DISCUSSION

The contribution of Lloyd Edmonds on George Orwell and the Spanish Civil War to ALR No. 54 deserves a reply.

In his second paragraph, Lloyd Edmonds begins his slighting reference to Orwell: he had an “excursion” to the Aragon hills, “fired a few shots” and returned to London. A few sentences later, we learn that Orwell was shot in the throat for his troubles. The whole way Orwell’s role is cast is that of a dilettante: at first reading it sounds almost as if Orwell was bored with the war, but being shot in the throat seems a good enough reason to me to leave Spain after only four months!

Edmonds portrays the struggle of the two cities, Barcelona and Madrid, in a curious way. Barcelona, it seems, didn’t have the honor of being bombarded constantly and cut off from supplies. Barcelona was where Orwell drew much of his material for Homage to Catalonia. Therefore......?

Edmonds accuses Orwell of portraying the Armageddon that was Spain as a futile guerrilla skirmish. Yet my recollection of Homage to Catalonia is one of an inspiring book - a book that fuelled my socialist convictions as no doubt it has many other students who now study it.

The material Orwell did gather was inspiring. The atmosphere of a “workers’ city”, with flourishing (for a time) workers’ control, reveals the truly political reason for the preparedness to die of the Spanish workers and peasants.

Yet the very central criticism which Orwell raises of the Spanish CP was that it saw the winning of the military war as a separate question, taking chronological precedence over extending the revolutionary gains in the workplace in the neighborhoods and elsewhere.

Franco and his generals had the support of 100,000 Moorish soldiers. Correct me if I am wrong, but wasn’t another criticism of those to the left of the CP that the Republican government, heavily influenced by the CP, made little progress in liberating the Spanish colony of Morocco? Perhaps if the dynamic of the revolution was begun there, the numbers and morale of these Moroccan soldiers would have been altogether different.

The policy of the Spanish communists was never in doubt, we are told. It was ‘to win the war’. But there are many ways to win (or lose) a war. And in a civil war one of the crucial elements is the morale of the fighters. They must have something to fight for. This is what gave the workers and peasants of Trotsky’s Red Army the endurance and will to win in the Soviet Civil War. But the CP’s policy, as outlined by Orwell (first win the war, then proceed with the revolution) is not really tackled by Edmonds.

Perhaps the demand for a “trade union government”, rejected by the CP, was in the right direction, perhaps not.....but this is not seriously discussed.

Is it Orwell’s fault that he was promoted during the Cold War? (Actually, I think the bourgeoisie had far more effective opponents of collectivism, as he had then become, than Orwell). What happened of course was that Orwell’s vision of socialism soured, as did many when they learnt or were convinced of the parody of socialism in the Soviet Union. Orwell’s pessimistic Animal Farm and his nightmarish 1984 have become cliches for the popular notion of “communism”. But we cannot eradicate such notions by justification of the policies of the parties which followed the international policy of the USSR.

Dave McKnight.