

## Homage to Catalonia

*G.Orwell*

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It takes a thousand bullets to kill a man in war, Orwell muses, observing that at the rate of his discharges it will take him twenty years before he kills his first Fascist. The enemy is the Fascist and Orwell has no problems with that, if he had he would not have been able to serve in the front. He notes when for the first time in his life he deliberately aims at a human being with the intention of killing, that he feels nothing in particular. I believe it is probably far more of an ordeal to kill a large animal than a human being. The human being is fragile, he slumps and dies, while an animal is far more physically vital, and the slow and anguished ebbing away of its life is a far more traumatic experience for the victim as well as the perpetrator to suffer and to watch. In fact this has been admirably expressed by Orwell himself in his short story about shooting an Elephant. To kill is a question of license, and once the social contract has been agreed on, sniping away is no big deal, especially if the distance is far and the target abstract and anonymous, say as a Fascist. Only once during his time at the front, does the Fascist acquire a human identity, that is when he sees one running half-dressed keeping up his pants with both his hands. Orwell finds himself incapable of shooting.

As we all know, the Spanish War was a defining moment for the generation between the wars, when the forces of Evil and Good clashed, and as such it attracted many a left-leaning intellectual, who saw the Republican resistance as a crucial opportunity to turn back the tide of Fascism that had inundated much of Continental Europe in the last fifteen years. Most of those were content of only remaining sympathetic observers, war-tourists in fact, a few actually choose to serve in active duty, not seldom coming to physical grief and dying as a result. The Homage of Catalonia is written in 'media res' as a personal report of his experience as a volunteer in the militia. It aims both at to give an accurate and unsentimental picture of what warfare really entails, and to provide a clear political analysis of the issues which clashed so confusedly. It is written while the war is still going on, and its outcome not entirely fixed. Orwell makes clear that his position is that of a partisan, that his actual experiences are limited as are the facts on which he can personally draw. He warns the reader not to take him, or any account of the Spanish Civil War on faith, because any report is liable to be distorted and filled with mistakes and suffering from a narrow perspective. Yet, limited as his direct experiences may be, they are nevertheless sufficient to contradict some of the egregious claims that has been made by various political factions and reported and embellished in the news media. In fact the disillusion he was to experience had a momentous effect on his political and philosophical thinking, and one can directly trace his anti-totalitarian message in his '1984' to the conclusions he was able to draw from his war time experience in Spain, the most fundamental of which being the existentialist issue of historical truth. In the past, Orwell writes in the essay he later wrote looking back on the war, there was at least the consensus that history could be written objectively in principle, that there were certain indisputable

facts on which everyone agreed, regardless of ideological perspectives, and which could form the basis for discussion and communication. But with the 20th century came the idea that not only the future was under the influence of human action, but also that the past could be altered to serve the interests which were prevalent at the moment. This was an idea that horrified him to his core, reflecting that truth as such is more fundamental after all than morality, in fact without truth there can be no morality at all.

The book is journalistic reportage, written for the contemporary scene, and as such it is a collage of personal reminiscences and political analysis. Orwell was never a natural writer, although he harboured a longstanding ambition to become one. His first attempts were those of poetry and drama marred by a fashionable tendency of writing purple, but the times in which he came of age, diverted him from such pursuits, and eventually allowed him to find an authentic voice, namely a voice of limpid factuality. His novels tend to be awkward and stilted, his political writings on the contrary paragons of lucidity, sometimes reminiscent in their didactic touch of those of Bertrand Russell, without the latter's haughtiness. Thus the theme of the Spanish Civil War allows Orwell to be at his best.

Orwell was at the front but saw very little action. War is sometimes characterized by long stretches of boredom interrupted by moments of pure terror. Orwell had both, but predominantly of the former. War means above all cold and dirt and a lack of sleep (and tobacco). As noted initially it takes a thousand bullets to kill a combatant, thus every combatant gets plenty of opportunity to getting used to be under fire. Being at the front under constant tension, means longing for its relief, i.e. action, even if it could spell your death. Orwell saw some. Confusing and ultimately without any significance. It is all unsentimentally and factually described, without any sugaring of heroism, along with Orwells descriptions of the slow changing of the seasons and the vegetation. His career came to an abrupt end, which is not entirely unusual to those engaged in warfare. A stray bullet hit him in his throat, and the detailed description of this belongs to the most interesting ones in the book, and actually the only one I clearly recall when rereading the book after more than thirty years. I in particular remember the relief Orwell found in the growing pain, arguing that when dying your bodily sensations tend to get muted rather than revived. The bullet hit his throat going clean out of his neck, but gave no pain. When you are seriously hit there is little if any pain, as probably many readers can testify. His wound took him away on a stretcher, then onto an ambulance and a succession of harrowing transports as well as visits to hospitals. Shortly thereafter he was discharged and dodging the authorities he was able posing as a wealthy tourist to escape Spain, where he was in immediate danger of imprisonment.

The overarching story of the Civil War is the resistance to Franco, but there are also side stories to it, which still seventy years after, are not generally known. To understand those one must keep in mind that the left has always been divided, and that the rivalries between different factions have often been far more bitter than those directed against a common foe. Marx and Communism is not the only road to Socialism, the legacy of the anarchist Bakunin had a very strong hold in Spain, a legacy expressed by powerful trade unions rather than elite party cadres. When Orwell first arrived in Barcelona in late December 1936, less than six months after the start of the War, he was enthralled by the

revolutionary atmosphere of the city. It was a city where the workers were in control. Tipping was forbidden, there was total egalitarianism, no scraping and bowing, but a new language of social intercourse. The land around was tilled collectively, and the industrial plants were under the control of their workers. And in the militia everybody, private or officer, had the same pay, and obedience to orders (which is an inescapable fact of any military campaign) were based on common understanding not on coercion and fear of punishment<sup>1</sup>. When Orwell returned at the end of April things had changed a lot, just as revolutionary fever had cooled down from the previous July to December. Smart clothes were once again apparent on the streets, and class-distinctions revived. Soon there were going to be street-fighting and barricades. Orwell found himself caught up in it all, sitting on guard on a roof for a few days. This being the result of tension between the Anarchists as represented by their syndicated union CTN and its political sympathisers POUM and the Communists politically represented by PSUC. The POUM was a small party and hence a natural thing to attack with impunity. Things cooled down, the Communists made political advances, and then the POUM was outlawed as a Trotskyist organization, in fact a Fifth Column and being in the pay of the Fascists. The allegations were absurd, and would later be acknowledged to be so by the more and more enfeebled Government, but that was not the point. Thousands and thousands of members and suspected sympathizers were thrown in jail, either to be immediately and brutally tortured and liquidated, as was their leader Nin, or allowed to slowly languish. It also endangered Orwell himself as having been part of the POUM militia<sup>2</sup>.

The political analysis of Orwell was that the Communists were opposed to the Revolution, that they allied themselves with the liberals and the capitalists of the Republic, claiming that the major thing was the war against Franco to which everything else was to be subjected, the latter being, according to the early Orwell, very reasonable. While the anarchist argued that without the Revolution resistance would be pointless, because it would only be fighting for a different version of Fascism. The Communism, in their unholy alliances, carried the day, in the process vilifying their political adversaries beyond any reasonable measure. Orwell noted that the most virulent propaganda was only expressed far from the front, at the actual front a far more fraternal relation existed between the politically warring factions. It is undeniable that the internal feud and the subsequent persecution, which seriously interfered with the actual mounting of the war, as key officers were thrown into jail, did weaken the Republic resistance<sup>3</sup>; but with hindsight it probably did not significantly change the final collapse, apart possibly from its timing.

It is tempting to engage in counterfactual speculation. What if the Revolution had been allowed to continue? On the Left it is fashionable to speak about the internal contradictions of Capitalism, one may also on the Right make perhaps an even stronger case for the inherent contradictions in the proletarian movement. That heady revolutionary atmosphere which so delighted Orwell, how long would it have been able to continue?

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<sup>1</sup> Yet when the going is bad there is always the temptation of desertion which is usually treated brutally independent upon the social nature of the arm

<sup>2</sup> Orwell was actually never a member of that party, although later when it came under attack, he rather wished he had joined

<sup>3</sup> And if one is cynical enough one may speculate that this was the ultimate ambition of Stalin

There were special circumstances, the excitement of resistance, but special circumstances are not in the nature of prevailing. Taking a longer view, one must admit that there is a large difference between a traditional proletariat, underfed, oppressed and marginalized, and a modern western one, materially well cushioned. The success of the western well-fare states (aided by private capitalism?) has made the idea of an exploited and starving mass population obsolete<sup>4</sup>. One may still talk about exploitation of course and still incite indignation, but that in a far more abstract sense, more inspired by sentimentality than practical urgency. Orwell lived long enough to have most of his youthful socialist enthusiasm compromised, but not really long enough to experience western mass affluence of the postwar decades. It would have been very interesting to learn about his reactions to it. He claimed over and over again that the point of Socialism was only to give to everyone a minimum of material comfort and opportunity. And agreeing with Brecht that although the demands of the spirit are more important to satisfy than those of the flesh, in the matter of timing, the latter must be given precedence.

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<sup>4</sup> We are of course talking about the First World, the situation is different for the Third World, but that is an issue that is nowadays of secondary interest