

# The New Criterion

Features June 2021

## All is Orwell

by Gerald Frost

*On George Orwell in Spain.*

By my unscientific count, more words have been written about George Orwell than any other writer in the English language besides Dickens and Shakespeare. But since the flow of publications about Orwell continues unabated, it may only be a matter of time before he overtakes both. To date, there are at least five biographies—although Orwell requested that none should be written—as well as memoirs, letters, essays, and academic studies. There is much more to come. D. J. Taylor, the author of *Orwell: The Life*, which won the Whitbread prize for biography in 2003 and is rightly regarded as the best of the bunch, has been commissioned by Constable to write what is described as a “completely fresh” second biography to appear in 2023. The publisher, one of several who plan to take advantage of the ending of copyright protection on Orwell’s published writings on January 1 this year, also plans to bring out new editions of Orwell’s five novels in the coming months.

How to account for the enduring interest in Orwell’s life and work? Quite obviously, part of the explanation is that, quite rarely, he has admirers on both the right and left of the political spectrum and that he wrote two of the most influential novels of the twentieth century, containing words and phrases—“Big Brother,” “Newspeak,” “Doublethink,” “Memory hole,” etc.—that have entered the political lexicon, reflecting and shaping the anxieties and fears of his own and subsequent generations. But I do not think this gets to the heart of the matter. Nor does Orwell’s own estimation of his strengths—which he described as the capacity to write clearly combined with an unusual ability to face up to unpalatable truths—provide a satisfactory explanation. There is no doubting the clarity and vigor of his prose, but when it comes to assessing his capacity to face up to grim truths, there is good reason to doubt Orwell’s claims to his having looked reality unflinchingly in the eye and told it like it was. Orwell’s friend Malcolm Muggeridge believed that while Orwell displayed “an almost painful honesty,” his grasp of what was going on in the world was often more than a little tenuous.

It is the contradictions in Orwell's character that provide the key to understanding the enduring fascination with his thought and work. His personality was too modest and austere to assert, as Walt Whitman did, "Do I contradict myself?/ Very well then I

contradict myself,/ (I am large, I contain multitudes)." But the contradictions abound, confirming Muggeridge's view that Orwell was not the unblinkered and straight-thinking observer he believed himself to be. Despite his strong moral sense, these contradictions also imply a degree of moral obtuseness and even confusion, and it is these which in large part explain our fascination with him.

The contradictions have frequently been noted: he was a socialist intellectual whose finest achievements included a mordant critique of the hypocrisy and double standards displayed by the socialist intellectuals of his day; a patriot who held most of his country's institutions in contempt; a passionate defender of historical truth who chose to write under an assumed name and who occasionally told lies; a self-styled champion of decency who backed causes that, had they prevailed, would have produced outcomes in which decency would have been difficult to discern; an atheist who decreed that his funeral should be conducted by the Church of England and that he should be buried in a rural parish churchyard. It is often the contradictions in an individual's character that give it distinction; in the case of Orwell, these were more marked and more numerous than in most, but it is not clear whether he was even aware of them. Yet it is these which explain why he is claimed by those on opposing sides—by socialists and libertarians, by conservatives as well as radicals, by patriots and internationally minded progressives. In a sense, he is up for grabs. All sorts of people can identify with him and claim him—or almost claim him—for their own and are keen, even desperate, to do so. The "almost" is important: many of his admirers feel that if only he had fully grasped the implications of the part of his work of which they happen to approve there would be no doubt about the matter. Admirers, including this one, are eager to read the latest interpretation of his thought in the forlorn hope that this will confirm that he really would have been on their side; it is a difficult habit to kick.

**T**he extent to which, to use a contemporary term, Orwell was conflicted is amply illustrated by his participation in the Spanish Civil War, an experience that shaped his political consciousness. Without it, he acknowledged, he would not have come to write *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. We have it on his own authority that the war defined his political outlook and that everything he wrote subsequently was written with the aim of fighting totalitarianism and of promoting democratic socialism.

Orwell had joined the *poum* (Workers' Party of Marxist Unification), rather than the International Brigades, because the Communists wouldn't have him. Orwell's Eton drawl had probably not impressed Harry Pollitt, the general secretary of the British Communist Party, who suspected,

---

## How to account for the enduring interest in Orwell's life and work?

perfectly correctly, that Orwell was likely to prove “politically unreliable” and that if he were to write about the war, he could not be relied upon to follow the party line. Pollitt therefore declined to provide the documentation that would have gotten Orwell across the Franco-Spanish border and into the International Brigades, abruptly ending their interview. Instead, Orwell traveled independently to Barcelona with a letter of introduction by the Independent Labour Party, who arranged for him to join the poum as a militiaman.

At the time, Orwell knew almost nothing of Spanish history, did not speak the language, and was largely ignorant of many aspects of the conflict in which he would come close to losing his life. His earlier experience as a colonial policeman in Burma, about which he felt guilty, had evidently produced a strong desire to be on the side of the oppressed, rather than that of the oppressor; the war offered the opportunity to atone for his sins as “an agent of imperialism,” which is how he had come to regard himself. He went to Spain in the belief that he would be supporting the working man and common decency (a favorite Orwell term) and did not regret having done so or subsequently doubt his reasons for having fought there.

---

**“It was the first time I had ever been in a town where the working class was in the saddle.”**

The seven days he spent in the Catalan capital before being sent to fight on the Aragon front strengthened his desire not merely to write about the war, but also to fight in it. “At that time and in that atmosphere it seemed the only conceivable thing to do.” He added:

“when one came straight from England the aspect of Barcelona was something startling and overwhelming. It was the first time I had ever been in a town where the working class was in the saddle.” Revolutionary posters were everywhere, private transport had been abolished, shops carried notices informing customers that they had been collectivized, many churches had been attacked or demolished. Waiters and shop assistants looked the customer in the eye: servility had been abolished. Almost Orwell’s first experience in Barcelona was to be told off by his hotel manager for insulting a porter by giving him a tip. Most extraordinarily, the bourgeoisie had almost entirely disappeared. Practically everyone, Orwell observed, wore rough working-class clothes or the uniform of the militia. He found the experience “queer and moving,” adding:

I recognized it immediately as a state of affairs worth fighting for. Also I believed that things were as they appeared and this was really a workers’ State and that the entire bourgeoisie had either fled, been killed, or voluntarily come over to the workers’ side.

Orwell’s attitude was undoubtedly colored by his obvious liking for Spain and the Spaniards; he recorded that he would “defy anyone” to mix with the Spanish working class and “not be struck by their essential decency; above all, their straightforwardness and generosity.” He added: “A Spaniard’s generosity, in the ordinary sense of the word, is almost embarrassing. If you ask him for a cigarette he will force the whole packet on you. And beyond this there is generosity in a deeper sense, a real largeness of spirit . . .”

At six feet three inches tall, the reserved old Etonian wearing jodhpurs, puttees, a woollen helmet, and boots so large that they had to be shipped out from England must have struck his comrades—many of them teenagers from the Barcelona slums—as a bizarre figure. But Orwell's physical courage and support for the Republican cause made him a popular figure: he recorded with apparent surprise and evident pleasure that after only a matter of weeks as a militiaman he was on Christian-name terms with as many as twenty of his fellow men-at-arms.

On arrival in Spain, he had sympathized with Communist aims in the belief that the party's soldiers would prosecute war more single-mindedly and ruthlessly than the Trotskyites, anarchists, and syndicalists whose aim was not just military victory against Franco but a full-scale social and political revolution.

Given Orwell's desire to fight for what he deemed to be the interest of the working man, it is understandable that he should have struck up warm relations with the militiamen of the *poum*. But it is doubtful whether he quite appreciated the absolutism which has shaped the Spanish character through history.

The "decency" of the Spanish machine gunner in giving you cigarettes or his coat on a freezing night in the trenches might well make you a friend, but such decency was of a particular Iberian character. The extreme nature of Spanish idealism was most evident among the anarchists with whom Orwell fought, but also found in syndicalist and revolutionary Marxists. As the historian John A. Crow recognized in *Spain: The Root and the Flower* (1963):

To the anarchist liberty meant freedom from state, church, and capitalist control, but it did not mean freedom of conscience. If perchance some good Spaniard wished to attend mass, or send his children to a religious school, or have a drink of whisky, or live in luxurious style or eat something besides local produce, or give his support to the idea of a stronger state, he was automatically one of the evil ones who would have to be liquidated in order that others might remain free. So stand him up against the wall, give him a cigarette and fire!

When Orwell returned to Barcelona after 118 days on the Aragon front looking like a scarecrow, dirty and unshaven, he found the city vastly changed: private vehicles had returned to the street, the revolutionary posters had largely disappeared, and the shops were no longer focused on the needs of the militias. He observed, rather sadly, that the normal divisions of society, between rich and poor, working class and middle class, were reasserting themselves: "The militia uniform and the blue overalls had almost disappeared; everyone seemed to be wearing the smart summer suits in which Spanish tailors specialize. Fat prosperous men, elegant women, and sleek cars were everywhere." Orwell now realized that the bourgeoisie had not disappeared or gone over to the other side, as he had naively supposed during his earlier visit; they had merely concealed their wealth and status for reasons of self-preservation. An almost reverse situation was now occurring. As the Spanish Communist Party increased hold over the government, prominent

---

Orwell's physical courage and support for the Republican cause made him a popular figure.

members of the pout found themselves at risk. Moscow was opposed to a full-scale revolution because it reasoned that this would damage the prospect of success in the war against Franco; it therefore sought to deny weapons to the pout and its allies and to discredit it by alleging that it was in the pay of the Fascists.

At this stage, Orwell might still have liked to have joined the International Brigades in the battle for Madrid, and a Communist friend offered to help make this possible. But Orwell, appalled by the cynicism of the Communist Party in seeking to preserve a bourgeois government and denouncing the anarchists and revolutionary socialists, decided to remain loyal to the pout. What galled Orwell most was the falsification of history: "I saw great battles reported where there had been no fighting, and complete silence where hundreds of men had been killed. I saw troops who had fought bravely denounced as cowards and traitors, and others who had never seen a shot fired hailed as the heroes of imaginary victories . . ."

His contempt for publications such as the *News Chronicle* and the *New Statesman* that uncritically accepted the Communist description of events was even greater than that for newspapers that backed Franco: "It is not a nice thing to see a Spanish boy of fifteen carried down the line on a stretcher, with a dazed white face looking out from the blankets, and to think of the sleek persons in London and Paris who are writing pamphlets to prove that this boy is a Fascist in disguise." He believed not merely that the truth about the conflict would never be known, but that objective truth itself had perished.

Shortly after his return to the Aragon front he was shot through the throat by a sniper's bullet. On discharge from the hospital, Orwell, suffering from a temporary loss of speech, returned to Barcelona, where the changes he had observed on his previous visit were even more pronounced. The best way of staying alive was to look like a member of the Catalan middle class. The smart clothes that would have formerly placed you in danger were now the key to survival. There is something comic about the idea of Orwell trying to look like a member of the middle class in order to remain at liberty. The embrace of his wife Eileen as he arrived at the Barcelona hotel where she was staying was accompanied by the words: "Get out!" She explained that her room had been searched and that Orwell was at risk of arrest and imprisonment.

---

Orwell, however, showed little interest in the details of anarchist thought.

Orwell, recognizing the dangers he now faced, slept on building sites or in churchyards while exploring a part of the city where he was unlikely to be spotted while making arrangements to return to England.

*Homage to Catalonia* was written immediately

on his return, while the war was still being fought, and is an attempt to make sense of his experiences. He had already concluded that talk of it being a "war for democracy" was "eyewash" and believed that the Nationalists would win unless Britain and France chose to provide military aid to the Republican cause, an outcome which he rightly judged to be unlikely. He also concluded

that in the event of a Republican victory, the Communists would run the show. This would be represented as a victory for the proletariat but in fact would represent the triumph of state capitalism. Orwell did not speculate on the likely consequences of a victory by the pout and its allies, but there is little reason to quarrel with Crow's judgment: "There is no doubt . . . that if the anarcho-syndicalists had come out on top after the war they would have introduced the worst conceivable kind of tyranny." In those circumstances, believing that one final purifying act of violence was necessary to bring about the end of violence and the transformation of society, the executioners might well have been as high-minded as it is possible for executioners to be—but their murderous zeal would have greatly exceeded that of Franco's death squads. Orwell, however, showed little interest in the details of anarchist thought (despite his description of himself as a "Tory Anarchist") and indeed little interest in political and economic theory of any kind.

Such considerations do not seem to have occurred to the saint of common decency as he produced his vivid and still highly readable account of his Catalan experiences, although he later acknowledged that he might have been "too kind" in his judgment of the pout.

Orwell was, however, as coruscating about those British journalists who accepted Moscow's interpretation of events as he was about those who supported Franco. But despite some saintly qualities—Christian virtues stripped of their piety, to paraphrase Christopher Hitchens—Orwell's behavior is not above question. Was he right to urge the Republicans to continue fighting and dying when there was no chance of success? Was he right to do so when it was plain that they would not get the classless society for which they fought, even if they won? Nor did Orwell reflect on the strategic implications for Western Europe and for the survival of representative government if the outcome was Communist government in Madrid with close links to fraternal parties in Moscow and Central Europe.

He had gone to Spain to fight for socialism and democracy. But he had fairly quickly concluded that dictatorship, of one sort or another, was inevitable. While for a few days in Barcelona in the spring of 1936 he breathed the intoxicating air of equality, he soon realized this was a state of affairs that could not last, and that in any event, he had been deceived by appearances. Why, then, did he determine that it was a fight worth fighting? Bravely, and at some cost to his health, he fought an unwinnable war for a unrealizable cause. But he still believed it was right to have fought and to have gone on encouraging others to continue doing so. Despite the mountains of evidence to the contrary, the issue, in his view, was simple: "Shall the common man be pushed back into the mud, or shall he not?"

This explanation, entirely bereft of historical and cultural context, is bound to strike anyone half familiar with the history of the conflict as simplistic in the extreme, even simple-minded. Orwell wrote: "I myself believe, perhaps on insufficient grounds, that the common man will win his fight sooner or later . . . . That was the real issue of the Spanish war . . . and perhaps of other wars to come."

He took for granted that the outcome would be some kind of socialism. Seven years later, in a review of Friedrich Hayek's *Road to Serfdom* in *The Observer*, which is curiously not mentioned in most of the Orwell biographies, he conceded that the negative part of Hayek's thesis was correct: "It cannot be said too often—at any rate it is not being said nearly often enough—that collectivism is not inherently democratic, but, on the contrary, gives to a tyrannical minority such powers as the Spanish Inquisitors never dreamed of." For good measure, he added: "Collectivism leads to concentration camps, leader worship, and war." Well, that would seem to be as unambiguous as you could wish for.

But Orwell's review also dealt with a book by the Soviet sympathizer and left-wing Labour MP Konni Zilliacus, who blamed imperialism and capitalism for the two world wars and much else. Orwell had no difficulty in agreeing with Zilliacus that capitalism led to the creation of monopolies (Orwell did not seem to mind state monopolies), to food lines, and to war. It was a depressing thing: both writers were probably right. Then, equally typically: "There is no way out of this unless a planned economy can be combined with the freedom of the intellect, which can only happen if the concept of right and wrong is restored to politics." Yet only a sentence earlier he had endorsed Hayek's denunciation of central economic planning, which allowed no such possibility. When it came to recognizing unpalatable truths, it seems that Orwell had as much difficulty as the next man.

Such unresolved contradictions permeate Orwell's thought and writing: they explain why he retains admirers on different sides of the political spectrum. We go on reading about him in the hope that these can somehow be resolved in a way that would finally put him irrevocably on our side; the fact that this can never be achieved only increases our desire for more. Orwell's reputation as a moral giant survives, but the interest in him would surely not have survived if his courage in grappling with the moral and political complexities of his age had not been combined with a capacity to grasp the wrong end of the stick and hang on with great tenacity.

---

**Gerald Frost** is a London-based author and journalist.

This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 39 Number 10, on page 17

Copyright © 2024 The New Criterion | [www.newcriterion.com](http://www.newcriterion.com)

<https://newcriterion.com/issues/2021/6/all-is-orwell>