

George Orwell & Alex Comfort's World War II Debate

Fighting Fascism: Is there a role for the democratic state

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2019, Winter

a review of

The Duty to Stand Aside: Nineteen Eighty-Four and the Wartime Quarrel of George Orwell and Alex Comfort by Eric Laursen. AK Press 2018

George Orwell's fiction and non-fiction writings are among the most relevant works for understanding our current societal plight, although he died in 1950. All we need to do is turn on the TV or radio or check the internet to be confronted with denial of truth and misinformation. And all we have to do is walk down a street or enter a store, bank or public building to be reminded of the increasing surveillance all around us.

In several of his essays and books, Orwell pointedly and poignantly discusses how demagogues use language to pervert the truth in order to obtain and maintain political power over others. That concern is obviously still highly relevant today.

So, it should come as no surprise that *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are among the two most widely read fictional works in the English language. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has generally sold well in the U.S. since it first appeared in 1950, partly because it has become a required classroom text in many high schools and universities.

After Edward Snowden's 2013 disclosures of U.S. National Security Agency surveillance, sales increased dramatically. With the election of Trump in 2016 sales soared again. And, after his inauguration in January 2017, this novel rose to the top of Amazon's best seller list.

Orwell's non-fiction book on his experiences in Spain during the revolution of 1936-39, *Homage to Catalonia* (written in 1938), has also been very popular over the years. The story it tells resonates with many because of its straightforward language relating his experiences as a person with sincere social ideals who became disillusioned with authoritarians striving for power. He skillfully describes coming to admire the egalitarian practices of the self-organized revolutionary militias.

A new book by Eric Laursen explores some aspects of Orwell's perspectives that are of particular interest to anarchists. At the same time, it introduces the reader to a 20th century anarchist they may not be familiar with, whose ideas and actions are also still relevant for today's struggles.

Alex Comfort (1920-2000) was a prolific English anarchist writer and activist seventeen years Orwell's junior. He is not generally well known today (except as the author of *The Joy of Sex*, 1972), because he could not be neatly fit into the categories of militant direct action anarchist or pacifist anarchist often favored by historians of the period.

Comfort was close to the group around the London-based Freedom Press and also active in anti-militarist circles during the 1940s through the 1960s. His uncompromising, aggressive anti-militarism and criticism of state power led Comfort to identify as an anarchist as he came to realize his principles rested on the historical theory and experience of anarchism. Once he reached this conclusion, he continued to identify with anarchists in his many fiction and non-fiction writings for the rest of his life.

In this context, it is important to note that two terms used often in Laursen's book, "stand aside" and "pacifism," are not used in ways most of us would expect based on current American English usage. This is not due to inaccuracy on Laursen's part, but rather to the way they were actually used by Comfort in mid-twentieth century England.

The phrase "the duty to stand aside" is both the title of the book and discussed in depth as employed by Comfort in defining his opposition to participating in government efforts during World War II and wars in general. But the way he used the phrase did not involve advocacy of anyone withdrawing as a passive neutral observer, abstaining from taking action against fascists and Nazis, or authoritarian communists for that matter. Comfort was definitively for active resistance through mutual aid and direct action wherever one might find themselves, including in Britain or another supposedly democratic state.

In 1946, he asserted, "I do not believe it is evil to fight...We have to fight obedience in this generation as the French maquisards fought for it, with the reservation that terrorism, while it is understandable, is not an effective instrument of combating tyranny."

Comfort also appreciated the active opposition to dictatorial rule of anarchists and others in Spain, Nazi Germany, and other parts of Europe in the 1930s and 1940s as exemplary models of popular resistance to authoritarianism.

He emphasized the importance of individual responsibility in resistance in order to strengthen social solidarity. Unlike those who call themselves pacifists nowadays, Comfort had no objections to armed resistance, so long as it was the result of local initiative and not led by people who aspired to replace one authoritarian regime with another slightly less reprehensible.

Orwell admired Comfort's novels and poetry, and shared his deep concern about the way the politics of both the authoritarian and so-called democratic states of the 1930s and 1940s were, as Laursen succinctly notes, "degrading culture and serious political discourse, turning literature and art into propaganda."

Orwell and Comfort agreed on the importance of working for a world in which individual self-determination and social cooperation could be combined. But they differed on whether or not the institution of the state and rulers of the democratic nations might play positive roles in the struggle against authoritarianism.

Laursen explains that while despising the British imperial system, which Orwell had experienced from the inside as a policeman in Burma, he was a patriot and a believer in the necessity of centralized authority for maintaining the basics of law and order.

Comfort, on the other hand, felt sincere love for actual people and places he knew, but rejected patriotism as a dangerous abstraction and centralized power as dangerous to those directly under its control in the homeland as well as to ordinary people in other countries.

This was based in part on his understanding that the modern state in all its manifestations attracts psychopaths to positions of authority, and also fosters corruption and brutality (what he called delinquent behavior) in power-holders.

Orwell developed respect for anti-authoritarian resistance to tyranny, and during the 1930s he hoped a workers' revolution would vanquish Nazism and fascism. But his hopes faded as the decade wore on, and anti-authoritarian groups were crushed while authoritarian forces grew stronger in many parts of the world. The massive use of military technology by states on both sides in World War II further convinced Orwell, like so many others, that it was necessary to compromise with the so-called democratic governments since only they possessed the equipment and organizations capable of defeating the Nazis, and later, authoritarian communists.

Comfort, on the other hand, strongly objected to compromising with state authorities or aspirants to power, which he always considered dangerous, because it destroys vital trust relationships between ordinary people in our own society and between the world's peoples. He also felt that it was morally reprehensible because it allowed authoritarian practices and rationales to be normalized in our own society.

Even though Eric Laursen's book deals with debates that took place more than sixty years ago, it can help us to think more deeply about many of today's questions of how to defeat authoritarianism.

Rui Preti is a long-time friend of the *Fifth Estate*.

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