

Homage to Catalonia and the Spanish Civil War – How this Affected George Orwell's Writing

by Brian Lazarus

“Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism.” George Orwell, *Why I Write* (Penguin Books, 2004)

George Orwell stepped off the train in Barcelona in 1936 with a naïve enthusiasm and optimism for the Spanish civil war. 1936 had been a pivotal year for him. He had begun to write his book the “Road to Wigan Pier”, about unemployed and impoverished miners in North-West England. He had also married his wife Eileen O'Shaughnessy in June of that year and by December he found himself in Barcelona fighting fascists. He had a strong desire to write about the rise of fascism in Europe and the conflict in Spain in particular. His concept of the world in terms of democratic socialism on the one side and the dangers of fascism on the other had not yet fully developed. His year spent fighting on the side of the Republicans in the war against Francisco Franco and his fascist regime significantly changed his world outlook.



(Unknown), Image of George Orwell and his wife, Eileen., circa 1936, photograph, <https://blog.hotelcontinental.com/orwell-couple-is-part-of-hotel-continental-history/>

To set the scene for the environment in which George found himself in on arrival in the winter of 1936, a brief overview of the political situation in Spain is needed. Spain had lost a lot of its prestige as a colonial power in Europe after the loss of its colonies in Cuba and the Philippines. The divided country consisted of a small wealthy industrialized north, centered around Barcelona in the province of Catalonia. And a more agrarian and impoverished southern part, in which significant poverty existed. Two groups dominated



(Unknown), The POUM militia in Barcelona 1936 with Orwell in the background; he describes several days and nights spent defending its headquarters from the roof of the nearby Poliorama theatre in 1937, Photograph, Getty Images, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/may/06/george-orwell-homage-to-catalonia-account-spanish-civil-war-wrong>

the political situation, the so-called Republicans with a mix of varying ideologies including

democratic socialists, communists, anarchists, and a group of anti-Stalinist liberal democrats but with Marxist ideologies. The POUM (Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista), the group that Orwell would ultimately join as a combatant, aligned themselves most closely with his ideologies and beliefs of democratic socialism. The right-wing factions consisted of the Nationalists, an amalgam of groups consisting of monarchists, a Catholic party and the most significant fascist group under the lead of General Francisco Franco (the Falangists). The tense political situation arose because of the lack of an outright majority consensus to rule the country resulting in three general elections in the course of six years. This had created a weak impermanent nationalist government. A center left Popular Front had gained power by a narrow victory but struggled to hold on to power. Spain then saw the rise of fascism inspired by Nazi Germany and Italy under Mussolini. The fascist elements disputed the outcome of the elections and street violence broke out in the spring of 1936 throughout Spain. This culminated in a military coup when a leftist police officer assassinated a right-wing politician. Anarchy and disorder spread from the South through Seville, Madrid and finally up to Barcelona. A significant faction of the left-leaning government including communists, anarchists and socialists took the opportunity to nationalize the industrial seat of power in the city of Barcelona, commandeer weapons and provide an armed resistance to the right-wing nationalists led by Franco. This is the climate that Orwell lands himself in.

The revolutionary fiesta impressed Orwell when he first arrived in Barcelona. His socialist democratic leanings strengthened, and he felt he had found a workable and noble form of socialism. He found that factories had become nationalized, unemployment decreased, and a classless society had begun evolving, with complete equality of the sexes. The concept of individual leaders had been abolished with all major decisions being made by a vote of the people. The wealthy classes fled the city, and their property and businesses had been commandeered to support all the people in Catalunya. Orwell enlisted as a fighter with the POUM and headed East to the front near Zaragoza with noble ideals and a strong sense of purpose.



Christopher Thomond, Orwell and his comrades from the POUM, circa 1936, Photograph, the-guardian.com/commentisfree/2014/feb10/orwell-hero-terrorism-syria-britishfighters-damned

His initial skepticism led him to question the army's ability to function without leaders and he wondered if his young untrained colleagues with their lofty equality ideals would provide a viable fighting force to resist Franco's military and liberate the country. But their courage, generosity and zeal won him over. The sporadic fighting at the front led to monotonous days spent mostly foraging for firewood and seeking sufficient warmth and shelter for the troops and maintaining their commitment to the cause. After spending 100 days at the front, Orwell left on leave and returned to Barcelona.

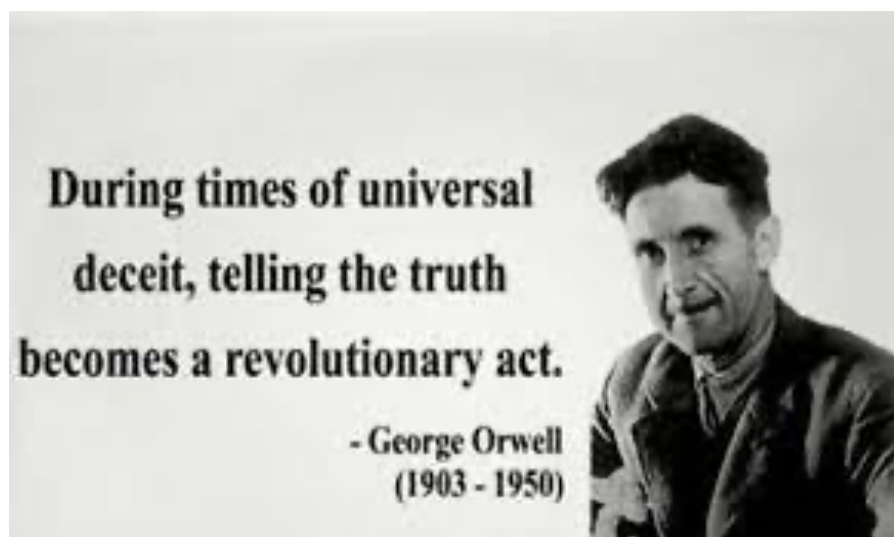
On leave in Barcelona, he became disillusioned with the lofty ideals of the war. The spirit of cooperation and optimism had completely evaporated. He found opposing factions within the Republican movement that fought each other for political power at all costs. In May of 1937

violence erupted between the POUM and the communists. A bloody and protracted conflict ensued with significant anti-POUM propaganda orchestrated by the communist factions which cast the group as a puppet regime of Nazi Germany and Franco- an enemy of the Republican cause. The torture and capture of many of Orwell's close friends and leaders within the POUM ensued. He now came to the realization that the communists would stop at nothing to discredit and spread propaganda about their enemies. Conflict between these former allies convinced Orwell that Spain would not be able to maintain a socialist democracy. He saw that their communist factions concerned themselves only with maintaining power and ruthlessly suppressing opposition thus showing no interest in creating an egalitarian and classless society. He returned to the front and very shortly thereafter suffered a serious gunshot to his throat by an enemy sniper. He sought medical care in Barcelona where his wife, Eileen, awaited him. Here he learned that that the Spanish government considered him an enemy of the state as a POUM collaborator. He and Eileen fled Spain to France and then subsequently traveled back to England.



(Unknown). George Orwell (behind gun) with his first wife Eileen O'Shaughnessy on the Aragon front during the Spanish Civil War.1936. Photograph.

Reflecting on his experiences during the Spanish civil war, Orwell's abiding memory is of the common decency of the people he fought with on the front lines, despite the horrendous circumstances. He is struck by their optimism, humanism and willingness to fight for the lofty ideals of egalitarianism and collective sharing in the rewards of their labor. He is similarly repulsed by the violence, repellent and underhanded tactics of both sides who will stop at nothing to maintain power at the expense of the ordinary people. In this way his lifelong commitment to exposing and fighting fascism and totalitarianism became fully realized and ultimately allowed him to write his two most celebrated works: "Animal farm" and "1984".



George Orwell, *Why I Write* (Penguin Books, 2004)