

George Orwell and the Spanish Civil War

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ABSTRACT

Spanish Civil War broke out in Morocco on 17th July 1936 under very adverse circumstances. Orwell reached Spain on the 26th of December 1936 and participated in the Civil war with an intention of gathering first-hand information for his newspaper articles. But joining this organization pushed him into the centre of an intricate and bitter political struggle between rival socialist groups. His preconceived ideas were shattered during this time which led to the emergence of new thoughts and beliefs. The year of the Spanish Civil War marked a turning point in Orwell's political vision. It was the year when he acquired a political faith- which remained with him till the end of his life. It left a very deep imprint on his literature. *Homage to Catalonia* and *The Road To Wigan Pier* can be cited as examples of Orwell's fight against lies.

KEYWORDS

George Orwell; Socio-historical Context; Influence.

Spanish Civil War broke out in Morocco on 17th July 1936 because the Popular Front Government was exclusively Republican and people like Largo Caballero wished for a pure socialist government, which his followers chose to call, in Leninist language, the "dictatorship of the proletariat." The Revolution was successful only in Old Castile, Navarre, Saragossa, Seville, Cordoba, etc. Catalonia and the Basque Provinces were loyal to the Popular Front Government because the Republicans guaranteed their autonomy. In Madrid and Barcelona, Security forces, helped by the workers defeated the officers. Thus, Republicans held the centre, Levant, Catalonia, Basque, and industrial zones; the Nationalists held the food-producing areas. This led to a food shortage in the Republican zone. The workers' militia replaced the dissolved army. Orwell described Barcelona, where CNT was all-powerful as "a town where

the working class was in the saddle." This revolution was distasteful to the Left-Republicans and the Communist party. The Western democracies protested but did nothing.

It was in such prevailing conditions that Orwell reached Spain on the 26th of December 1936 and participated in the Civil war. Though his original intention in going to Spain was not to participate in the war but to "gather materials for the newspaper articles." [Orwell, George. *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters...* Vol.I,p.299]. Yet, fulfilling his intention of 'gathering materials' was not an easy task. First of all, to enter Spain he needed papers from some organization of the Left. Without that, it was nearly impossible to enter Spain. Moreover, he had refused to take membership in any organization for gathering first-hand information. He contacted Independent Labour Party (ILP) with whom he had slight connections and

joined the POUM militia. It acted as a ladder leading Orwell to his aim which was to see for himself the true condition of Spain and gather material for his newspapers. But joining this organization pushed him into the centre of an intricate and bitter political struggle between rival socialist groups, the Popular front Government and the Socialists of the Left.

Orwell's presence in the Spanish Civil War was because he wanted to get a first-hand account of the happenings in Spain. He felt that reality was being suppressed by publishing false accounts in the newspapers. Secondly, he wanted desperately to fight against those whom he considered to be on the wrong side, that is, the authorities and their bitter party politics. Thirdly, he was fighting for comradeship. Orwell was so obsessed with the idea of comradeship that he writes in one place:

...an actual flesh- and-blood worker in conflict with his natural enemy, the policeman, I do not have to ask myself which side I am. [Orwell, G. Homage to Catalonia, p.119].

Fourthly, he wanted to stir the feelings of Europeans through newspaper articles, so that they may help their comrades in Spain through every possible means.

When he visited Spain he had certain pre-conceived ideas in his mind which shattering shattered those ideas and led to the emergence of new thoughts and beliefs. This happened only because Orwell had formed certain views when he was in England, his native land, through newspapers and other sources. But when the authenticity of the news dawned upon Orwell, he became a totally changed man. Along with it came the change in the themes of his novels. And if in the first stage of his career, Orwell was preoccupied with the evils of imperialism and its progeny, poverty and social injustice; in the last stage, he examined

the evils of totalitarianism which he saw from within as he had seen imperialism.

But after the Spanish war experience, he saw it in terms of democracy versus totalitarianism. In fact, the Spanish War divided him from his former self and required him to create a new conception of the world, which he very dutifully and diligently did. The year of the Spanish Civil War 1936 may be said to be a turning point in Orwell's political vision. It was the year when he acquired a new political faith- which remained with him till the end of his life. He realized his position where he was standing and penned down in Volume-I of CEJL truthfully that:

Every line of serious work has been written, directly or indirectly against Totalitarianism and for Democratic Socialism, as I understand it. [Orwell G. "Why I write," Collected Essays, Journals and Letters: ...Vol. I, p.28].

He was also critical of Marxist theory as he knew it. He thought of it as a confusing talk before leaving England. He laid stress on the urgent duty of socialists which was hindered by the prevailing conditions- that is, of War and Factionalism. Orwell believed himself to be a Socialist, as he had faith in equality. Thus, we can see that Orwell had come to Spain with a definite intention to peep into the truth, to arouse public opinion against Factionalism abroad with the help of his pen, and search for all this engaged him in the internal conflict leading to the breaking away of preconceived ideas and emergence of new ones. It left a very deep imprint on his mind and on his literature.

Homage to Catalonia and The Road To Wigan Pier may be viewed as examples of Orwell's fight against the set of appalling lies whose path was the official tongue- the one which none could challenge. Concluding about the Spanish War one can say that it was regarded in many ways like Fascism vs Communism;

Catholicism vs Atheism; Culture vs Barbarism; Upper class vs Lower class, and Totalitarianism vs Democracy.

It was the last point i.e., Totalitarianism vs Democracy that was deeply ingrained in Orwell's mind and the remaining part of his life revolved around this aspect, making it to be a focus of his creativity till he finished with his last work Nineteen Eighty-Four.

He developed the strong feeling that society is money-tainted and that injustice is prevalent because of the differences in the societal set-up. This feeling permeated into his unconscious mind. This feeling of socialism gained weight during his stay in Burma under the Imperial Rule and back in England while living with the downs and outs. The Spanish Civil War only strengthened his belief in libertarian socialism. After the event, he became a confirmed anti-totalitarian. It was a sort of watershed in his writings, after which he did not look back. As Raymonds William puts it: "The

experience left a scar which was never likely to heal."

After the war, he did write Negative-Utopian fiction but he was not disillusioned regarding the global activities like other writers of his time. He had a clear vision in front of him; otherwise, he would not have been able to write the two novels which gave him fame. He would not have been able to fight against totalitarian governments with the help of his pen. In 1937 (July 31) he wrote to Rayner Happenstall:

What I saw in Spain did not make me cynical but it does make me think that the future is pretty grim... I still think one must fight for Socialism and against Fascism... only it is as well to discover which is which.

Through his work, we do not get the impression that he had also gone through the gamut of emotional reactions of disenchantment, sulks, isolation and withdrawal into self.

WORKS CITED

Orwell, George. Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters: An Age Like This- 1920-1940, Vol. I,p.299. Homage to Catalonia,p.119.