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# The War that Inspired Animal Farm: How George Orwell's Experiences in Spain Shaped his Views Towards Russia

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Sami Ahmad  
Best Midwestern High School Writing Competition

The War that Inspired Animal Farm:  
How George Orwell's Experiences in Spain Shaped his Views Towards Russia

The Spanish Civil war was a duel between two systems of government: democracy, and fascism. This war dragged many nations into it, with volunteers enlisting and countries sending in aid, arms, and money. One man who enlisted was Englishman George Orwell.<sup>1</sup> He had embarked on the journey with the words: "This Fascism, somebody's got to stop it" (Meyers 140). Yet George Orwell emerged out of the Spanish Civil War a changed man. Orwell returned from Spain with firsthand knowledge of the horrors of Stalinist Russia. He saw his militia outlawed and its commanders slaughtered, witnessed his friend tortured to the point of death, and was hunted down by Stalinist forces. The impact the Spanish Civil war had on Orwell greatly influenced the reasons why he felt such animosity towards communism and totalitarian states, notably Russia, and these feelings are present throughout his novel *Animal Farm*.

To understand how Orwell had firsthand experience in dealing with Stalinist Russia, a brief history of the Spanish Civil War must be recounted. In 1920, King Alfonso XIII ruled over the Spanish, but the government was corrupt and inefficient. In 1923, King Alfonso recognized the unrest in his country and so stepped down to the rule of General Primo de Rivera, a military dictator. Rivera however, was not an ordinary dictator. He introduced projects to improve Spain, building roads and schools throughout the country. However, when the depression of the 1930's struck, Rivera could not fix the financial issues that Spain had, and so the military withdrew its support and Rivera stepped down, giving way to elections. The Republican group won the Spanish elections of 1931, and Spain was then declared a republic, under the leadership of Prime

Minister Manuel Azana. The country then went through a series of political disputes and infighting. While this was taking place, the military was making preparations for a takeover of the government. General Francisco Franco took over the military in Spanish Morocco, overthrowing the government there. The world began to side with either Franco and the Nationalists, as they called themselves, or with Azana and the Republicans. Catholics, the Falange (Spanish Fascist Party), Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy declared support for the Nationalists. Stalinist Russia, Mexico, as well as many left wing parties like the Socialists and the Anti-Stalinist Marxist Party sided with the Republicans. George Orwell was a volunteer from England, enlisting with the POUM, the Unified Marxist Workers' Party. The POUM "was a combination of anti-Stalinist Communist dissidents and Trotskyists" (Meyers 142) Throughout the war, Orwell fought against the fascist armies of Francisco Franco, but the Nationalists were made up of disciplined military men, and the Republicans were made up of volunteers with minimal military training. In his short memoir, "Homage to Catalonia," Orwell wrote: "How on earth could the war be won by an army of this type?" (Orwell 15) Franco's forces eventually took over many key Republican cities, and with the capture of Madrid, England and France acknowledged Franco's government. However, towards the end of the war, the Republicans' lack of resistance was what enabled the Nationalists to win the war, and the lack of resistance was caused by Stalin's betrayal of the Spanish Republicans.

Stalin's betrayal of the Republicans was a key reason why they lost the war. From the beginning of the war, Stalin's secret police, the NKVD, hunted down and eliminated his opponents in the Republican ranks, effectively leaving the Spanish Communists in control over the Republic's armed forces. Stalinists eventually took over the Republicans, because not only were they the only country supplying major quantities of arms to the Republicans, but they had

many military advisors in Spain who gradually took over the war effort. The militias in Spain were “re-organized” and the communists refused to give arms to militias that did not come under their command, among them the POUM and the CNT. (A Catalonian workers’ anarchist movement) Tensions rose, and the CNT issued a statement saying: “The guarantee of the revolution is the proletariat in arms. To attempt to disarm the people is to place oneself on the wrong side of the barricades. No councillor or police commissioner, no matter who he is, can order the disarming of the workers, who are fighting fascism with more self-sacrifice than all the politicians in the rear, whose incapacity and impotence everybody knows. Do not, on any account, allow yourselves to be disarmed!” (Harper, *Flag Blackened*)

This protest was met with brutal repression by the Stalinists, who stormed Barcelona, the location of CNT headquarters, and the CNT leaders backed out and surrendered. The troops, demoralized, laid down their weapons in surrender. With the destruction of the CNT, the anarchist movement was broken, and the communists had full power. With the collapse of the Spanish Revolutionary workers’ movement, the key backbone of the Republican force, the workers, were crippled, and thus Stalin’s betrayal of the Spanish Republicans was complete, as Trotsky states: “Stalin succeeded completely in fulfilling the role of the grave-digger of the revolution” (Trotsky 121). For these reasons, Franco was victorious in the civil war.

Orwell experienced the ruthless nature of the Stalinists firsthand, when his militia, the POUM, was hunted down by the Communists in Spain, on charges of being disguised fascist organizations. In “Homage to Catalonia,” Orwell writes:

In the Communist and pro-Communist press the entire blame for the Barcelona fighting was laid upon the P.O.U.M. The affair was represented. . .as a deliberate, planned insurrection against the Government, engineered solely by the P.O.U.M. . .it was definitely a Fascist plot, carried out under Fascist orders with the idea of starting civil war in the rear and thus paralysing the Government. The P.O.U.M. was ‘Franco's Fifth Column’ — a ‘Trotskyist’ organization working in league with the Fascists. (Orwell 93)

Later, after having been declared a fascist organization under the pay of Germany and Italy, the POUM was “suppressed and declared an illegal organization” (Orwell 101). The NKVD kidnapped Andre Nin, a POUM leader, and tortured him to death. Orwell’s friend in the POUM, Georges Kopp, almost suffered the same fate:

When Georges Kopp came to Spain he was a robust...young man...healthy and strong [...] today [...] thin, feeble, and bent, walking slowly with the aid of a cane. His body is covered with scabs and bruises, the marks of the diseases he had contracted [...] in the [...] dungeons of the Stalinists.” (Meyers/Orwell 166)

The NKVD arrested other POUM leaders and forced them to confess to crimes they had not committed, such as communicating with Franco’s forces, and they were dealt with much like Stalin’s political opponents in his Russian purges.

Orwell witnessed firsthand the horrors of the Stalinists in Spain, by seeing their betrayal and killing of the Anarchist Workers and the POUM. This experience increased his dislike of Communism and Totalitarian states like Stalinist Russia. In “Why I Write,” Orwell wrote: “The Spanish war and other events in 1936-37 turned the scale and thereafter I knew where I stood. Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, *against* totalitarianism and *for* democratic socialism” (Orwell 4). Orwell was now against Totalitarianism. He stated that writers’ motives for writing are sheer egoism, aesthetic enthusiasm, historical impulse, and political purpose. He also writes: “*Animal Farm* was the first book in which I tried, with full consciousness of what I was doing, to fuse political purpose and artistic purpose into one whole” (Orwell 1).

As a result of Orwell’s time in Spain, Orwell’s dislike of Totalitarian states and Communism became more pronounced and throughout *Animal Farm*. He uses satire, irony, and allegory to show this.

The first example is Orwell's depiction of the Soviet leaders as pigs. Snowball represents Leon Trotsky, and Napoleon represents Joseph Stalin. Orwell's decision to depict the Stalin and Trotsky as pigs is explained in his opinion of the animals:

Some aspects of the fable were based on Orwell's experience. He liked animals in general, but was hostile to pigs and told David Astor: "They are most annoying destructive animals, and hard to keep out of anywhere because they are so strong and cunning." (Meyers 248)

George Orwell despised pigs, and his choice to portray Stalin and Trotsky shows the disdain he felt for them. "*Animal Farm* is an animal satire through which Orwell [...] attacks [...] Russian Communism" (Yemenci 1). By portraying the Russian Leaders as "annoying destructive animals," Orwell demonstrates what he feels about them.

Orwell satirically attacks Russian Communism with irony. Before dying, Old Major states:

And remember also that in fighting against Man we must not come to resemble him. Even when you have conquered him, do not adopt his vices. No animal must ever live in a house, or sleep in a bed, or wear clothes, or drink alcohol, or smoke tobacco, or touch money, or engage in trade. All the habits of Man are evil. And above all, no animal must ever tyrannise over his own kind. Weak or strong, clever or simple, we are all brothers. No animal must ever kill any other animal. All animals are equal. (Orwell 11)

Orwell demonstrates the irony of the pigs' actions by having them completely reverse the principles of Old Major and to do the exact opposite of what he had instructed them to do. Similar to their original backing of the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War, then Stalin's betrayal of them, Orwell's quote shows his disdain for the easy change of intent the Russian leaders exhibited when controlling their peoples and dealing with allies.

Orwell depicts the pigs as self-serving. They indulge in many luxuries that they deny the other animals on the pretense of being against Animalism: "Napoleon had denounced such ideas as contrary to the spirit of Animalism. The truest happiness, he said, lay in working hard and

living frugally” (Orwell 129). The pigs simply control the other animals, do not work, and reap the products of the animals’ hard work: “But still, neither pigs nor dogs produced any food by their own labour; and there were very many of them, and their appetites were always good” (Orwell 130). Ironically, the pigs fit the description Old Major gives of the working habits of man: “Man is the only creature that consumes without producing [...] yet he is lord of all animals [...] he sets them to work [...] gives back to them the bare minimum [...] the rest he keeps for himself” (Orwell 7-8). The pigs exploited their fellow “comrades,” much like how Stalin and his cohorts lived a life of luxury in Moscow while millions of peasants died of starvation and cold elsewhere.

Orwell displays his dislike of totalitarian states in *Animal Farm*. As the pigs represented humans, Orwell illustrates that humans abuse power, and this abuse of power is what totalitarianism takes root in. Besides ridiculing the Russian leaders, Orwell also indicates his belief that people with power will use it to make themselves greater, as the pigs did in *Animal Farm*. The pigs were once ordinary animals on the farm, but it is obvious that they had power over the other animals: “The pigs were so clever that they could think of a way round every difficulty” (Orwell 27) “With their superior knowledge it was natural that they should assume the leadership” (Orwell 27-28) “The pigs now revealed. . .they had taught themselves to read and write” (Orwell 23). Orwell satirizes this totalitarian abuse of power by having the pigs seize power, distort the commandments and laws they made, and forcing the animals to fulfill their orders without caring about their conditions.

In *Animal Farm*, Orwell parallels how easily the Russian leaders suppressed oppressed their working classes, just as the workers’ rebellion was put down in Spain by Stalin’s forces. The other animals had no say in any matters on the farm: “In future all questions related to the

workings of the farm would be settled by a special committee of pigs, presided over by himself [...] there would be no more debates” (Orwell 54). The other animals had no voice, and as Alev Yemenci states: “In a society where people have no voice, if the ruling body with privileges such as special education, luxury and titles, has absolute power, this will lead to total corruption and disintegration of values” (Yemenici 1). Orwell believed that the animals and working class would be oppressed if they did not speak out. When asked how he thought of the idea for *Animal Farm*, Orwell said: “I saw a little boy, perhaps ten years old, driving a huge cart-horse [...] whipping it whenever it tried to turn. It struck me that if only such animals became aware of their strength we should have no power over them, and that men exploit animals in much the same way as the rich exploit the proletariat” (Meyers 248). However, when the animals ignorantly allow the pigs to control them, Orwell shows what happens when people with no power blindly follow those that have it. Boxer is a wonderful example of this, blindly following the rule of the pigs, with his maxims: “I will work harder,” and “Napoleon is always right.” Orwell shows that these even if one demonstrates complete obedience to his leader, like Boxer, he will ultimately be betrayed by his leaders, as Boxer was when he was sent to the knackers, a correlation to the way in which Stalin treated his citizens.

The Spanish Civil War changed George Orwell. It changed his political views, and led to him becoming a pro-socialist. Because he served in the POUM, he saw the Communists and Stalinists betray his militia, hunt them down, and kill its leaders. He saw the communists brutally put down the rebellion of honest proletariat workers, which led to the victory of fascism. Orwell witnessed firsthand the actions of the communists, and saw them for what they truly were: cruel, selfish, and oppressing. This newfound knowledge convinced Orwell to write *Animal Farm*, to write a novel which exposed the actions of the Soviet Communists, and to write a novel



in which Orwell expressed his opinions on Soviet and Totalitarian leaders. The impact the Spanish Civil War had on Orwell brought forth Orwell's feelings of animosity for the Soviets, Communists, and Totalitarian States, and thus Orwell compiled these things into *Animal Farm*, and in doing so wrote one of the greatest allegorical novels in literature.

#### Notes

1. Although George Orwell was a pseudonym of Eric Blair, in this paper Eric Blair will be referred to as George Orwell.

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