

The Anarcho-Syndicalist Genesis of Orwell's Revolutionary Years

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2016

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Orwell had four phases during his revolutionary years, lasting from late December 1936 until about the early fall of 1940. Each was significant, but all were rooted in Orwell's observations of Spain's, and especially Catalonia's, anarcho-syndicalist revolution. When Orwell went to Spain he did not know exactly what he would find. He had a letter of introduction from the Independent Labour Party. He wanted to fight against fascism, defend democracy, and support workers.

Orwell found what perhaps was the most far-reaching revolution in history. It had economic, sociological and psychological dimensions. It had far-reaching significance in his interpersonal relationships. (See Orwell's "Looking Back on the Spanish War," Section III.) Orwell said that according to his basic inclinations he would have joined the anarchists and that among the non-foreign troops, the anarchists were the most effective fighters in loyalist Spain.

Phase One

The first phase began when he came to loyalist Spain (lasting until the May Days [1937] events) when he was enchanted with the workers' revolution. Factories had been taken over by workers. Agricultural estates were collectivized by peasants. Specifically he witnessed the early period of the anarcho-syndicalist society. Anarcho-syndicalist symbols were painted on walls. There was a revolutionary and comradely feeling among the people in Barcelona. People called each other "thou" and "comrade."

When Orwell was fighting on the Aragon Front among POUM militia members, Independent Labour Party volunteers, and peasants, Orwell experienced a new world opening. There was almost complete equality. There was nothing like office politics, fear of your employer, or people on the economic "make." Orwell described it as a "microcosm" of the type of socialist society he would like to live in. Sam and Esther Dolgoff's small periodical *Views and Comments* later quoted passages from Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* describing Barcelona and the militia in order to help give an impression of what an anarchist society looked like.

At that time, Orwell was not too interested in the political conflicts within the Loyalist side. "Why not get on with the war," he thought. He wanted to join the International Brigade so he could fight around Madrid, as we would colloquially say, "Where the action was." The 1937 May Days armed conflict between the police and Communists on one side, versus the anarchists and POUM on the other side, changed his mind. He stood firmly with the working class. Once enchanted by a city where "the working class was in the saddle," he could not change sides. This revolution was in his bones. It was to impact the rest of his life and the rest of his serious writings.

The Second Phase

From the time he got caught up in the 1937 May Days fighting until his escape from Spain, he supported the anarchist and POUM point of view. Stopping fascism and defeating Franco would be worthwhile even if it was not for full-scale revolution but only to defend bourgeois democracy.

At that time the government of Barcelona was arresting many anarchists. Orwell was unaware of that. This did not figure in *Homage to Catalonia*, which I read three times. In this revolutionary period he was also fighting to halt the advance of fascism, including Nazism.

During Orwell's fighting during this period he was shot in the neck and almost died. By a miracle, his life was saved. But that wound undoubtedly helped to shorten his life. When he was

in a make-shift hospital a wounded person next to him was a Communist. They talked about how they would be fighting against each other if they were back in Barcelona.

Third phase of Orwell's revolutionary years, after he was severely wounded

When he came back to Barcelona, he found that the POUM was being suppressed. He and his wife, Eileen Blair, made it out of Spain in the "nick of time." From June or July 1937 until the German-Soviet pact, during which time he opposed Britain's drift toward war, Orwell was ready to physically resist what he believed was going to be an aggressive imperialist war led by the Chamberlain government of Great Britain. During this period his resistance to fascism took the form of joining—as Peter Davison noted in the book of Orwell's diaries that he edited—the International Anti-Fascist Solidarity Committee (Solidaridad Internacional Antifascista), to which Emma Goldman had introduced Orwell in 1938.

Orwell was hoping that a workers' revolution would beat fascism. This was also the hope of American Socialist Party leader Norman Thomas, who hated fascism and Nazism, but formed the Committee to Keep America Out of War. This was the period when Orwell joined the Independent Labour Party. The ILP was left-wing socialist, anti-Stalinist, anti-fascist, and anti-war. What more could Orwell want?

During this period, besides writing, four areas seemed to occupy his efforts: (1) Fighting against fascism; (2) Trying to tell the truth about Spain, especially correcting the injustice done to the anarchists and POUM; (3) Trying to get left-wing prisoners held by the Republic in Spain freed; and (4) Opposing Great Britain's drift toward war. His opposition toward the upcoming world war was so great that he was planning physical resistance to the war and communicated that idea to like-minded radicals.

Orwell's Metamorphosis

Orwell wrote in his essay "My Country Right or Left" that he had a dream that the war had started the night before the German-Soviet "non-aggression" pact. This made him realize, he wrote, that his patriotic feelings toward England were clarified. But I think he was motivated by something else he wrote in "My Country Right or Left": If England did not resist Nazi Germany it would make a mockery of the resistance of the Chinese against the Japanese aggression, and of the resistance of the Spanish Loyalists against the Fascists led by Generalissimo Francisco Franco.

From late August 1939 and the beginning of World War Two, until about the middle of 1940, he strongly supported the Allies, but wanted to turn the war into a revolutionary war. The turning point was the dream mentioned above.

The idea of the war becoming a revolutionary war was less of a dream than we might think. The resistance in Yugoslavia was primarily, but not completely, one of partisan Communists led by Tito. Let us not forget the Jewish Socialist Bund, which in the first, and only, election in Revolutionary Russia in 1918 to the Constituent Assembly received about half a million votes. The biggest resistance to Japanese occupation in China was the Communists. Anarchists were also involved in the Chinese Revolution, but that has been largely written out of history. In fact,

the strength of the Communist revolutionary forces in China was such that President Harry S. Truman wrote in his Memoirs:

”It was perfectly clear to us that if we told the Japanese to lay down their arms immediately and march to the seaboard, the entire country [of China] would be taken over by the Communists. We therefore had to take the unusual step of using the enemy as a garrison until we could airlift Chinese National troops to South China and send Marines to guard the seaports.”

It looks like the Communists won the war/revolution for China.

The backbone of French and Italian resistance included Communist partisans, Jewish refugees from Germany, and Spanish Republican refugees. Ho Chi Minh led a revolutionary resistance, the Viet Minh, against Japanese occupation of Indo-China. In Norway and Denmark the resistance to Nazi occupation was led by democratic socialists. So you have the makings of a revolutionary world war against Nazism, Italian Fascism and Japanese imperialism.

Leon Trotsky, before his murder by agents of Stalin, advocated turning World War Two into a revolutionary war. Orwell’s ideas went through a slight modification when he wrote *The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius*, especially in the section ”England Your England.” To paraphrase Orwell, from *Homage to Catalonia*, his idea, and Leon Trotsky’s, of turning the Second World War into a revolutionary war was not as utopian as it seemed.

To understand the depth of Orwell’s revolutionary feeling, I quote from and comment about statements from the first American edition of *Homage to Catalonia* (i.e. the classical edition before the rearrangement of chapters.) ”What clinches everything is the case of [Spanish] Morocco. Why was there no rising in Morocco?” Orwell answered that an uprising in Morocco would hurt French interests. And France was an ally of the USSR. A rebellion against Franco in Spanish Morocco would have meant victory for the Loyalists. If the Loyalist government had declared Spanish Morocco free and independent, Franco’s forces would have been encircled, and POUM-anarchist strategy of revolution as an instrument of war would have been vindicated. So, Orwell wrote, ”Perhaps the POUM and anarchist slogan: ’The war and the revolution are inseparable’ was less visionary than it sounds.”

And what if, as Orwell suggests, the USSR had supported the Loyalists as revolutionaries?

”If with the huge prestige of Soviet Russia behind them [the Loyalists], they [Communists and European labor leaders] had appealed to the workers of the world in the name not of ’democratic Spain’ but of ’revolutionary Spain’, it is hard to believe they would not have gotten a response.”¹

And perhaps if such a response would have included strikes in Germany and Italy millions of lives would have been saved—including the lives of more than twenty million Russians and more than six million Jews. And perhaps anti-fascist revolution would have spread in Europe and Asia and we would have a world free of fascism, war, the worst type of exploitation and nuclear weapons. Also there may have been a great lessening of ethnic tensions, as per the experience of people in the IWW and in anarchistic Ferrer communities.

Orwell’s post-revolutionary socialism

George Orwell’s book *The Lion and the Unicorn*, advocating democratic socialism for Britain, is part of the Searchlight Books series he started to edit for publisher Frederic Warburg. Orwell wrote in that book that it was part of his campaign to make World War Two into a revolutionary

¹ From the original classic American edition of *Homage to Catalonia*, pages 67-70. Harcourt Brace, 1952.

war. But it was past that stage. Orwell wrote *The Lion and the Unicorn* in the fall of 1940.² The book advocates such reforms as a maximum 10-to-1 ratio of pay between the highest-paid and lowest-paid person in Britain. It was published in February 1941 by Secker and Warburg.³

In keeping with his orientation toward non-white and colonial peoples, he advocated a formal British alliance with Ethiopia, China and other third world countries that were victims of German Nazi, Italian fascist or Japanese imperialist aggression; formation of an "imperial council" in which "coloured peoples" would be represented, and immediate dominion status for India. His domestic proposals included nationalization of banks, mines, land, railways and major industries, and major educational reforms.

This was very different from the worker-controlled society in loyalist Catalonia. But still, it was a wide-ranging program.⁴ He was then associated with the left wing of the British Labour Party, despite some differences.

Orwell was very interested in the Paris Commune, which he discussed in his Appendix to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Despite the conflicts between Marxists and anarchists, which go back to the conflicts between Karl Marx and Michael Bakunin and their differences over the role of the state and electoral politics, when Marx writes about the Paris Commune of 1871 he sounds like an anarchist. The picture Marx paints of the Commune is similar to what Orwell reports about the anarcho-syndicalist revolution in Barcelona. Marx's writings about the Paris Commune are perhaps his best writings. Marx referred to the Commune as putting an end to the state. He wrote of how heroically the people of Paris died in defense of the Paris Commune.

About 46 years after the Commune, John Reed witnessed how Russian workers were quite willingly dying for the Revolution. He wrote about it in *10 Days that Shook the World*, published in 1919. A similar thing happened in Spain in July 1936, where workers actually "manned the barricades" and at least temporarily beat back the fascist rebels. This was done at a great price, but a price that was willingly paid by many. Alexander Berkman made similar observations about the third Russian Revolution in Kronstadt in 1921, in his great pamphlet *The Kronstadt Rebellion*.

Conclusions

Orwell was one of the first non-anarchists to bear witness to the accomplishments of the anarcho-syndicalist society in large areas of Spain at the start of the Spanish Civil War. Rudolf Rocker wrote about the anarcho-syndicalist revolution, but Rocker was an anarcho-syndicalist. Emma Goldman wrote about Spain's revolution, but Emma was the world's quintessential anarchist. Young anarchists in New York, i.e. the *Vanguard* group, put out *Spanish Revolution*. But Orwell, who was not an anarchist, became an outspoken supporter of the CNT-FAI. Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* is the seminal book with honest and truthful scholarship about that era in the history of the Iberian Peninsula. Orwell considered *Homage to Catalonia* his best book. From December 1936 until his death in January 1950, the memory of the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist-POUM revolution was always a part of Orwell.

² Sheldon, Michael. *Orwell: The Authorized Biography*. HarperCollins Publishers, 1991, page 336.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Orwell, George. *The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius*. Secker and Warburg, 1941.

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The Anarcho-Syndicalist Genesis of Orwell's Revolutionary Years
2016

Scanned from Anarcho-Syndicalist Review 68, Fall, 2016, page 19

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