

A new dramatization of Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*

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A new play based on George Orwell's book *Homage to Catalonia* ended its international run in Barcelona on June 14. The drama's theme was one which has rarely if ever been dealt with on stage—the revolutionary nature of the struggle of the Spanish working class in 1936-37 and the role of international Stalinism in suppressing it.

Homage to Catalonia was a European co-production that opened at the West Yorkshire Playhouse in Leeds on March 15. From there it went first to MC93 Bobigny in Paris then to Northern Stage in Newcastle and finally to the Teatre Romea in Barcelona.

Orwell's book *Homage to Catalonia* is an account of his experiences fighting in the Spanish Civil War between December 1936 and July 1937. He spent the whole of that time in Catalonia, the most industrialised area in Spain, which was the centre of the revolutionary struggles of the Spanish working class.

Before Orwell left England for Spain he contacted the British Communist Party (CP) for advice about his travel arrangements. The Civil War had been raging for six months and his plan was to write articles for the *New Statesman* magazine. Harry Pollitt, leader of the CP, asked him to join the International Brigade. When Orwell refused, saying that first he wanted to see the situation in Spain for himself, Pollitt concluded that he was politically unreliable and refused to help.

Orwell then asked the centrist Independent Labour Party (ILP) for assistance and Fenner Brockway gave him letters of introduction to the ILP representative in Barcelona. The writer travelled with the ILP contingent to Catalonia, arriving in Barcelona on December 26, 1936.

From the beginning of the civil war the working class of Catalonia had taken the initiative in the struggle against Franco's fascist forces, providing an example that was followed in Madrid, Valencia and other towns and cities all over the country. In his book *Revolution and Counter-revolution in Spain*, Felix Morrow describes how, in the face of government refusal to provide them with arms, workers had attacked the barracks almost with their bare hands. They managed to obtain rifles and explosives and within days Barcelona was under their control.

Throughout Catalonia, under the leadership of the CNT (the Anarchist trades unions) and the POUM (Partido Obrero de Unificación), the working class controlled almost every aspect of social life. Morrow explains that for a short period a situation of dual power existed.

Orwell describes the atmosphere in Barcelona when he arrived there and found "the revolution was in full swing." He recognised immediately that this was a "state of affairs worth fighting for.... Above all, there was a belief in the revolution and the future, a feeling of having suddenly emerged into an era of equality and freedom..."

"I was breathing the air of equality, and I was simple enough to imagine that it existed all over Spain. I did not realize that more or less by chance I was isolated among the most revolutionary section of the Spanish working class."

He joined the militia almost immediately, "because at that time and in that atmosphere it seemed the only conceivable thing to do." For the next

six months he fought with the POUM militia on the Aragon front, not moving out of the trenches for 115 days.

When he returned on leave to Barcelona on April 26, 1937, he found that everything had changed. The atmosphere of equality had gone and "the normal division of society into rich and poor, upper class and lower class, was reasserting itself." He describes his feelings of foreboding: "The danger was quite simple and intelligible. It was the antagonism between those who wished the revolution to go forward and those who wished to check or prevent it—ultimately between the Anarchists and the Communists."

The policy of the Stalinists in Spain—as it was throughout Europe and internationally—was determined by the interests of the bureaucracy in the Soviet Union. They had adopted the narrow nationalist policy of "Socialism in One Country" and had completely abandoned the interests of the international working class. They viewed any independent workers' struggle as an obstacle to their attempt to build alliances with the "democratic" imperialists of Britain and France. In *The Spanish Revolution (1931-1939)* Trotsky points out that "The Soviet government played the role of hangman toward the revolutionary Spanish workers, in order to demonstrate its trustworthiness to London and Paris."

So from the beginning of the war the Stalinists defended the right to rule of the Spanish bourgeoisie. They were determined to pre-empt any development towards revolution. Their immediate task was to smash the independent strength of the working class, to destroy the POUM and the CNT, disarm the workers and disband the militias and they were prepared to use any method to achieve this.

The Russian GPU operated with impunity throughout the whole country. They spread rumours that the POUM and the CNT were infiltrated by fascist agents provocateurs and accused both organisations of sabotaging the war. They said the POUM was allied to the fascists and the CNT was "objectively fascist."

Spanish Communist Party secretary Jose Diaz wrote, "Our principal enemies are the Fascists. However, these not only include the Fascists themselves, but also the agents who work for them.... Some call themselves Trotskyites.... If everyone knows this, if the government knows it, why doesn't it treat them like Fascists and exterminate them pitilessly?"

This was the period of the Moscow Trials when thousands of Trotskyists, and others who opposed the bureaucracy in Russia, were hunted down, imprisoned and murdered. On December 19, 1936, the official Russian CP newspaper *Pravda* announced, "In Catalonia the elimination of Trotskyites and Anarcho-Syndicalists has begun. It will be carried out with the same energy as it was carried out in the Soviet Union."

These were no idle threats. On May 3, 1937, the Stalinist-controlled Assault Guards attacked the Barcelona Telephone Exchange, which was in the hands of the Anarchists.

Confronting the heavily armed Assault Guards, thousands of workers

turned out on the streets to build and man the barricades. A general strike was called throughout the city. It was, for a brief period, an insurrectionary situation in which Orwell participated.

He had arrived on leave in Barcelona a few days before the Stalinists' attack. Up to this point he had had some sympathy with the tactical line advocated by the CP: "The war first, the revolution afterwards." But his experiences during the May Days in Barcelona completely changed his ideas. He became convinced that the war against Franco could only be won through the revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist system.

During the fighting the Anarchist parliamentary group tried to negotiate a truce and POUM ordered that their headquarters be defended, but otherwise there was to be no firing. The leadership of both organisations attempted to avoid an outright confrontation. On May 8, the Anarchist workers finally obeyed the appeal by their leaders to take down the barricades and disperse. A truce was arranged between the POUM, the CNT and the police and civil authorities. By this time there were 400 dead and over 1,000 wounded. Immediately the CP demanded that the Republican government draft reinforcements into the city.

Orwell returned to the front, where on May 20 he was seriously wounded when a bullet went "clean through his neck," missing his carotid artery by only a millimetre. His right arm was temporarily paralysed and he was unable to speak above a whisper. He was no longer fit for combat.

Within days of the fighting in Barcelona, a Communist minister was put in charge of internal order and the Assault Guards were roaming the streets of the city, arresting members of the militia and throwing them into jail. Orwell describes the mood there when he returned for a second time—"an atmosphere of suspicion, fear, uncertainty and veiled hatred.... The Stalinists were in the saddle, and therefore it was a matter of course that every 'Trotskyist' was in danger." There were mass arrests of members of the POUM militia, and Orwell describes how even wounded militiamen were dragged out of hospital by the police.

On June 15, the CP pushed a bill through the central government in Valencia outlawing the POUM and charging its leaders with being paid agents of Franco. The international Stalinist press ran screaming headlines declaring: "Spanish Trotskyists Plot with Franco."

Forty members of the POUM central committee were arrested. Its leader, Andreas Nin, was arrested and tortured and by June 21 he was dead. Morrow records that the Stalinists claimed that he went "missing" having "fled towards fascist lines."

Anyone who opposed the Soviet bureaucracy was identified by the GPU as a "Trotskyist." In fact, the POUM had no connection with the Fourth International. Nin had distanced himself from the Left Opposition from 1933 and moved towards the British ILP.

In an interview on February 19, 1937, Trotsky pointed out: "This party is not 'Trotskyite.' I have criticized its policies on many occasions, despite my warm sympathy for the heroism with which the members of [the POUM], above all the youth, struggle at the front."

In February 1936 the POUM had formed an electoral bloc on a Popular Front programme with other left parties, including the Catalan nationalists and the CP. Trotsky criticised the POUM leadership in the strongest terms for its opportunism.

Nin paid no attention to Trotsky's dire warnings and in September of the same year the POUM entered the Popular Front government of the "Generalidad" of Catalonia, only to be expelled three months later. One of the first decisions of the new cabinet of the Generalidad was to abolish all the revolutionary committees that had been set up at the beginning of the war.

The leadership of the POUM had refused to pose the question of which class should rule—the bourgeoisie or the proletariat—and for that they paid a heavy price.

Nevertheless, in a letter written on August 8 1937, Trotsky defended Nin from the vilification of the Stalinists. He wrote, "He tried to defend

the independence of the Spanish proletariat from the diplomatic machinations and intrigues of the clique that holds power in Moscow. He did not want the POUM to become a tool in the hands of Stalin. He refused to cooperate with the GPU against the interests of the Spanish people. This was his only crime. And for this crime he paid with his life."

The suppression of the POUM, in June 1937, was kept out of the Barcelona papers for days to conceal the news from the militia fighting on the Aragon front. Orwell explains: "Every POUM militia man who came down the line at this period had the choice of going straight into hiding or into jail."

Orwell himself went underground. He explains, "I was not guilty of any definite act, but I was guilty of 'Trotskyism.' The fact that I had served in the POUM militia was quite enough to get me into prison."

He realised his life was threatened by the GPU and he would have to leave Spain. Before he did so he spent several days, at great personal risk, visiting the British Consulate in an attempt to secure the release from prison of his friend George Kopp.

On June 23, accompanied by his wife, who had been working as a secretary for the POUM in Barcelona, he took the train to France. They avoided arrest by passing themselves off as prosperous English tourists. He was forced, for the sake of security, to leave all his notebooks behind.

Orwell's intention was to write a book, telling the truth about his experiences in Spain. He had already contacted his publisher, Victor Gollancz, from Spain, saying, "I hope I shall get a chance to write the truth about what I have seen.... I hope to have a book ready for you about the beginning of next year." But when Gollancz realised Orwell had witnessed the May events, he replied that he did not think he would be able to publish it. Orwell had been vilified in the *Daily Worker* and Gollancz did not want to upset Pollitt.

Following the Stalinists' lead, the British "liberal" *News Chronicle* reported that the May Days were a frustrated "putsch" by the "Trotskyist POUM." The article ended: "Barcelona, the first city of Spain, was plunged into bloodshed by *agents provocateurs* using this subversive organisation."

Orwell took up his pen to denounce these lies. In one article—*Spilling the Spanish Beans*—he wrote, "It is the left-wing papers, the *News Chronicle* and the *Daily Worker*, with their far subtler methods of distortion, that have prevented the British public from grasping the real nature of the struggle.

"The fact which these papers have so carefully obscured is that the Spanish Government ... is far more afraid of the revolution than of the Fascists.

"When I left Barcelona in late June the jails were bulging.... But the point to notice is that the people who are in prison now are not Fascists but revolutionaries; they are there not because their opinions are too much to the Right, but because they are too much to the Left. And the people responsible for putting them there are those dreadful revolutionaries—the Communists."

He comments further, "It may be, also, that the spectacle of a genuine revolution in Spain would rouse unwanted echoes in Russia," and continues, "The real struggle in Spain, on the Government side, has been between revolution and counterrevolution. The Government, though anxious enough to avoid being beaten by Franco, has been even more anxious to undo the revolutionary changes with which the outbreak of the war was accompanied..."

"In Spain, everyone whose opinions are to the Left of the Communist Party is sooner or later discovered to be a Trotskyist, or at least, a traitor..."

"In England, in spite of the intense interest the Spanish war has aroused, there are very few people who have even heard of the enormous struggle that is going on behind the Government lines. Of course, this is no accident. There has been quite a deliberate conspiracy to prevent the Spanish situation from being understood."

Orwell's efforts to tell the truth about the Spanish situation before the British people were frustrated at every turn. Time after time his articles and book reviews were rejected by the liberal and left-wing press for being "too controversial" or likely to "cause trouble."

In his book, *Homage to Catalonia*, Orwell not only recounts his own experiences in Spain, he also presents his understanding of the political situation there and all the organisations involved. He writes honestly and directly, expressing his doubts, his confusion and his struggle to understand the meaning of the world historic events he was witnessing.

The book was finally published on April 25, 1938, and it received scathing reviews. Orwell was portrayed as a defender of Trotskyists and Anarchists and consequently a traitor to the Republican cause. Fifteen hundred copies were printed and some were still unsold when Orwell died 12 years later.

All the history, which Orwell so vividly recounts, is virtually unknown in Spain today. It has been buried, first during 35 years of fascist rule and later because of the insistence of "left"- and right-wing governments alike to "forget the past." This is why it is so important that this whole period has been opened up by the dramatisation of *Homage to Catalonia*.

The production of *Homage to Catalonia* involved five Catalan actors and five actors from Northern Stage in Newcastle. The book's adaptors were Spanish playwright Pablo Ley and English dramatist Allan Baker and the director was Josep Galindo of Spain.

At a seminar held during the play's run in Leeds, Josep Galindo explained that as rehearsals progressed they found themselves diving deeper and deeper into the book for inspiration: "We wanted to make the book explode into an imaginary world that the audience was opened up to."

The play did not unfold in a conventional way through the interaction and conflict of characters. Rather the characters were "demonstrating" the narrative. Essentially they were saying, "Yes these are the words of Orwell, this is Orwell's story, but I am making them my own." They utilised different acting styles as appropriate, from the naturalism of a Geordie volunteer to the highly stylised sneering manner of the GPU agent.

Most of the key events from the book were dealt with—Orwell's arrival at the Lenin Barracks with its atmosphere of equality and freedom, the sparse military training, the lack of arms, life on the front line, the fighting, Orwell's wounding, the May Days in Barcelona, the suppression of the POUM, the arrest of George Kopp and Orwell's attempt to free him and finally Orwell's escape with his wife into France.

The Stalinists' attack on anyone deemed to be a Trotskyist was clearly brought out throughout the play. At one point a character read out a Stalinist newspaper report: "The Italian and German Agents who flocked to Barcelona, ostensibly to 'prepare' the notorious Fourth International Congress, had an important task to carry out.... Their task was to prepare—in collaboration with local Trotskyists—a situation of disorder and bloodshed so that Hitler and Mussolini could claim that it was impossible 'to safeguard shipping' and there was no alternative but 'to land troops at Barcelona.'"

At another point a voice from the radio said: "Following the arrest of leading Trotskyists both in Barcelona and elsewhere significant details of one of the most appalling examples of espionage and the class treachery of the Trotskyists came to light. Documents in the hands of the police as well as more than 200 voluntary confessions by those detained reveal that Trotskyist leaders in the POUM maintained clandestine radio contact with Franco as well as with Berlin and, acting with other clandestine organizations in Madrid..."

Later a GPU report on Orwell and his wife of July 1937 was projected on the screen: "It is clear from their correspondence that they are confirmed Trotskyists. They belong to the ILP of England.... They must be considered as liaison officers of the ILP with the POUM..."

In an interview with *Homage* WSWS [Catalonia] An interview with writer Pablo Ley and director Josep Galindo", Pablo Ley explained to me that the play's two acts correspond with two parts of the book. He said, "The first part is about the war, and we dealt with that from the point of view of a dream because it showed the possibility of everything, that the world was opening up. And for us the second part is the end of the dream when the nightmare begins—the end of hope and the beginning of the persecution, the fall of ideals, the restoration of bourgeois values."

He explained that the production had many lines—"the images line, the objects line, the characters line and the text line. That is not the most important, because the most important thing is that we put all these lines together and of course integrate them with the music."

He said they realised that the play was very demanding because there was so much going on. And that is certainly true. The audience had to work hard to follow what was happening with the dialogue flowing in English and Catalan and the translations flashed up on a screen behind.

The play presented a kaleidoscope of images and impressions—of the chaos, of the sights and sounds of war, of the heroism, the confusion, the conviction and determination.

Music was an integral part of the production—the revolutionary songs, the menacing sound of a single note played repeatedly on a tinny old piano in the background, the melancholy notes of a saxophone as if heard through an open window, the strident noise of a rock band played by the whole cast to simulate the chaos and cacophony of the battle.

Great use was also made of documentary film footage. A huge screen dominated the stage with constantly changing images, complementing or contrasting with what was going on in the play. The research for the footage was an integral part of the preparation of the production.

The images began with a train drawing into Barcelona station and crowds waving to the newly arrived volunteers, with the sights and sounds crowding in, as they must have done for Orwell himself, the joyful faces of the workers, then the marching of the young fighters in training for the front and finally the reality of the battle.

The second act dealt with the May Days and their aftermath and Orwell's escape from Spain. It used direct quotes from the book more extensively than the first and brought out clearly that the Spanish Civil War was in essence a struggle between revolution and counterrevolution. At one point in the play Orwell warned the GPU agent, "What you did to the POUM will cost you the war."

In this act there was also less concentration on the visuals, but the ones that were used had an overwhelming impact—the bombing of Guernica, with bodies being retrieved from the wreckage, a traumatised woman sitting outside the ruins of what was once her home, and the columns of refugees carrying their few possessions as they fled across the Pyrenees into France. This last sequence was accompanied by the heartrending strains of Pablo Casals playing a Spanish folk song on the cello.

The play ended with Orwell standing on an empty stage and speaking the final passage of the book. It is directed against the complacency of the English middle class, for whom "earthquakes in Japan, famines in China and revolutions in Mexico" have no meaning, and for whom "the industrial towns were far away, a smudge of smoke and misery hidden by the curve of the earth's surface." Orwell warns of the "deep, deep sleep of England, from which I sometimes fear we shall never wake till we are jerked out of it by the roar of bombs." As the lines were delivered with simplicity and directness, a blurred image of the face of Adolf Hitler emerged on the screen.

The second act was far more powerful than the first. In the first act there were several attempts to introduce humour, perhaps to provide some release of tension. Most of the episodes were based on some passing remark in the book, and all of them were "unfunny" and somehow produced a jarring note.

I puzzled over why dialogue, which was so alien to the whole spirit of the play, had been introduced. But I think a remark made in Pablo Ley's interview provides a clue. Despite the playwright's commitment to provide an honest interpretation of Orwell's story, in which he largely succeeded, there was nevertheless a question mark over what he described as "Orwell's dream."

Ley said, "We try to show the utopia that Orwell found in Barcelona. He looked around, he saw the people, he saw everything and it seemed equality was possible..."

"That was his hope.... I wasn't there, so we will never know. It is not clear to what extent he was projecting his ideal. It is clear that it was not real because it collapsed and Barcelona suddenly seemed another thing."

This remark expresses unresolved contradictions in Ley's own ideas. He has written a play which clearly shows that the conflict in the Spanish Civil War was between revolution and counterrevolution. And yet he is unsure of whether the revolution was a real possibility. This was not openly stated in the play, but it was expressed in the jokes, which seemed to say, "Was it really as good as Orwell describes?" and this detracted from the impact of what was undoubtedly a very powerful production.

Ley said in his interview, "We want [the audience] to come and think a little.... We don't want to make beautiful theatre. We want to explain things. When you are interested in something, you read and you find many things you didn't know before. Then you want to explain to others.... You can tell beautiful stories if you like, but stories that are well explained, that is the most beautiful thing."

I am sure that this production has provoked a great deal of thought not only about the events in Spain in the 1930s, but the problems of leadership that face the Spanish and international working class today.

Sources for this article: George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (Penguin Books); George Orwell, *Orwell in Spain* (Penguin Classics); George Orwell, *Essays* (Penguin Classics); Leon Trotsky, *The Spanish Revolution* (Pathfinder Press); Felix Morrow, *Revolution and Counter-revolution in Spain* (New Park Publications).



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