

George Orwell's Homage to Catalonia, Stalinism and the Spanish revolution

11 April 2002

Dear Comrades,

I recently finished listening to six tapes entitled *Homage to Catalonia* by George Orwell borrowed from the local library. It was really inspirational. As an idealist he went to defend democracy & took active part in one of the brigades as well as writing an account of both military & political aspects.

His analysis of the role of Stalinism in Spain seems as if it were written by a delegate of the ICFI. Could you offer an explanation in what way if any his analysis might differ from yours? May you have continued success.

Sincerely,

JPW

Thank you for your question and your message of support. George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* is an inspiring book by a gifted and honest writer committed to expose the truth. Written in 1937, it is a moving account of the heroic revolutionary struggle of the Spanish people against fascism and for socialism. Above all it provides irrefutable proof by an independent living witness to the crimes committed by the Stalinist bureaucracy in Spain and its betrayal of the Spanish revolution. Orwell's account was a vindication of the analysis that had been made by Leon Trotsky and the International Left Opposition of the Soviet bureaucracy, whose policies had by then become utterly counterrevolutionary on a world scale.

Many workers and intellectuals had moved sharply to the left in response to the tumultuous events of the 1930s, such as the Depression, the growing rise of fascism and the struggles of the working class.

When in July 1936, General Franco launched a military rebellion against the elected republic in Spain its real target was the economic, political and cultural organisations of the working class. Spanish workers responded by revolutionary measures, taking over and running factories, land, transport, and all aspects of military and economic life. When the government refused to give them arms, they got them from soldiers, looted arms stores or improvised them in the most ingenious ways.

Many leading artists and intellectuals came to fight in Spain, as they saw the events not only as a fight against the scourge of fascism, but also as a struggle for socialism. The calibre of such artists can be seen at the exhibition *Dreams and Nightmares* now showing at London's Imperial War Museum.

Orwell's experiences among the Spanish workers, which he so vividly describes in *Homage to Catalonia*, confirmed for him the counter-revolutionary nature of the Stalinist bureaucracy. And he

was determined that people should know about it.

In a letter he wrote to Cyril Connolly, from hospital in Barcelona where he was being treated for a bullet wound to his throat and arm by the fascists, he wrote: "Thanks also for recently telling the public that I should probably write a book on Spain, as I shall, of course, once this bloody arm is right. I have seen wonderful things and at last really believe in Socialism, which I never did before. On the whole, though I am sorry not to have seen Madrid, I am glad to have been on a comparatively little-known front among Anarchists and POUM [Workers Party of Marxist Unification] people instead of in the International Brigade, as I should have been if I had come here with C.P. [Communist Party] credentials instead of I.L.P. [Independent Labour Party] ones...."

Orwell's experience was different from most other artists and intellectuals, who went to Spain as supporters of the Stalinised Communist Parties, which many still associated with Lenin's Bolshevik party and the revolutionary traditions of October 1917 and which possessed a massive apparatus for both propaganda and direct repression of dissent. For George Orwell to produce and publish such material then was therefore no small task. The Kremlin bureaucracy was actively seeking the physical annihilation of the entire generation of Marxist workers and intellectuals who had made the Russian Revolution in 1917 possible, while internationally the Communist Parties were acting as the agents of Stalin in suppressing any opposition to the bureaucracy's interests wherever such opposition appeared. Orwell's honest account of the Spanish events also conflicted with the reigning perceptions amongst large layers of the revolutionary-minded working class.

Orwell gave many accounts of his difficulties at the time. In a letter to Reyner Happenstall, written on July 31 1937, after describing the wave of arrests, tortures and repression being carried out in Spain of anybody suspected of Trotskyism, he says: "Meanwhile it is impossible to get a word about this mentioned in the English press... I had a most amusing time with the *New Statesman* [a liberal/reformist newspaper] about it. As soon as I got out of Spain I wired from France asking if they would like an article and of course they said yes, but when they saw my article was on the suppression of the POUM they said they couldn't print it. To sugar the pill they sent me to review a very good book, which appeared recently, *The Spanish Cockpit*, which blows the gaff pretty well on what has been happening. But once again when they saw my review they couldn't print it as it was 'against editorial policy', but they actually offered to pay for the review all

the same—practically hush-money.”

The eventual publication of his book in 1938, after a struggle to even find a publisher, won Orwell nothing but contempt and vilification on the part of the Communist Party and its fellow travellers and he was ostracised by much of the left wing intelligentsia. Suffice is to say that in Orwell’s lifetime the book sold only about 50 copies a year.

Homage to Catalonia is therefore a seminal text and remains an excellent introduction to the Spanish events and the strangling of the revolution by Stalinism. But Orwell could not elaborate a revolutionary alternative to Stalinism and eventually the domination of the workers’ movement by the bureaucracy, combined with the victories this gave fascism, led him to extreme forms of political demoralization as is seen in his book *1984*. He ended up supporting the democratic imperialist powers in the Second World War.

However, his political evolution was not inevitable. When he arrived in Spain to report on the war he was carrying ILP credentials and found himself fighting alongside its sister party, the POUM. His political education was therefore the responsibility of centrist currents that were actively opposed to Trotsky’s struggle to construct a new revolutionary international in conflict with the Stalinised Third International, and who politically disarmed the most advanced workers in the face of twin dangers of fascism and Stalinism through their support for the popular front in Spain.

Trotsky paid great attention to the development of various centrist currents such as the ILP and the POUM, which attracted the support of those repelled by Stalinism and reformism, but which objectively acted as an obstacle to the adoption of a genuinely revolutionary Marxist programme. Describing the immensely favourable conditions for revolution that existed in Spain, where the masses had set up militias and workers’ committees—the stronghold of their future rule over society—he castigated the POUM:

“Yet the POUM, while criticising the old parties, subordinated itself to them in all fundamental questions. It participated in the “Popular” election block; entered the government that liquidated workers’ committees; engaged in a struggle to reconstitute this governmental coalition; capitulated time and again to the Anarchist leadership; conducted, in connection with this, a false trade union policy; and took a vacillating and non revolutionary attitude towards the May 1937 uprising.”

In *The lessons of Spain—the last warning*, Trotsky repeats: “The modern history of bourgeois society is filled with all sorts of Popular Fronts, i.e. the most diverse political combinations for the deception of the toilers.... There can be no greater crime than coalition with the bourgeoisie in a period of socialist revolution.”

Trotsky and the Fourth International insisted that what was necessary in Spain was a revolutionary programme, a revolutionary party and a revolutionary leadership. It is doubtful that Orwell ever fully understood this. At the time he wrote *Homage to Catalonia*, he would make references to the political nature of the civil war and the need for programme. By 1942, in an essay entitled *Looking back on the Spanish Civil War*, Orwell states: “The Trotskyist thesis that the war could have been won if

the revolution had not been sabotaged was probably false. To nationalise factories, demolish churches, and issue revolutionary manifestos would not have made the armies more efficient. The Fascists won because they were the stronger; they had modern arms and the others hadn’t. No political strategy could offset that.”

This is the opposite of Trotsky’s standpoint. In the middle of the civil war he wrote:

“A civil war is waged, as everybody knows, not only with military but also with political weapons. From a purely military point of view, the Spanish Revolution is much weaker than its enemy. Its strength lies in its ability to arouse the great masses to action. It can even take the army (of Franco) away from its reactionary officers. To accomplish this it is only necessary seriously and courageously to advance the programme of the socialist revolution.”

“It is necessary to proclaim that, from now on, the land, the factories, and shops will pass from the capitalists into the hands of the people. It is necessary to move at once toward the realisation of this programme in those provinces where the workers are in power. The fascist army could not resist the influence of such a programme: the soldiers would tie their officers hand and foot and hand them over to the nearest headquarters of the workers’ militia. But the bourgeois ministers (republican) cannot accept such a programme. Curbing the social revolution, they compel the workers and peasants to spill ten times as much of their own blood in the civil war.”

Orwell’s subsequent development does not distract from the importance of *Homage to Catalonia*, but it does help to explain the significance of the struggle that was conducted by the Fourth International to show that there was an alternative to Stalinism.

For a deeper understanding of the Civil War and Revolution in Spain, the revolutionary perspective, the role of the different political organisations and parties and the counterrevolutionary policies of Stalinism, Trotsky’s writings on Spain gathered in the book *The Spanish Revolution—1931-39* (Pathfinder Press) and Felix Morrow’s *Revolution and Counterrevolution in Spain* (New Park Publications) are essential reading.

Fraternally,
Vicky Short



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