through personal stories of threat and death by the regimes depicted. People are so afraid of the Party in *1984* and abide by their rule because of the threat of harm they impose. The term “vaporised” is used and refers to being killed and, in effect, erased from time. Orwell uses the phrase “your one-time existence was denied and then forgotten.” The use of the past tense verb “denied” shows how much of an influence the Party has on the course of history and the fact that it then leads to “forgotten” emphasises it. The fear in communities is so intense that people are willing to forget and erase memories. A character called Syme is a clear example of how oppressive the Party is when it comes to vaporising people. Syme is described by Winston as “too intelligent” and he says, “One day he will disappear.” The use of the verb “disappear” might usually convey mystery but in this context, it implies that the Party will kill Syme and erase him from time. It is made clear that the Party does not want people under its control who are too aware of how the regime works and therein pose a threat.

Winston also says, “He sees too clearly and speaks too plainly” which is indicative of Syme’s incompatibility with the Party. The concept of seeing “too clearly”, being too aware and even speaking “too plainly” shows how the Party aims to censor everything its citizens witness, even to the point of oppressing even their own thoughts. They have a certain level of how far they want you to see before you become “too” aware of what is going on around you.

Orwell also uses short, impactful sentences to show the Party’s opinion: “The Party does not like such people.” This abrupt statement is able to convey threat simply through saying the Party has a type of person they dislike. This is not the mark of a fair line of government. It is an oppression of the freedom to deviate in any way from the Party’s approved set of innate or contrived character traits of its citizens. The fact that the Party

will kill you if it “does not like” you conveys that under the regime of the Party, you do not even have the personal freedom of simply being an individual.

Similarly, in *Stasiland* Miriam tells the personal story of losing her husband, Charlie, who refuses to be oppressed by the regime and is too outspoken, publicly disagreeing with the Stasi. Before his death, Miriam describes how “they would come over and search the house from time to time” with no specific reason and without any kind of warrant. The pronoun “they” refers to Stasi officers; in Miriam's situation it is not necessary to mention the Stasi by name because everyone has knowledge of them. The phrase “from time to time” is casual and shows that Miriam's personal freedom of privacy has been eroded by having her residence unjustly searched so frequently. She seems to describe it without much emotion because she only mentions it once and is able to joke about it: “Afterwards, we laughed!” This implies that it was a very normal occurrence that she has become desensitised to. Then to inform Miriam of Charlie's death, the Stasi uses a brutal and unkind method, a further tool of oppression and abuse of their power. Funder writes “an ordinary policeman in his green uniform knocked on their apartment door.” The delivery of this information from an “ordinary policeman” shows that the Stasi wanted to make Miriam feel worthless and that Charlie's death is and without value because they are not making a fuss; they are sending a standard low-ranking officer instead of a more formal official to break the news. This is emphasised when the policeman says, “you need to...collect your husband's things, because he is dead.” The policeman did not use any kind of euphemism for “death” or say any comforting words which is abrupt and heartless. The policeman is then “gone before Miriam could find any words.” This brusqueness enforces the fact that the Stasi wants to make death seem insignificant, devoid of sentiment and shows how they oppress Miriam's personal freedom of emotional comfort.

Miriam is not the only person that this happened to, there is a weight of evidence of the Stasi killing people in such a volatile manner; at least 1500 people were murdered by the Stasi in a similar way to Charlie (the extent is not fully known).

Furthermore, the Stasi blames the murder of Charlie on suicide by hanging which is incredibly cruel for Miriam who deduces he was killed by them. She says, "I know those cells...everything is smooth inside" and the Stasi officer she is talking to just says "No" when she questions if he saw what Charlie was hanging from. The Stasi deceitfully oppresses Miriam's personal freedom of justice for her partner by blaming the victim.

Personal stories of torture, an extreme form of oppression of personal freedom, are covered heavily in *Stasiland* and to an even greater extent in *1984*. Miriam discusses her own experiences with torture when being interrogated in prison. During her interrogation she was subjected to sleep deprivation which is described as one of the "obscene torture methods practised on American POWs" during the Korean War (1950s). Funder uses the sombre description "A hungry man can still spit bile, but a zombie is remarkably pliable." The use of the noun "zombie" is impactful because it is often associated with science fiction and gruesome horror so therefore emphasises the effect the torture method has on people. Furthermore, the verb "pliable" is unsettling because it presents the idea of the person being manipulated and, in a sense, 'bent' into how the conductor pleases.

Miriam is described to not be "permitted to sleep during the day" and she explains how they would "take the mattress off the floor so there was nothing left to sit on." The removal of the only possible source of comfort in a prison cell, especially when tired, shows how the Stasi were persistent in oppressing her freedom to sleep so as to force her into compliance. Furthermore, their ruthlessness is emphasised when Funder writes "Sleep deprivation can mimic the symptoms of starvation, especially in children". This is

particularly significant because at this time in her life Miriam is only sixteen years old, unlikely to pose any serious threat, and is being tortured by the government of a mass surveillance state.

Funder continues to add detail to Miriam's story by giving direct symptoms of sleep deprivation such as "victims become disorientated and cold" and "waking hours take on the logic of a dream". It is evident how lack of sleep can seriously affect a person's mental and physical health, which accentuates the seriousness of the torture and oppression to the safety and freedom of this child who is still under the age of consent. This cycle of torture ends when she lies and confesses to being aided by an underground escape group. The Stasi were able to successfully break her into admitting what they wanted to hear which means they were successful at oppressing her overall personal freedom.

A similar yet even more extreme form of torture and oppression of individuality is presented to the reader in *1984*. At the very end of Part 2 of the novel, Winston and Julia are captured by the "Thought Police", whose job it is to arrest those who they believe to be having treasonous thoughts about the Party and the regime. Orwell presents Winston's subsequent torture with violent descriptions of beating until he confesses to any number of crimes they wish him to. Orwell writes "The confession was a formality, though the torture was real." This is a relatively short, simple sentence similar to the one in *Stasiland* which described the "zombie" state of mind caused by sleep deprivation; the purpose of this sentence is to summarise the idea in a concise and uneasy statement to set the tone for the following description of torture.

Winston uses the noun "formality" to describe his "confession" to 'thoughtcrime' (a term given by the Party to any thought which is illegal) which gives the reader the sense that he does not even consider resisting; the torture is not yet fully described but this

confession being shown as a “formality” could foreshadow how much pain will be inflicted. Plus, the noun and verb “torture” in itself is a very harsh sounding word with endless negative connotations of pain and illegality; torture is in fact listed as a war crime and a violation of human rights. Orwell describes the beatings as “Always there were five or six men...at him simultaneously.” The exact number is not given and gives the reader a sense of disorientation. Additionally, the odds of six on one is incredibly unfair and he uses “always” which suggests the beatings are incessant.

Moreover Winston lists the weapons used, saying “Sometimes it was fists, sometimes it was truncheons, sometimes it was steel rods, ...boots.” The repetitive, anaphoric use of “sometimes it was” enforces the countless times he was beaten, which in combination with the lengthy list of various weapons takes the significance out of *what* he is beaten with and places emphasis on the *frequency* instead, without losing detail of how the beatings occur.

The next form of torture exercised on Winston is that which intends to make him fully accept the Party’s views, a further example of oppression. Orwell focuses on O’Brien, a recurring and previously idolised character, trying to break Winston by making him ludicrously believe that two and two make five rather than four, if the Party were to wish it. At the start of the novel Winston wrote in his diary “Freedom is the freedom to say two plus two equals four”, and now O’Brien denies him that simple personal freedom. He says, “How many fingers am I holding up, Winston?” to which Winston replies “Four”, then O’Brien says, “and if the Party says it is five?”, to which Winston also responds “Four”. O’Brien then uses a scientific dial to inflict pain directly into Winston’s brain without overtly harming him but still causing blinding pain. Orwell writes “The air tore into his lungs”; the harsh verb “tore” gives the picture of his lungs ripping apart. Winston is reduced to shouting “Four! Five! Four! Anything you like... stop the pain!”

This shows how through intense pain, O'Brien begins to make Winston accept the idea of four being five if the Party says it is.

At the very end of the novel, Orwell writes a short, devastating sentence, the closure of Winstons personal story: "He loved Big Brother", referring to Winston finally winning, or in a sense losing, his internal battle with what is real and what is not. Deliberate action to reset a person's thoughts is perhaps the ultimate form of oppressing personal freedom and both Funder and Orwell are very clear about attempts to do so by the regimes depicted by personal stories in both *Stasiland* and *1984*.

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