George Orwell Biography – Spanish Civil War

In Spain in 1923 there was a military coup against the monarchy, and the Spanish people demanded a fairer social standing through elections. Eventually a majority left wing government was elected and was in power for a number of years, but some poor economic choices left many Spanish people dissatisfied. This opened the door for far right and Nationalist groups, of which Francisco Franco controlled the ‘Army of Africa’, which included the Spanish owned and populated parts of northern Africa. Later he became the leader of the Nationalists and invaded the South of Spain, taking the Costa del Luz with ease. Britain, France and other democratic nations became worried and threatened by yet another country potentially falling to Fascism (Mussolini in Italy and Hitler in Germany). There were many international brigades sent to help the Popular Front (left wing side), which is where most of the British troops who were sent were stationed. Orwell however, joined the anarchist, Trotskyist group known as POUM. (The Popular Front had many different factions, most of which were more Communist – Stalinist, or socialist). The Popular Front held the North of Spain, including Catalonia, and Madrid, for much of the war, and this is where Orwell was stationed.

‘Homage to Catalonia’ was a book of memoirs Orwell published about his time fighting in the Spanish Civil War, in the left-wing army who held Catalonia until Franco won it in the last years of the war. Orwell set out for Spain on about 23rd December 1936, claiming he was there to ‘fight against Fascism’ (Franco and the Nationalists). Orwell joined the side of the Republican (Popular Front) government, in the POUM (Partido Obrero de Unificacion Marxista) faction, due to their link with the International Labour Party.

Orwell spent a while at the Lenin Barracks in Barcelona before he was sent to the relatively quiet Aragon Front, and from there on to Alcubierre during the depth of winter, where there was very little military action and he lived uncomfortably due to lack of equipment. Orwell was promoted to corporal fairly quickly. When the british ILP Contingent arrived, Orwell was transferred with them first to Monte Oscuro, and later to Huesca. He spent some days in hospital with a poisoned hand, which may be a reason for Orwell’s detailed description of Winston’s leg throughout ‘1984’. On his return to service he was involved in an attack on the Nationalist trenches. He then wanted to be sent to the Madrid Front to see more action, which cemented his position at the time as accepting of the Communist groups within the Popular Front. However, during his time in Barcelona much of his time was spent fighting rival factions (mainly Communists/Socialists) within the Popular Front. The Communists went on to name and slander the POUM faction in the same vein as fascists, which led to Orwell staying on the Aragon Front, and rejecting joining the International Brigades. He had same about the event: "No one who was in Barcelona then, or for months later, will forget the horrible atmosphere produced by fear, suspicion, hatred, censored newspapers, crammed jails, enormous food queues and prowling gangs of armed men." - all themes which are easily relatable to ‘1984’.

On his return to the front, Orwell was wounded in the throat by a sniper’s bullet, which missed his main artery by a very small margin and his voice was barely audible. He received electrotherapy treatment and was declared medically unfit for service.

The pro-Soviet Communists had made the POUM faction out to be a Trotskyist (i.e. not Stalin) organisation, so it became attacked and outlawed from within the Popular Front. Orwell and his wife had to escape from Spain. He arrived home on 13th July 1937, and stayed in Greenwich, where he found his views on the Spanish Civil War to be out of favour. He then returned to Wallington where he tended his animals and set about writing ‘Homage to Catalonia’.

Orwell fell ill with what was thought to be Tuberculosis and was admitted to a Kent hospital for ex-servicemen. Homage to Catalonia was published and was a commercial flop. Orwell then went to French Morocco to recover, where he wrote ‘Coming Up For Air’. Orwell’s father died in 1939.

World War II

When war broke out, Orwell’s wife Eileen began work at the Censorship Department in London, which may have led to many of Orwell’s insights about government censorship in ‘1984’. Orwell would not be accepted into the army due to the condition of his lungs. He began writing film, book and play reviews in 1939. In 1940 he moved to Marylebone. Eileen’s brother Lawrence passed in France, which contributed to her long term depression. Orwell kept a wartime diary at this time, which may have allowed for some of the vivid imagery of a nation under war in ‘1984’, particularly with regards to the streets of London in the prole quarters.

Orwell found an opportunity in the Home Guard. He had a vision that the Home Guard would become a revolutionary People’s Militia. He wrote lecture notes for instructing platoon members on street fighting, field fortifications and mortar use, which was perhaps a reason for the extensive knowledge on warfare Orwell demonstrates in ‘1984’. When Orwell visited his wife and family in Greenwich he saw the effects of the Blitz. During this time Orwell had many shorter term jobs at different publications and, writing more reviews as well as appearing on the radio, whilst also being rejected by the Air Ministry.

His comment in 1941 on Stalin is telling of his view on international politics at the time, and may also link to his construction of the ‘character’ ‘Big Brother’ in ‘1984’:

*"One could not have a better example of the moral and emotional shallowness of our time, than the fact that we are now all more or less pro Stalin. This disgusting murderer is temporarily on our side, and so the purges, etc., are suddenly forgotten."*

Orwell finally obtained ‘war work’, working for the BBC’s Eastern Service in an effort to counter Nazi propaganda, which may have given rise to his creation of Ministry of Truth and the changing of facts to fit the rhetoric of a regime – i.e. propaganda. It was also Orwell’s first experience of the rigid office life, much of which comes across when Winston’s job and surroundings are being described. In 1942, Eileen began work at the ‘Ministry of Food’ which may be the reason for Orwell’s naming of the Ministries in 1984. Furthermore, he and Eileen moved into a flat in Maida Vale, which Orwell was fond of, and which he might have had in mind when writing about the room Winston and Julia share in 1984. In 1943, Orwell strongly positioned himself with the Political Left in London, with his choice of literary friends. His mother died later that year and he began work on ‘Animal Farm’. Orwell quit his jobs at the BBC and the Home Guard, but continued to write Animal Farm. He became a fairly highly regarded left-wing political pundit at this time also.

The Orwells adopted a child in Durham, and named him Richard Horatio Blair. They moved to Islington where they set up a home, with Eileen opting to quit her job in order to look after the family. Secker and Warburg agreed to publish Animal Farm, and Orwell’s political career took flight when he was offered a position at the Observer as a war correspondent. He then travelled to France after it had been taken back by the Allies. It was while he was here that Eileen died in hospital. He returned to London to cover the 1945 General Election, and later that year Animal Farm was published. It was a commercial success as it fitted suitably with the post World War II climate. From 1945-1949 Orwell was a journalist for a few different publications while he worked on ‘1984’, which was published in 1949. He published many articles in various political lobbying campaigns in this time, while a housekeeper looked after his son in his reportedly ‘bleak’ house, following Eileen’s death. He went to stay on the Island of Jura to get away from London, and then moved there following the death of his sister Marjorie. He lived there with his sister Avril, his housekeeper and her boyfriend, and his son, while he started 1984, but moved back to London in 1946, for one of the coldest winters on record. In 1947 he continued work on 1984, but had a disastrous boating incident which affected his already deteriorating health greatly. He was pronounced to have Tuberculosis. Orwell finished 1984 in December 1948. In 1949 it was published with immediate critical and popular success.

In the Summer of 1949, Orwell courted Sonia Brownell, and they announced their marriage in September. Orwell was moved to University College Hospital London, where Sonia took charge of his affairs. Orwell and Brownell married in the hospital room on 13 October 1949. Orwell delegated control of parts of his company which had rights to his most famous works to friends and family. George Orwell died on 21st January at the age of 46, after an artery burst in his lungs.