

## The Handmaid's Tale - Historical Parallels

*"There's nothing in the book that hasn't already happened." - Margaret Atwood*

Although *The Handmaid's Tale* is written about a dystopian *future*, many of the shocking events and occurrences are not fictional inventions of Atwood. The author has drawn on many real-life events that have taken place in the past, or in some cases, that are still taking place today.

You are responsible to choose an area to research throughout the duration of this novel-study. Choose a topic that interests you. You will be given some class time to explore your chosen topic.

*Some examples of historical events that Atwood explores in her novel:*

### **Romanian children**

- the banning of birth control in Romania (Under the dictatorship of President Ceausescu, who wanted to increase his country's population, birth control and abortion were banned after 1966. Romanian women of child-bearing age were each expected to have five children. As a consequence, thousands of unwanted children were born and many thousands abandoned. Atwood uses this real disaster to make her readers consider Gilead's laws on childbirth and its anti-abortion stance.)

### **Polygamy**

- *the Mormons* (This movement began in America in the nineteenth century, when Joseph Smith claimed to have had revealed to him, by an angel, the Book of Mormon)

### **The Handmaid's uniform**

- *Burqas worn in Afghanistan*

### **Public Execution**

- *Taliban public executions*

### **Religious wars**

- *The war in Bosnia-Herzegovina among three faith groups: Muslim, Roman Catholic, and Serbian Orthodox)*
- *16th Century France (succession of wars between Roman Catholics and Protestants)*
- *Ongoing war between Israel and Palestine*

**State Religion / Propaganda and Censorship** - *used to turn a leader (or leaders) into idols that are to be admired, respected, and often feared.*

- *Hitler (In Nazi Germany, all reporters and journalists had to register with the Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda. This was to ensure that nobody produced negative press about Hitler. Hitler's rise to power is, in several ways, reflected in Gilead)*
- *Mussolini*
- *Russian Tzar (the "little father", the closest man to God on Earth.)*
- *Stalin's Russia*
- *North Korea / China*
- *Bible locked away during the Dark Ages*

### **Resistance movements**

- White Rose resistance organisation in Nazi Germany. The White Rose was a non-violent resistance group in Nazi Germany, consisting of a number of students from the University of Munich and their philosophy professor. The group became known for an anonymous leaflet campaign, lasting from June 1942 until February 1943, that called for active opposition to German dictator Adolf Hitler's regime
- Jewish resistance to the Nazis during the Holocaust.

### **An Underground Railway**

- When slavery was legal in the United States, there was an underground railway that enabled runaway slaves to gain their freedom by leaving the country.

### **Re-education**

- The communist party of China (use of re-education or brain washing.) → Cultural Revolution

### **Enforced religious conversion**

- Islam in Iran
- Early Modern England protestants

### **Nuclear-plant accidents**

Pieixoto also refers to nuclear-plant accidents. Probably the most serious of these in America prior to Atwood's writing of *The Handmaid's Tale* was the

- **Three Mile Island** plant incident in 1979.
- 1986, nuclear plant accident, at **Chernobyl** in the Ukraine, then part of the Soviet Union. (Explosions at the plant led to serious radiation emissions. Many thousands of people have since suffered from cancers which are thought to have been caused by the effects of radiation.

*The topic I would like to research:*

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*Additional possibilities:*

- the Salem witch hunts
- Pol Pot's reign in Cambodia
- the Bountiful community in Creston, B.C.
- Boko Haram → kidnapping school girls