George Orwell and Arthur Koestler Looking Back on the Spanish Civil War

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DIPLOMSKI RAD

George Orwell and Arthur Koestler Looking Back on the Spanish Civil War

Književno-kulturološki smjer

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Ak. godina: 2020/21.

Contents

Introduction

The Spanish Civil War started on July 17, 1936 when General Francisco Franco rebelled against the forces loyal to the Spanish Government. General Franco emerged victorious from the Spanish Civil War in 1939 establishing a military dictatorship. He ruled as Caudillo[1] until his death in 1975.

In the 1920s, Spain was on a path to a rapid economic development. However, this process was truncated by the Great Depression. The economic expansion was followed by some socioeconomic changes that would become more prominent in the 1930s. The most significant for Spain was a gradual increase in anti-clerical sentiment. For instance, the Spanish government of 1931-1933 expelled the Jesuits from Spain, and closed Catholic schools in most parts of the country (Payne 15). Another socioeconomic change occurred because of the technological development of the 1930s. Transportation flourished in the 1930s and trains and boats became more widespread. Thus, Spain became more accessible to outside observers (Payne 160).

The 1930s also saw a considerable advancement in the print media, as well as radio and the cinema which contributed to the period being referred to as the golden age of the foreign correspondent. Arthur Koestler and George Orwell were amongst the many foreign journalists, writers, and other intellectuals who went to Spain when the war broke out to report on the Spanish question. Koestler's newspaper reporter credentials were in fact a cover for his secret mission into Franco's headquarters in Seville where he was supposed to look for evidence of the German and Italian governments violating the Non-intervention Agreement that was intended to prevent the war from further escalation (Scammell, 2001: 91). Orwell, on the contrary, genuinely went to Spain to write newspaper articles, but as soon as he arrived to

[1] The title General Franco assumed during the Spanish Civil War as the Spanish equivalent to the titles used by the German *Führer* and Italian *Duce*.

Barcelona he joined the militia of the Workers' Party of Marxist Unification (the POUM), one of the many Leftist factions in the Republican zone (Orwell, 1938: 1). Both of these writers supported the Republican cause just as was the case with Ernest Hemingway, W. H. Auden, John Dos Passos, and many others who visited the Republican zone (Payne 163).

The Spanish conflict was an eye-opening experience for Koestler and Orwell, and marks the first significant event in the development of their Left-wing anti-totalitarian politics. This development was signalled in their memoirs of the Spanish War. Koestler's *Spanish Testament* was published by Victor Gollancz in 1937 and consists of two parts. The first deals with his journey from Belgium, where he was staying when the war broke out, to Málaga. The other part of the memoir is a personal account of the time Koestler spent in the Seville prison where he was taken to when Málaga fell into the hands of the Nationalists. Orwell's memoir *Homage to Catalonia* was first published by Secker and Warburg in April 1938. Even though Orwell's works were usually published by Victor Gollancz, the Spanish memoir was rejected because Orwell was associated with the POUM, and therefore considered a "Trotskyist" (Orwell, 1968a: 279). *Homage to Catalonia* is Orwell's account of the revolution in Barcelona and its crushing by the Republican government in May 1937, as well as his combat experience.

Their memoirs are a valuable contribution to the understanding of the "Spanish question". Both authors discussed the nature of the Spanish conflict, but disagreed on the issue of it being a revolution.

When commenting on the war strategy and discipline of the Republican Army, they both offer their insights into the working-class consciousness. Both Koestler and Orwell were subject to some form of prosecution in Spain, and their memoirs are early accounts of the workings of totalitarian governments.

Another topic worth exploring is their view of the propaganda since the Spanish War was the first European civil war in which propaganda played such a great role. Both writers saw the most advanced technology used to advance totalitarian ideals and wondered whether the idea of Progress had come to an end in 1936. In the aftermath of the First World War, an atmosphere of pacifism was widespread in the ranks of Leftist organisations in Europe, but the Spanish War brought an end to it.

Finally, it is important to stress that the conflict was of great importance for both authors on the personal level. The memoirs reveal the ways in which the Spanish Civil War changed the outlook and values of these writers. It offered them a greater level of understanding of totalitarian governments and an opportunity to recalibrate their ideological worldviews. To put it differently, the analysis of the memoirs helps us understand what Orwell meant by "History stopped in 1936" when he said it to Koestler. And why his interlocutor "nodded in immediate understanding" (Orwell, 1968b: 179).

The Spanish Civil War helped Koestler and Orwell understand the workings of totalitarian regimes. Because of his party affiliation, Koestler's perception of this Spanish revolution, as well as his Spanish memoir, is considerably different. While Orwell deemed the atmosphere in Barcelona as revolutionary, Koestler's memoir is a work of propaganda because he deliberately tried to conceal the revolutionary character of the Republican zone. Because of their Spanish experience, they would also become vociferous critics of the Soviet regime since they were both persecuted for the first time in their lives by totalitarian governments.

On Revolution

Even though many regard the Spanish Civil War as a struggle between democracy and Fascism, a genuine social and economic revolution actually took place in areas controlled by

the Republicans. It was genuine for it was carried out by worker organisations, not parties or non-worker groups. Not only worker organisations, but also hundreds of thousands of agrarian workers and small farmers, distinguishing the Spanish revolution from the Russian one which occurred two decades before (Payne 93). Yet, it is not uncommon that wars and revolutions are interrelated (Arendt, 1963: 17-8). The American Revolution was accompanied by a war of liberation, the French Revolution was followed by wars of defence and aggression, and in the case of Spain, a revolution erupted following the Spanish coup of July 1936. Aside from being closely related to wars, these revolutions have also been seen as "ushering in a new era for all mankind" (Arendt, 1963: 53) and the idea of world history was born out of these events. Andreu Nin, the leader of the POUM, argued that the Spanish revolution was "a more profound revolution than the Russian Revolution" on account of the fact that "the government did not exist" (Payne 95). It seems all the more logical that Orwell and Koestler would be attracted to the events of the Spanish crisis because the conflict did not appear distant, but resembled an event of great historical importance for the entire world.

Orwell travelled to Spain precisely because he deemed the events in Spain revolutionary. In late December 1936, "the revolution was in full swing" (Orwell, 1938: 1) and Orwell found the situation exciting and worth fighting for which is why he joined the POUM (Orwell, 1938: 1). There were indeed many outward manifestations of the revolution in progress. Orwell describes churches being demolished, buildings and shops collectivised, revolutionary songs blasting out of the loudspeakers placed down the streets of Barcelona, and human relations devoid of any pre-revolutionary forms of speech (Orwell, 1938: 2). For instance, tipping was forbidden by law and no one was addressed as "Señor" or "Don", but as "Comrade" (Orwell, 1938: 2). The style of dress was also different from the pre-revolutionary times since everyone wore working-class clothes thereby eliminating visible class differences (Orwell, 1938: 2). Orwell found some of these revolutionary aspects bizarre, but worth

fighting for. He did not avoid mentioning the poor conditions that people of Barcelona were living in:

> Together with all this there was something of the evil atmosphere of war. The town had a gaunt untidy look, roads and buildings were in poor repair, the streets at night were dimly lit for fear of air-raids, the shops were mostly shabby and half-empty. Meat was scarce and milk practically unobtainable, there was a shortage of coal, sugar, and petrol, and a really serious shortage of bread. Even at this period the bread-queues were often hundreds of yards long. Yet so far as one could judge the people were contented and hopeful. (1938: 2)

Orwell attributes this state of affairs to the "evil atmosphere of war" (1938: 2). Hence, he does not see these poor conditions as an indication of a failed revolution. In wartime, shortages are common on the home front and Orwell was quite aware of them. In the essay titled "Inside the Whale", Orwell says that, had he been a soldier fighting that war, he would have preferred to read a work of literature with no references to the ongoing war: "After the bombs and *the food-queues* and the recruiting-posters, a human voice!" (Orwell, 1968a: 525, emphasis mine). Common bread shortages in revolutionary Spain were not in itself an indicator of the economic failure of the revolution. They were no different from those Orwell had experienced in First World War Britain. It is not possible to determine whether the revolution in Barcelona was an economically unsuccessful enterprise since it only lasted for the duration of the war. Therefore, these shortages were the result of war conditions, not its economic policies as was the case in the USSR, for instance.

When it comes to Koestler's insight into the Spanish revolution, in *Spanish Testament* he dives into the causes of the conflict. Since his book is propagandistic, Koestler necessarily downplays the revolutionary component in the Republican struggle. He does not think that the Spanish Popular Front was a revolutionary enterprise at all. Instead he claims it was a political

coalition striving “towards one goal alone: the raising of the Spanish State, which had never yet succeeded in emerging from the clerical, feudal stage, to the constitutional, material and spiritual level of the great European democracies” (Koestler, 1937: 45). In his view, the Spanish conflict is not to be seen as a struggle between Communism and Fascism, but a struggle between the forces fighting for a modern and democratic Spain, and those who want it to remain a pre-modern country. According to Koestler, the only way to discard the claim of the Spanish conflict being a struggle between Communism and Fascism is to delve deeper into the “structural foundations” of the Spanish question (Koestler, 1937: 41-2). This entails describing “the agrarian problem”, a term used to denote the issue of Spain being a country with a semi-feudal structure. Since the landed aristocracy, constituting only one percent of the rural population, controlled more than half of cultivable land in Spain, Koestler referred to such distribution of land as semi-feudal. It was not completely feudal because, according to the data he provided, “peasants owning small farms”, “poor peasants”, and “agricultural labourers” owned 48.5 percent of cultivable land (Koestler 1937: 42). Moreover, he saw Spain as the only country in Western Europe with such a level of inequality and blamed the government of the Spanish Republic, proclaimed on April 14, 1931, for not carrying out the agrarian reform at greater speed: “From 1931 until the beginning of the reaction of 1933, out of a total of forty-five million hectares of cultivable land forty thousand hectares in all were divided up amongst the peasants; that is, exactly 0.009 per cent” (Koestler, 1937: 50-1). Koestler considers the Republican government guilty of stagnation and uses these numbers to show how necessary the task of parcelling out the land held by the gentry really was, but also to refute the claims made by the Nationalists that the Spanish Republic was introducing “Communism and Anarchy” (Koestler, 1937: 50-1). Furthermore, Koestler sees the reform of the Catholic Church as a prerequisite for a successful agrarian reform. Namely, in the Republican struggle against the clergy he does not see anti-religious sentiment, but rather a

struggle against the largest landowner in the country. An example of the economic power of the clergy is the fact that the tramway system in Madrid was owned by the Catholic Church (Koestler, 1937: 44).

American historian Stanley G. Payne offers a different interpretation as to why potential revolutionary situations occur, and his interpretation is more accurate than Koestler's when it comes to the situation in 1930s Spain. Payne considers "backwardness" a superficial explanation for the revolution. He neither denies Spain had many social problems nor claims it was a fully developed country. Since revolutionary movements cannot develop without a certain level of education and development, one has to place some doubt to Koestler's claim that Spain was the most backward country in Europe (Payne 46). Instead, Payne opts for Tocqueville's interpretation of revolution. According to Tocqueville, revolutions occur in societies that have experienced some improvement which stimulates a psychological disposition to aim for even greater change. In such circumstances, radical solutions become appealing if improvement has been temporarily frustrated (qtd in Payne 46). For instance, Tocqueville points to the widespread belief that it was the French Revolution that divided landed property (qtd in Elster 32). In reality, some twenty years before the Revolution, inheritances were excessively subdivided and peasants owned half the land in France (qtd in Elster 32-3).

Working-Class Consciousness

Even though Orwell was not a Communist, and therefore not a Marxist, both he and Koestler were questioning their faith in working-class consciousness because of their Spanish experience. One of the basic postulates of Marxism is the idea that working-class consciousness appears as a consequence of industrialisation. The workers are brought together in factories and are compelled to share the same fate, that is, the same class consciousness. Up

until that point, they remain inert historical actors who occasionally stir up revolts. However, once they acquire their class consciousness, they are supposed to act in accordance with their role in the historical process outlined by Marx (Moore 474). It is also worth stressing that Marx was aware that working-class consciousness is not sufficient for a revolution to be successful. Despite the fact that the Paris Commune had the intention of overthrowing the bourgeois regime and that they were conscious of their class alliance, the revolution failed (*Communist Manifesto* 13). In the end, Lenin's spin on Marxism turned out to be more influential and convenient for revolutionary movements in regions where industrialisation was in its infancy. He claimed that the awareness has to be brought from the outside, referring to intellectuals who would become professional revolutionaries and establish the dictatorship of the proletariat (Lenin 69).

As mentioned above, the revolution behind the Republican lines was carried out by the Spanish working class, but both Orwell and Koestler noticed the issues impeding the revolutionary upheaval. Both authors were aware that a revolutionary army founded upon democratic principles had the potential of undermining the success of their military operations. The anarchist leader Juan García Oliver shared their opinion and was disappointed with the level of morale amongst the Republican soldiers: "It is a phenomenon of this war that when towns held by the fascists are attacked they hold out for a long time, and that [when Republicans are attacked] we do not resist at all. They surround a small town, and after a couple of days it is taken; but when we surround one we spend our entire life there" (Payne 86).

Koestler had the privilege of witnessing the fall of Málaga in February 1937 where he was arrested by the Nationalist forces once the city fell. To Koestler, the fall of Málaga served as an epitome of the confusion, cowardice, and lack of discipline of the Government forces. He blamed the Government for not supplying the city defense with the arms and war material

of the Republic. This fact increased the feeling amongst the Republican soldiers that they were abandoned to the slaughter of the rebel forces (Koestler, 1937: 216). Orwell also found the story of the fall of the city "disgraceful" and in his war memoir mentions that some militiamen believed Málaga fell to the Nationalists due to treachery (Orwell, 1938: 21). Notwithstanding, Koestler expected the defenders of Málaga to stand their ground because they were "fighting for a cause that was their own" while on the other side was the rebel army consisting of Italians, Moroccans, and legionaries who exerted professional bravery of mercenaries and fought against "the people's cause" (Koestler, 1937: 216).

And while Koestler did not directly participate in the conflict, Orwell did, as was mentioned above. As a member of the POUM militia he was able to gain a better insight into the way the Leftist militias were organised. In *Homage to Catalonia*, he refuses to admit that the democratic "revolutionary" type of discipline is unreliable. He was briefly an acting-lieutenant in command of about thirty men and claimed that he never had any issue in keeping them disciplined and obeying his orders (Orwell, 1938: 13). However, in "Looking Back on the Spanish War" he concedes that there were instances when the egalitarian principle of "the worker's army" played a destructive role in impairing his authority. While he was a corporal in command of twelve men, one of the soldiers refused to go to a certain post and Orwell began to drag him towards his post. Others began shouting at Orwell and calling him a "Fascist" because his actions reminded them of the hierarchical structure of "a bourgeois army" (Orwell, 1968b: 178). Orwell refers to this incident as one of "those enormous arguments by means of which discipline is gradually hammered out in revolutionary armies" (Orwell, 1968b: 178). Therefore, we can see that his position on the egalitarian principle in the army changed over time and that he realised it was a potentially destructive way to organise soldiers.

Another reason why the revolution was doomed to fail is the absence of international solidarity of the working class. Orwell :

> Time after time, in country after country, the organized working-class movements have been crushed by open, illegal violence, and their comrades abroad, linked to them in theoretical solidarity, have simply looked on and done nothing; and underneath this, secret cause of many betrayals, has lain the fact that between white and coloured workers there is not even lip-service to solidarity. (Orwell, 1968b: 181-2)

Orwell must have been aware that most of the British volunteers in the International Brigades came from a working-class background (Baxell 114). Not only were most of them workers, but the International Brigades provided a tremendous effort to prevent Madrid from falling into Franco's hands in late 1936 (Scammell, 2001: 93). The city would eventually fall into the Nationalists' hands in 1939. Nonetheless, the failure of the Spanish revolution served as a final nail in the coffin of Orwell's belief in proletarian internationalism. What is more, his reference to the absence of any semblance of solidarity between white and non-white workers could also be traced back to the Spanish War where many Moroccans fought on the Nationalist side against the Republican army which consisted of mostly white soldiers (Koestler, 1937: 77).

Distrust and Persecution

As Hannah Arendt explains, totalitarian government is different from dictatorships and tyrannies. Crucially, it is a twentieth century phenomenon (Arendt, 1951: xxvii). Firstly, according to Arendt, unlike dictatorship and tyrannies, totalitarian government employs propaganda on a greater scale (1951: 341). Secondly, its use of secret police is unprecedented in the history of repressive regimes (Arendt, 1951: xxxvi). Thirdly, it distorts facts in order to frame its political opponents as "objective enemies" (Arendt, 1951: 424). Fourthly, and lastly,

Arendt attributes the "scientificality" of totalitarian government to the process of Western civilisation becoming obsessed with using science for unscientific purposes (1951: 346). In their writings, both Koestler and Orwell discuss what distinguishes totalitarianism from the autocratic regimes that preceded it.

One of the basic principles of totalitarianism that both authors witnessed in Spain was propaganda which was employed by both sides. Unlike Orwell, Koestler had travelled to countries where totalitarian methods had been employed by the ruling class before. In 1932, he travelled to the Soviet Union as a member of the Communist Party of Germany and spent much of the time there in Ukraine. His visit coincided with the Great Famine which was the consequence of Stalin's collectivisation of agriculture. At this moment, Koestler simply ignored the causality of the tragedy and described the shortcomings he saw in Soviet society as "unfortunate relics of the past" that would be rectified by the Party in the "glorious future" that lay ahead of the Soviet people (Scammell, 2019: 240). One of the reasons why Koestler understood the workings of Communist propaganda so well, and why his later criticism of Communism was so valuable to both the anti-Communist Left and Right surely lay in the fact that he partook in the whitewashing of the crimes of the Soviet regime (Scammell, 2019: 240). Therefore, the level of propaganda used in the Spanish conflict was not new to Koestler.

On the other hand, Orwell's hostility towards the USSR and the Communist International developed precisely because of his experiences in Spain (Newsinger, 2007: 56-7). In his letter to Stephen Spender, he claimed that he had been "very hostile to the CP since about 1935" (Orwell, 1968a: 313). What he is referring to in this letter is his aversion to the political style of the Communist Party of Great Britain because he believed it alienated ordinary people from Socialism. He simply did not find their worship of Russia, their cultural insensitivity, and crude economic determinism appealing (Newsinger, 2007: 56-7).

Orwell's first experience of totalitarian methods occurred in Spain where he witnessed revolutionaries being imprisoned and labelled as "traitors", the overreaching power of the secret police, and the blatant use of propaganda. These methods were employed by the Republican government aided by the Soviet Union in their crackdown on non-Communist groups in the Republican zone, among which was the POUM. Unlike Koestler who went to Spain as an agent of the Communist International disguised as a newspaper correspondent, Orwell cared little which anti-Fascist party he fought for (Scammell, 2001: 96). Upon his arrival in Spain, Orwell considered criticising Communist policy in Spain as "rather futile… the one thing that mattered was to win the war" (Newsinger, 2007: 57). Actually, in May 1937 he went on a leave to Barcelona in order to leave the POUM militia and join the International Brigades. Yet, what he witnessed upon his return to Barcelona completely shocked him. The city had no semblance of "working class predominance" and reminded him of an ordinary bourgeois city where class inequality was quite visible (Orwell, 1938: 26). Orwell was almost certain that the Republican government decided to liquidate the revolutionary government in Barcelona because the Soviets, who began supplying the Government with arms in the autumn of 1936, required them to do so (Orwell, 1938: 25). The atmosphere he encountered in the city was one of fear of secret police, suspicion, and disregard for the rule of law.

This widespread fear of secret police is one of the basic elements of totalitarianism. Arendt suggests that the secret police are of greater importance to totalitarian governments than the military apparatus, but that the same shift of emphasis is characteristic of tyrannies. Nonetheless, totalitarian government does not only employ the secret police to suppress the population at home, but also to establish global rule (Arendt, 1951: xxxvi). Since they ideologically claim "the whole earth as their future territory" (Arendt, 1951: xxxvi), it is logical that they put greater emphasis on an organ of domestic violence such as the secret police which will rule occupied territories with police methods rather than military forces

(Arendt, 1951: xxxvi). Accordingly, the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, the Soviet secret police usually referred to as the NKVD, participated in the Spanish conflict on two fronts. On one front they joined the Government forces and the International Brigades and engaged the "Trotskyist" POUM, while on the other they fought the Nationalist forces. Orwell describes the atmosphere in the following manner:

> Numerous foreigners with doubtful political records were on the run, with the police on their track and in constant fear of denunciation … The long nightmare of the fighting, the noise, the lack of food and sleep, the mingled strain and boredom of sitting on the roof and wondering whether in another minute I should be shot myself or be obliged to shoot somebody else had put my nerves on edge. I had got to the point when every time a door banged I grabbed for my pistol. On the Saturday morning there was an uproar of shots outside and everyone cried out: 'It's starting again!' I ran into the street to find that it was only some Assault Guards shooting a mad dog. 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. (Orwell, 1938: 71)

This atmosphere of suspicion is another essential feature of totalitarian rule. While visiting Seville upon his arrival in Spain, Koestler, too, noticed that people were mistrustful of everyone else and that there were many spies on the streets (1937: 18-21). One of the preconditions for this atmosphere is the existence of the "objective enemy". In Spain, it was Orwell's POUM which was labelled by the NKVD as the "objective enemy" that was to be eliminated. This notion of "objective enemy" transcends the initially ideologically determined enemies of the totalitarian movement (Arendt, 1951: 424). For instance, in Spain, those would be the bourgeoisie and the Church. However, a totalitarian regime is no different from a despotic one if it exterminates the initially selected enemies and returns to a normal state of

affairs (Arendt, 1951: 424). At the beginning, the NKVD focused on surveillance and destabilisation of the non-Communist groups. In the spring of 1937 the NKVD agents stationed in Spain were ordered to liquidate the leaders of these non-Communist groups. The aforementioned leader of the POUM Andreu Nin was abducted and murdered by a mobile squad of NKVD assassins. This could not have been possible had the NKVD not discredited the POUM as a "German-Francoist spy organization" (Andrew 73). Hence, we can conclude that the POUM became the "objective enemy", because the circumstances required so.

Another aspect of totalitarianism that Orwell became familiar with in Barcelona was the complete absence of the rule of law. An example of this was the case of individuals being considered "guilty" simply because they were affiliated with non-Communist groups. "Guilt by association" is a simple device that was employed by totalitarian regimes and Orwell had trouble grasping the reality of it (Arendt, 1951: 323). Following the innumerable arrests of POUM militiamen, Orwell was also forced to go into hiding:

> As for myself, I should have to go straight into hiding. The prospect revolted me. In spite of the innumerable arrests it was almost impossible for me to believe that I was in any danger. The whole thing seemed too meaningless … I kept saying, but why should anyone want to arrest me? What had I done? I was not even a party member of the POUM. Certainly I had carried arms during the May fighting, but so had (at a guess) forty or fifty thousand people. (Orwell, 1938: 103)

His wife explained to him that it was not a question of being guilty of any definite act (Orwell, 1938: 103). Orwell was considered guilty of "Trotskyism" and such an accusation was sufficient for him to be arrested and imprisoned. In this case we can also catch a taste of Orwell's patriotism that would become the subject of his essays written during the Second World War: "It was no use hanging on to the English notion that you are safe so long as you keep the law. Practically the law was what the police chose to make it" (Orwell, 1938: 103).

One of the reasons why Orwell believed England would not become a totalitarian country was that people of all social classes or political affiliations held a firm belief in "the law" as something that is of greater importance than the State and the individual, and had respect for constitutionalism (Orwell, 1968b: 46). Remarks such as "they can't run me in; I haven't done anything wrong", or "they can't do that; it's against the law" are characteristic of the atmosphere of British constitutionalism (Orwell, 1968b: 46). Orwell does not dispute the fact that the law is not administered impartially in England and considers it a powerful illusion. Nonetheless, according to Orwell, the belief in constitutionalism still has a positive influence on the British legal system (1968b: 47).

Koestler, too, was not at peace with similar methods employed by the rebels. "Guilt by association" troubled him, as well. In *Spanish Testament* he writes that those who supported the Republican government were, without exception, charged with taking part in a rebellion, despite the fact that they were part of the Government forces fighting to suppress the Nationalist uprising. Even Koestler himself was sentenced to death without being brought up for trial. In fact, he had never been informed of the reason for his arrest (Koestler, 1937: 283). In the end, Koestler would be released because many British individuals and organisations, amongst whom were 58 members of the British Parliament, sent numerous letters of protest and telegrams to General Franco demanding Koestler be released (Koestler, 1937: 383).

He was also amongst the tens of thousands of political prisoners who were condemned to death without trial. As was the case with Orwell, neither did Koestler know what he was accused of (Orwell, 1968a: 295). However, his prison experience will be explored more broadly in a separate section of the thesis.

Truth and Propaganda

Another important element of every totalitarian movement is a deliberate distortion of facts (Koestler, 1937: 41-2). In the 1930s, totalitarian movements such as the Nazi movement in Germany and the Communist movements in Europe recruited their members from a mass of indifferent people who were considered "as too apathetic or too stupid for their attention" (Arendt, 1951: 311-2). Since totalitarian movements place themselves outside and against the liberal democratic party system as a whole, new methods are introduced into political propaganda (Arendt, 1951: 311-2).

It is worth pointing out that totalitarian movements mostly use propaganda for the non-totalitarian public. Party members are never fooled by tactical manoeuvres of the party leadership (Arendt, 1951: 383), as was the case with Koestler's perception of the conflict. As was mentioned above, Koestler's book is propagandistic. His aim in writing the book is to dispute the claims made by the Nationalists that "Communism had come to power in Spain" (Koestler, 1937: 64-5). What is more, Koestler labels such claims as part of "one of the most perfidious propaganda campaigns Europe has ever known" (Koestler, 1937: 64-5). However, it has also been shown that many revolutionary activities were in process in the Republican zone. Cases of churches being demolished, private businesses collectivised, and Catholic schools being closed down were widespread in the Republican zone. Around 40 percent of all the farmland in the Republican zone was expropriated, while 54 percent of the land expropriated was turned into collectives (Payne 99). Koestler must have been aware of these developments. As the matter of fact, on his journey through Spain he briefly visits Barcelona and points out that "(t)he city presented a somewhat depressing picture" (Koestler, 1937: 178). He does not delve deeper into the living conditions in Barcelona, but it is clear that the atmosphere Orwell describes in his memoir, which consists of revolutionary songs blasting out of the loudspeakers, citizens wearing working-class clothes and addressing each other as

"Comrades", would challenge the idea Koestler is trying to convey in *Spanish Testament*. Koestler presents the war as the struggle of the Spanish people to turn Spain into a "great European democracy" (Koestler, 1937: 45). According to Scammell, Koestler was fascinated with propaganda methods employed by Franco's propagandists and the reason for that was the fact that he identified with them and, what is particularly interesting, "was probably aware of it" (95). These methods included rebel propagandists trying to create an atmosphere reminiscent of the Crusades because of the anti-clerical character of the Republican government (Koestler, 1937: 109-10). The Catholic Church in Spain also spread many propagandistic claims. Namely, the clergy glorified the Nationalists' allies, and demonised their adversaries:

> France was represented as being a decadent nation, corrupted by "cocottes and anti-clericals"; England, the egoistic and perfidious Albion, as being the arch-enemy of Spain and of the Papacy. Germany, on the other hand, was a "chaste and healthy nation, which possessed an extraordinarily powerful army and fleet and whose friendship was likely to be in all circumstances of advantage to Spain, and to contribute to the welfare and the prosperity of the Catholic Church". (Koestler, 1937: 101).

While Koestler accuses the Nationalists of using "perfidious propaganda" against the Republican government, and at the same time downplays the reality of many parts of Spain being put under workers' control, Orwell, on the other hand, is more concerned with Government and Communist propaganda against the POUM and other non-Communist groups in the Republican zone. Orwell believes that those who have not been fighting the war, the international public and future historians, would have a difficult time getting a more accurate and unbiased account of the war because the media misreported the Spanish crisis (Orwell, 1968a: 269). It was in Spain, in the case of the Barcelona fighting to be precise, that

Orwell begins wrestling with the epistemological problem of whether it is possible to control the past or even distort memory (Crick 156). He fears that future historians would have nothing but party propaganda and a mass of accusations since no reliable records would be available to them (Orwell, 1938: 73). The truth would be even more difficult to establish because, according to Orwell, left-wing papers, such as the *News Chronicle* and the *Daily Worker*, have done more to prevent the British public from grasping the reality of the conflict than pro-Fascist newspapers (Orwell, 1968a: 269). For instance, the *Daily Worker* claimed the POUM planned an insurrection against the Republican government, and was acting under Nationalist orders (Orwell, 1938: 78). Koestler's criticism of the English press, on the contrary, lies in the fact that some journalists are suffering from what he terms, the "objectivity neurosis":

> Nevertheless there is a form of journalistic vanity which is just as dangerous as the indulgence in unscrupulous and tendentious propaganda; I call it "objectivity neurosis." The journalist who is determined at all costs to give proof of his objectivity often succumbs to the temptation of maintaining silence with regard to concrete facts, because these facts are in themselves so crude that he is afraid of appearing biased. English journalists in particular, with their traditional feeling for level-headedness and decency, have often had to complain of this difficulty. But a civil war is in itself a somewhat indecent affair. "Damn it," a correspondent of a conservative paper who had just returned from rebel territory once said to me, "sometimes one would really rather be writing for 'The Daily Worker'." (Koestler, 1937: 84)

Koestler's definition of "objectivity neurosis" greatly corresponds with the idea of what is today known as "false balance", "bothsidesism", "bothsidesing" or "false equivalency". This kind of media bias aims to remain impartial and to present both sides of the story as equally credible. This kind of reporting would be quite admirable, but problems emerge "when the

factual evidence is stacked heavily on one side" (Spayd, "The Truth About 'False Balance'"). Critics of "bothsidesism" claim that by giving an impression of being fair, the media actually do more harm to their audience since neither of the sides may be seen in the right light, and an idea that most might view as reprehensible is represented as being equally credible ("Looking at 'Bothsidesing'"). We can attribute this "false balance" to the view of the Spanish War as one fought between two equally appalling sides that was prevalent amongst the members of the British establishment who were not actively working against the Spanish Republic, but neither were they helping the Nationalists (Baxell 61).

Orwell would find writing for the above mentioned the *Daily Worker* appalling. Namely, in *Homage to Catalonia*, he brings an excerpt from the *Daily Worker* dated May 11, 1937, in which the POUM is accused of starting the Barcelona fighting. Most of the Communist and pro-Communist press even claimed that the insurrection against the Government was carried out under Fascist orders (Orwell, 1938: 78). As it has been mentioned at the beginning of this section, totalitarian regimes use propaganda "in a world which itself is nontotalitarian" (Arendt, 1951: 342). The fact that pro-Communist newspapers in Britain were willing to serve as a mouthpiece for Soviet propaganda and change their editorial policy in accordance with the Soviet foreign policy deeply troubled Orwell ("Inside the Whale" 513). The *Daily Worker* and the *New Statesman* represented the POUM as a pro-Fascist organisation in order to discredit them. The Soviet foreign policy was determined to hamper the revolutionary momentum in the Republican zone and the Communist press in Britain acted in accordance with it (Orwell, 1968b: 183).

On the issue of the POUM starting a Fascist uprising in Barcelona Koestler claims in *Spanish Testament* that the anti-Stalinist party was the one inflaming public feelings: "The Anarchists blamed the Catalan Government for the food shortage and organized an intensive campaign of political agitation; the windows of the trams were plastered with their leaflets.

The P.O.U.M. – the Trotskyist Party – was even more unrestrained in its agitation" (1937: 178). It is important to point out that Koestler would later become a fierce critic of such defamation. In *Scum of the Earth*, he mentions that party members refer to this device of having an explanation for every situation as "revolutionary dialectics" (25-6). What is also interesting, in the same memoir we find out that Koestler has not developed the same kind of animosity towards the Leftist elements of the British press that we could see in Orwell's writings on Spain. He claims that the French press did not report on the concentration camps that were erected in France for the militiamen who fought in the Spanish Civil War, and other foreigners who were deemed "undesirable aliens". The *Daily Herald* and the *New Statesman*, on the other hand, both reported with impartiality on these concentration camps in which Koestler himself was incarcerated (Koestler, 1941: 47).

Orwell, on the contrary, considers anti-POUM claims ludicrous and elaborates why the May fighting was not instigated by its militia, and why this "Trotskyist party" had nothing to do with Fascism other than deep animosity towards it. Firstly, the POUM had little influence in the trade unions and was not likely to cause a disturbance of such magnitude. Secondly, the alleged Fascist plot was based on the rumour that German and Italian troops were planning to land in Catalonia in which case the POUM would assist them. However, no German or Italian troopships were seen anywhere near the coast. And finally, had the POUM leaders been seriously intent on sabotaging the Republican war effort, they would have simply let the Nationalists through the parts of the front they were controlling (Orwell, 1938: 78-9).

This kind of framing of their political opponents is not uncommon in the development of totalitarian movements. Arendt ascribes this tendency to "the essentially fictitious character of totalitarianism" (1951: 378). The ideology of totalitarian movements is not fixed. It remains flexible in order to be adapted to different situations. Therefore, despite the fact that the POUM was carrying out the idea that the Soviet Union nominally symbolised, that is, the

global revolution, it became necessary to liquidate the group because its aims were not in accordance with the political line delivered at the Seventh Congress of the Communist International held in August 1935. The notion of the popular front did not entail inciting revolutionary activities. The Communist International wanted its Party sections across Europe to work with other anti-Fascist organisations to form a broad front against Fascism. This was quite different from the so-called Third Period of the Communist International that preceded the Seventh Congress. In 1928, the Comintern proclaimed that capitalism was about to collapse, and instructed all Communist parties to adopt an aggressive anti-parliamentary line. Needless to say, Orwell is highly critical of such changes in the Soviet foreign policy: "I believe that in the future we shall come to feel that Stalin's foreign policy, instead of being so diabolically clever as it claimed to be, has been merely opportunistic and stupid" (1968b: 183). Orwell believes that the Soviet Union should have supported revolutionary movements around the world. Instead, the Soviets resorted to adjusting their foreign policy according to the circumstances on the European political scene. The Soviet political elite thought primarily of the stability of the Soviet system, rather than the global revolution.

Scientism and Determinism

As mentioned above, Koestler and Orwell interpret the Spanish Civil War as an event which halted the expected course of history. They are both referring to the elements of totalitarianism that were brought to light in the Spanish War. Therefore, they both interpret history as being linear and irreversible. This kind of progressive understanding of history emerged during the Age of Enlightenment. While Orwell was not a Marxist during the Spanish conflict, Koestler as a member of the Communist Party of Germany must have been. On account of this fact, it must have been a great surprise not seeing Marxian approach to economic determinism succeed in Spain: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but

under given circumstances directly encountered and inherited from the past" (Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* 10). The past that Marx is referring to in this excerpt is similar to Koestler's broad elaboration of the agrarian problem that he sees as being central to the Spanish crisis. His interpretation of "the struggle of Spanish democracy against the clergy" (Koestler, 1937: 44) is also in line with this kind of understanding of history. He understands their anti-clerical struggle as "a struggle which all the Western democracies waged successfully centuries ago when they set to work to lay the foundations of a liberal era" (Koestler, 1937: 44). Thus it becomes evident that Koestler's approach to the conflict is Marxist in nature and that the events in Spain shake his ideological foundations.

Another reason why Koestler might have been disappointed by the events occurring in Spain lies in Hegel's conception of history which Hegel explains in dialectical terms.[2] Applied to the Spanish crisis, the Nationalists' struggle would be the thesis, the Barcelona revolution the antithesis, and the Republican Government the synthesis which, however, should have conserved the contradiction between the thesis and the antithesis. However, since Franco emerged out of the war victorious, this has obviously not occurred. Koestler expected all progressive forces in the world to rush to Spain to fight for the Republican cause, yet this was not the case. Koestler perceives the failure of the Republican government as a serious blow to the understanding of history which entails a gradual development of material conditions and freedom of the human kind.

Orwell's disillusionment has less to do with Marxian approach to history, and more with the crushing of democratic institutions. His interpretation of the historical break

[2] German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel regarded history as a movement towards a greater level of human freedom. His dialectics follows a thesis-antithesis-synthesis pattern. In this formula, a thesis is a positive concept, an antithesis contradicts the thesis, and the synthesis unifies the two. Hegel considered history as one giant dialectic and believed that this dialectic elucidates human development which entails progressive unfolding of the Absolute. The Absolute reveals more of its true nature as history moves forward. Marx borrowed this concept of dialectic from Hegel because it helped him explain the materialist conception of history, and his belief in a gradual development towards the establishment of communism.

occurring in Spain stems from the fact that, in a country such as England, more citizens were being included in democratic processes and their living conditions had been gradually improving. He admits that he was partially motivated to fight on the Republican side because the left-wing press in England described the Spanish conflict as “another war for democracy” (Rae 252).

Having witnessed the events in the Spanish War, both authors come to a conclusion that a linear understanding of history is an outdated concept: “I remember saying once to Arthur Koestler, “History stopped in 1936,” at which he nodded in immediate understanding. We were both thinking of totalitarianism in general, but more particularly of the Spanish Civil War” (Orwell, 1968b: 179).

Having witnessed the crushing of progressive forces in Spain, their interpretation of a gradual human development through history is called into question. They perceived totalitarianism as an aberration from enlightened modernity. The methods employed in Spain appeared barbaric and uncivilised. Koestler saw the bombardment of Madrid by the Nationalists as “a challenge to civilization” (1937: 177). Furthermore, he believes that if the crimes perpetrated by the Nationalists go unpunished, Western civilisation would be doomed (1937: 177). Orwell, on the other hand, witnessed the crushing of a revolution he considered to be authentic, and worth fighting for. The crushing was done by the Republican government aided by the totalitarian Soviet regime.

However, the argument outlined in Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s famous work titled *Dialectic of Enlightenment* claims the exact opposite. Totalitarianism does not depart from the Enlightenment project; rather, it embodies it in many ways. As has been stated in the previous section, totalitarian movements are characterised by their “indifference to the arguments of political opponents” (Arendt, 1951: 311-2) since they place themselves outside the party system. Adorno and Horkheimer attribute the success of Enlightenment to its

tendency to eliminate the unknown through the belief in science. One of the fundamental principles of the French tradition of positivism is a belief that knowledge can only be discovered through science. Namely, "that which cannot be known scientifically, cannot be known" (Bryant 13). Humans are afraid when there is anything unknown and, in this context, demythologisation is an important element to Enlightenment: "Enlightenment is mythical fear radicalized. The pure immanence of positivism, its ultimate product, is nothing other than a form of universal taboo. Nothing is allowed to remain outside, since the mere idea of the "outside" is the real source of fear" (Horkheimer and Adorno 11). This totalitarian spirit which fears anything that remains "outside" was obvious in any totalitarian country, but also in 1930s Spain. Aside from numerous mass killings perpetrated by both sides, any expression of opposing values was completely eliminated in the whole of Spain. For instance, while the Republican zone saw closure of all Catholic schools, leftist and liberal teachers were purged in the Nationalist zone (Payne 163).

What is also worth pointing out when it comes to the notion of totalitarianism being a modern phenomenon is the "scientificality" of totalitarian regimes. Another principle of the French tradition of positivism that is significant in this context is an assertion that "moral and political choice should be established exclusively on a scientific basis" (Bryant 20). Using science for unscientific purposes had been employed in modern politics even before totalitarian ideologies gained popularity. Arendt asserts this was the result of the Western world becoming obsessed with science (1951: 346). Her interpretation of totalitarianism being the last stage in this process of science becoming an answer to all ills of the human kind is quite similar to Horkheimer's and Adorno's. The positivist conviction that the future is to become scientifically predictable is based on the presumption that objective laws of power can be discovered. And indeed, totalitarian regimes sugar-coat living conditions of the population by avoiding discussion and claiming that "only the future can reveal its merits"

(Arendt, 1951: 346). This sort of "postponed ideal", or "theoretical future happiness" (Koestler, 1941a: 150), strips the totalitarian regime of responsibility for the present. However, Arendt asserts that the main discrepancy lies in the fact that totalitarianism, unlike "scientism", does not resort to such procedures having in mind human welfare as its object (1951: 347).

Both authors would later become aware that an assertion that totalitarian spirit is incompatible with enlightened modernity is flawed. In August 1941, Orwell wrote an essay titled "Wells, Hitler and the World State" in which he dismisses the idea of totalitarianism being a deviation in the world run by a scientific man:

> But unfortunately the equation of science with common sense does not really hold good. The aeroplane, which was looked forward to as a civilizing influence but in practice has hardly been used except for dropping bombs, is the symbol of that fact. Modern Germany is far more scientific than England, and far more barbarous. Much of what Wells has imagined and worked for is physically there in Nazi Germany. The order, the planning, the State encouragement of science, the steel, the concrete, the aeroplanes, are all there, but all in the service of ideas appropriate to the Stone Age. Science is fighting on the side of superstition. But obviously it is impossible for Wells to accept this. It would contradict the world-view on which his own works are based. The war-lords and the witch-doctors must fail, the common-sense World State, as seen by a nineteenth-century liberal whose heart does not leap at the sound of bugles, must triumph. (Orwell, 1968b: 102)

Orwell's skepticism towards the belief that science is a universal solution to all problems that humanity faces to a great extent stems from his Spanish experience. It was in Spain that he witnessed the power the airplane has to alter the conditions of war, and modern warfare in general. He admits that no airplane ever dropped a bomb anywhere in his vicinity, but he did

see some of the Nationalist aircraft being used for propaganda purposes. In that one instance, copies of a Nationalist newspaper announcing the fall of Málaga were dropped (Orwell, 1938: 20). Furthermore, he witnessed science "fighting on the side of superstition" for the first time in Spain where German and Italian aircraft had a great impact on the outcome of the war. Nonetheless, Orwell believes that totalitarian regimes are associated with "scientificality" on a practical level. He exposes their use of science, i.e. modern war machinery for unscientific purposes, but does not indicate that there is any trait of "scientificality" in their ideologies for he claims that their ideas are "appropriate to the Stone Age" (Orwell, 1968b: 102).

Koestler's criticism is comparable to Orwell's in that he no longer believed science was an adequate compass for mankind. Describing José María Gil-Robles, the leader of the Spanish Confederation of Autonomous Rights (commonly known as the CEDA), as "a pioneer of the Fascist movement in Spain" (Koestler, 1937: 59-60), he also points to this paradox of "the ultra modern form of reaction" (Koestler, 1937: 59-60). Koestler asserts the Nationalists were striving to impose "the Middle Ages values" on the Spanish population with the help of modern technology (1937: 59-60).

Thus we catch a glimpse of Koestler's position on Reason and the belief in science in his most famous novel *Darkness at Noon*. Rubashov, awaiting his execution in an isolation cell, writes in his diary:

> "We have thrown overboard all conventions, our sole guiding principle is that of consequent logic; we are sailing without ethical ballast." Perhaps the heart of the evil lay there. Perhaps it did not suit mankind to sail without ballast. And perhaps reason alone was a defective compass, which led one on such a winding, twisted course that the goal finally disappeared in the mist. Perhaps now would come the time of great darkness. (Koestler, 1941a: 237-8)

The narrator's comment on Rubashov's diary entry resembles Orwell's refusal to equate science with common sense. The narrator questions the possibility of mankind progressing towards a more peaceful, technologically advanced future without critically examining the possibilities where scientific discoveries may take the human kind. Additionally, the narrator's skepticism towards logic is in accordance with Koestler's criticism towards the "unconditional adaptation of the tenet that the End justifies the Means" (1941: 23-4). He perceives such Machiavellian indifference to morality as a typical trait of totalitarianism and more disastrous than "a naked tyranny of the Neronian type" (1941: 23-4).

War Theory and Pacifism

For the past century or so, war has been considered an aberration that modernity would correct. Warfare has been linked to barbarity and tribalism, while modernity has been considered pulling Man towards enlightenment (Curtis ix). The havoc wrought by World War One built a mental atmosphere in which most people in Europe sought "nothing beyond ease, security and avoidance of pain" (Rubio 27). In such a worldview, there was little room for military virtues which had been embodied in a British cartoon character named Colonel Blimp[3]. More specifically, it was the European Left that interpreted strategy and military matters as anachronistic. Things changed a bit for the Left around 1935 what has been, at least partially, the result of the new party line imposed at the aforementioned Seventh Congress of the Communist International (Orwell, 1968b: 54-5), and to a greater extent the general rise of Fascism and Nazism. Orwell was highly critical of this popular front movement for two reasons. The first dealt with the fact that by being focused on fighting against Fascism it evaded clearly stating what it was fighting for, and the second because it implied that the Russians would do the fighting for the British (1968b: 75).

[3] British cartoon character invented by cartoonist David Low which first appeared in *Evening Standard* in April 1934. Colonel Blimp is an obese, elderly figure representing a stereotypical British reactionary.

Orwell would remain deeply repelled by the English left-wing intelligentsia until the end of his life, but his most severe accusations were written in the aftermath of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact[4]. For those who were blindly following the line proposed by the Communist International he had nothing but contempt because they were actually in service of Russian foreign policy (Newsinger, 2007: 58), while the pacifists, according to Orwell, were objectively pro-Nazism because they were undermining the British war effort, and some were even subjectively pro-Nazism. Orwell considered those who were anti-war objectively aiding the Nazis, while those who supported a peace dictated by Germany or even German victory were seen as subjectively pro-Nazi (Newsinger, 2007: 86). The latter accusation may seem far-fetched and even reminiscent of the Communist propaganda used against the POUM during the Spanish Civil War. However, Newsinger claims there is some accuracy to Orwell's accusations: "Not only were there pacifists who adopted a pro-German stance, but the pacifist movement had been very deliberately infiltrated by fascists and fascist sympathisers in the run up to the war" (2018: 86). In December 1944 Orwell admitted he had been too harsh in his criticism and wrote that the pacifist does not have to be objectively pro-Nazi, in other words, a traitor (Rubio 56).

A great deal of Orwell's writing is dedicated to the morality of war, but in *Homage to Catalonia* he does not articulate his opinion on pacifism, or provide a definite answer to the question whether fighting a war is a moral enterprise. Koestler, on the other hand, advocates a firm stance against Fascism and other forms of authoritarian government. Moreover, he expresses his contempt for the pacifism of the European Left in *Spanish Testament*:

[4] Officially known as the Treaty of Non-Aggression between Germany and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. It was a non-aggression pact named after Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov and German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop that enabled Nazi Germany to invade Poland unopposed by the Soviets.

> In those post-war years the European Left, especially in the defeated countries, was ultra-pacifist. It lived in fools' paradises – Locarno, the League of Nations, Collective Security. The unsavoury business of arming and seizing power they left to the reactionaries, who were guilty of very bad form and actually did seize power: Hitler, Mussolini, Dollfuss. (182-3)

In such an atmosphere, Koestler stresses that it was deemed distasteful to be interested in military affairs which turned out to be a mistake seized by totalitarian and other authoritarian movements. As the matter of fact, at the beginning of *Spanish Testament* Koestler informs the reader that he was preoccupied writing a pacifist novel on the day the Nationalist revolt broke out. Koestler dropped writing the novel and became engaged in following the situation in Spain (17).

During the war, one of the few people on the European Left knowledgeable about military matters was General Julius Deutsch who invited Koestler to attend a parade in a seaside town near Valencia (Koestler, 1937: 182). Koestler appears to be claiming that the Republicans would have had more success had they followed General Deutsch's example. Had they spent more time studying military matters, they would have had more success on the battlefield (Koestler, 1937: 182). As the matter of fact, one could compare Koestler's view of war to Marcuse's argument saying that the struggle to change the war by love is futile. Love should be turned to hatred while the struggle takes place, and return to love once the struggle has been won (Marcuse 173).

In his review of Koestler's *Spanish Testament*, Orwell points to Koestler's refusal to pretend to be objective after he has gone through the hell of Madrid being bombed by the Nationalists. At first, Orwell is critical of Koestler's book and believes such unidimensional representations of war epitomise the Nietzschean axiom – "he who fights against dragons becomes a dragon himself" (1968a: 295). Later in the review, he juxtaposes bombing with more

brutal ways of conducting warfare such as torture and destruction of peasants' dwellings. If one does not become a dragon, one is still in danger of being "enslaved by people who are more ready to these things than you are yourself" (1968a: 296). In the Spanish case, that meant fighting against Franco's Nationalists aided by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. Orwell concludes the review with a disappointing statement that there is still no viable alternative to these horrors when it comes to fighting wars. He expresses a similar view in "Looking Back on the Spanish War" in which he does define war as evil, but "often the lesser evil" (175).

Even though Orwell does not explicitly comment on the morality of war, his stance towards war-making in *Homage to Catalonia* is two-fold. Describing the poor conditions the militiamen are forced to endure at the Aragon front, and pointing out the fact that all soldiers are infested with lice, Orwell ironically exclaims: "Glory of war, indeed!" (1938: 36). In a few other instances in the memoir, Orwell further illustrates on the widespread lack of hygiene among the soldiers of the revolutionary army. He found it disgusting, but claims it did not bother him after some time:

> The position stank abominably, and outside the little enclosure of the barricade there was excrement everywhere. Some of the militiamen habitually defecated in the trench, a disgusting thing when one had to walk round it in the darkness. But the dirt never worried me. Dirt is a thing people make too much fuss about. It is astonishing how quickly you get used to doing without a handkerchief and to eating out of the tin pannikin in which you also wash. (Orwell, 1938: 14)

In *Civilisation and Its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud defined "the use of soap as a direct measure of civilization" (Freud 43). In the case of the militiamen defecating in the trench, Orwell found it repulsive since the human impulse towards cleanliness stems from the fact that *homo sapiens* strives to get rid of excretions "which have become unpleasant to the sense-

perceptions" (Freud 54). Therefore, according to Freud's argument, the person who lacks hygiene offends others.

The fact that Orwell is not worried about dirt in those conditions suggests the uncivilised character of war. In a way, war appears to be a pre-civilised, even pre-modern endeavour in which you are bound to become uncivilised if you engage in it. Writing "Looking Back on the Spanish War" in autumn 1942, Orwell still could not "escape from disgusting smells of human origin" (174). He finds it funny that the first thing that comes to his mind when reminiscing about his Spanish days are latrines which unmasked the reality of the Spanish War for him.

On the other hand, there is an episode in *Homage to Catalonia* in which we can notice that Orwell actually believes there is some glory to war after all. The picture consists of a group of men aboard a train going to the front, the maimed slowly sliding down the train, and the guns on the open trucks (Orwell, 1938: 94). Orwell is aware that it is a "pernicious" feeling, but the episode still arouses in him the idea "that war *is* glorious after all" (1938: 94). In the essay published in 1942, Orwell would admit that he had a romantic perception of "fighting a war which is *about* something" (Orwell, 1968b: 174). In the end he would become disappointed in that the memory of the Spanish experience is reduced to degrading trench conditions.

Orwell's position on war is two-fold and has been described as "descending into the doublethink of Nineteen Eighty-Four" (Keeble 402). This sort of "double-think" stance is visible on his take on the glory of war, but another more telling example would be his approach to bombing what has been touched upon in the context of his review of Koestler's Spanish memoir. Namely, he considers it a less harmful action than spreading propaganda whose only goal is to dehumanise the enemy (Rae 254). Orwell believes it is "not especially inhumane", but "a relatively civilized weapon" (Keeble 402). What is more, in *Homage to*

Catalonia Orwell even expresses his hope that this "civilized weapon" could possibly alter the conditions of some future war in which warmongers living on the home front would be just as vulnerable as the soldiers in the trenches (31).

Personal experience

Apart from challenging as well as changing their political positions on many issues, the Spanish War was a deeply personal experience for both writers. In a "Dialogue With Death", the second part of the Spanish memoir, Koestler describes his one hundred and two days spent imprisoned in Seville. Even though he had plenty of time to leave Málaga, Koestler decided to stay and witness what will happen upon the entrance of the Nationalist forces to a town because no journalist had ever done that. He was arrested upon the arrival of the forces and taken to Seville. Koestler describes the two Civil Guards, Don Luis and Don Pedro, who took him to the Seville prison as being "for the most part kindly Spaniards" (1937: 264). He does not consider them exceptions fighting on the Nationalist side, and refuses to attribute too much importance to the individual character. His outlook is rather pessimistic when it comes to individual liberty because he rejects the notion of the individual having much freedom to realise "his primitive inclinations": "What matters is not what a man is, but what function the social system dictates that he shall fulfil" (Koestler, 1937: 264). This position likely stems from his Communist worldview which dismisses individual freedom as a bourgeois concept. However, the prison experience would deeply undermine this position. The repressiveness of the Nationalists that he personally experienced made him realise that the "individual is sacrosanct" (Koestler, 1941a: 146-7). Until he was thrown in jail he had justified the crimes perpetrated by the Soviet regime. He had not deemed the famine in Ukraine, which caused six million deaths because of Stalin's collectivisation of agriculture, a tragic event, but a shortcoming which could be improved in the "glorious future" of the Soviet Union (Scammell, 2019: 240). Yet, the prison experience transformed Koestler's vision of the

individual in society, and he became aware that crimes cannot be "justified by the moral and collective goal they serve" (Scammell, 2019: 245-7).

Orwell ascribes more importance to his personal encounters than Koestler. His Spanish memoir actually opens up with a scene of him meeting an Italian militiaman. Orwell asserts that this Italian militiaman wearing "his shabby uniform and fierce pathetic face" embodies the struggle of the Spanish revolution. In his description of the militiaman there is no cynicism that we can discern in Koestler's portrayal of Don Luis and Don Pedro. We could also see that Orwell retains a great level of humaneness in combat. In his 1942 essay on the Spanish War he brings a story, which he considers moving, of him not shooting at a Nationalist soldier who was in the open. The soldier "was half-dressed and was holding up his trousers with both hands as he ran" (Orwell, 1968b: 177), and Orwell did not consider him a Fascist, but a "fellow creature, similar to [him]self" (Orwell, 1968b: 177). Koestler's time spent in prison was a terrifying, but more importantly an eye-opening experience for him for two reasons. The first had to do with due process violations. He was never interrogated after his arrest in Málaga, and it was not until he was in the Seville prison that he found out that he had not been summoned before the court-martial to hear his death sentence (Koestler, 1937: 254). His situation was further agonised by the fact that he had spent most of the time behind bars without having any idea what he was accused of. The second reason is the torture of spending time awaiting his death sentence and hearing executions of other prisoners being carried out during the night (Koestler, 1937: 343-4). In a collection of essays written by former Communists titled *The God That Failed*, Koestler wrote the following on his prison experience:

> The lesson taught by this type of experience, when put into words, always appears under the dowdy guise of perennial commonplaces: that man is a reality, mankind an abstraction; that men cannot be treated as units in operations of political arithmetic

> because they behave like the symbols for zero and the infinite, which dislocate all mathematical operations; that the end justifies the means only within very narrow limits; that ethics is not a function of social utility, and charity not a petty-bourgeois sentiment but the gravitational force which keeps civilization in its orbit. Nothing can sound more flatfooted than such verbalizations of a knowledge which is not of a verbal nature; yet every single one of these trivial statements was incompatible with the Communist faith which I held. (68)

Koestler was released on May 12, 1937 and later commented that at that point he was not yet aware that he could no longer champion the Communist ideology. The above-quoted excerpt seems a bit reductive and Koestler is aware that these assertions sound quite commonplace, but he admits that feelings of fear and pity transformed his outlook and values. The reason why Koestler did not cease to be a member of the Communist Party of Germany as soon as he was set free, but only nine months later in February 1938 (Davis 504), lies in the fact that this change had been unconscious (Koestler, 1949: 67). Nonetheless, the commonplaces that Koestler lists in the excerpt are embodied in the figure of the Commissar. In 1945 he published a collection of essays titled *The Yogi and the Commissar* in which he elaborates his view of human history producing two conceptions of Change. The Yogi symbolises Change from Within, while the Commissar stands for all attempts to bring Change from Without. The Commissar's approach is Machiavellian in nature because it aims to bring about this Change by using all the means necessary, "including violence, ruse, treachery and poison" (Koestler, 1945: 9-10).

Orwell experienced a similar near-death experience when he was shot in the neck by a sniper outside Huesca. He thought for a few minutes that he had been killed by the bullet, but did not consider it a revelatory, but simply "an interesting experience" (Orwell, 1968a: 281). What must have left a greater impact on Orwell was seeing his friends getting arrested or

fleeing Spain after the POUM was declared illegal. He could not come to terms with George Kopp, his personal friend and comrade-in-arms, getting arrested because he "knew [Kopp's] history" (Orwell, 1938: 102). Koestler does not refer to any of his friends getting arrested or murdered in Spain, but he experienced a similar shock when some of his closest friends were arrested during the Moscow Trials what also must have contributed to his decision to part with Communism. His brother-in-law Ernst Ascher and two of his closest friends, Alex Weissberg and his wife Eva, were arrested in the Russian mass-purges. Ascher was most likely murdered because he had been missing for twelve years when Koestler wrote about him in *The God That Failed*, while the Weissberg couple were released and expelled from Russia. According to Koestler, Eva's experiences in Russian prisons provided him with useful information while writing *Darkness at Noon* (1949: 69-70). It was not altogether uncommon that writers would switch their political allegiances due to their personal experiences. John Dos Passos went to Spain in 1937 to serve the Republican cause, but having found out that his closest Spanish friend José Robles was murdered by the Communists, gradually evolved into a vehement anti-Communist (Payne 168).

Conclusion

The events that Arthur Koestler and George Orwell witnessed during their time in Spain changed their opinion on many issues. Having realised that he could no longer keep convincing himself that the notion of the end justifying the means is morally acceptable, Arthur Koestler left the Communist Party of Germany. He could no longer distinguish between the methods of the USSR and Fascist governments. On the other hand, during his stay in Spain, George Orwell was not a member of any party but a dedicated Leftist, yet the events during the May fighting in Barcelona turned him into a vociferous anti-Communist.

Despite realising that it was a nominally Socialist country that prevented a social revolution in Catalonia, Orwell found the situation in Barcelona worth preserving and as a piece of proof that a more humane society was achievable. Koestler's brief visit to Barcelona resulted in a radically different perception of the Spanish revolution, which can only be attributed to his party affiliation. In general, the first part of Koestler's memoir is in line with the "grand camouflage" – the position adopted by the Communist International and the Republican Government which denied that the Spanish revolution ever occurred in order to bring the Western democracies to the Republican camp.

Both Koestler and Orwell were critical of the lack of fighting morale in the Republican ranks. Orwell posits in his memoir that the POUM militia has been established upon the egalitarian principle. However, he would later admit that there were some incidents in which the principle proved difficult to implement. What is more, he considered the idea of proletarian internationalism practically dead and buried with the crushing of the Spanish revolution because not many workers around the world showed any solidarity with the Spanish working class.

Returning from the Aragon front to Barcelona, Orwell for the first time experienced what it was like living under a totalitarian government. The widespread fear of secret police and disregard for the rule of law substituted the revolutionary atmosphere. This was done through the efforts of the Republican Government which was becoming more and more influenced by the USSR. Koestler sensed the same kind of distrust and fear in the Nationalist zone, while he could personally attest to the fact that the rebel government had little regard for due process.

It has been established that the first part of Koestler's memoir is propagandistic in nature because of his Communist Party membership, and that he mostly focused on Nationalist propaganda. Orwell, on the other hand, saw Communist propaganda as being

distinct from propaganda employed in the wars of the past. He could not fathom the extent of neglect for facts, and was deeply troubled by the fact that the British press partook in the dissemination of stories such as the POUM being a Fascist organisation.

Koestler and Orwell came to an agreement that the Spanish Civil War represented a historical milestone. The notion that human history represents a gradual improvement of social conditions has been proved to be incorrect. Moreover, it has become clear that the level of progress in science does not necessarily correspond to the degree of progress on the level of ideas. However, it is crucial to stress that, at this point, Koestler was considering Franco's forces as the reactionary element, while Orwell came to a realisation that the USSR also played a reactionary role in the conflict.

Though they were not advocates of militarism, both writers were aware that the pacifist character that the European Left embraced in the wake of the First World War ought to be abandoned. Their Spanish experience made them realise that it was necessary to fight against Fascism using weapons. Moreover, Orwell's writing discusses the morality of war to a greater extent than Koestler. His position on war is two-fold; in some instances he considers it a deeply banal endeavour, while in others he thinks it glorious.

Ultimately, both, *Spanish Testament* and *Homage to Catalonia* are filled with episodes that are of personal nature. Two most important are surely Koestler's imprisonment, and Orwell getting wounded. The former episode, according to Koestler, left a great impact on his worldview, while Orwell simply claimed getting shot by a sniper was an interesting experience.

The memoirs are thus documents of the world of the 1930s in which a writer could no longer focus solely on aesthetics or literary devices, but was forced to engage himself in the

reality surrounding him, and inevitably be affected by it. No writer could remain “objective” in the world that was rapidly changing and no one knew the direction it was bound to take.

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Abstract

Arthur Koestler and George Orwell were amongst the many intellectuals who rushed to Spain when the civil war broke out in 1936. Both went to Spain as news correspondents, but neither of them reported on the conflict *per se*. Koestler, at the time member of the Communist Party of Germany, was on a mission sent by the Communist International to gather evidence of the German and Italian governments breaching the Non-Intervention Agreement, while Orwell joined one of the many Leftist militias as soon as he arrived in Barcelona. They turned their experiences into memoirs which are one of the first illustrations of the way totalitarian regimes operate. Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* is a harsh criticism of the influence the Soviet Union had on the Republican government because it helped the Government forces hamper the revolutionary process in the Republican zone. Koestler, on the other hand, wrote *Spanish Testament* as a work of Communist propaganda that aimed at representing the conflict as a progressive, not revolutionary, struggle against Fascism. Still, despite the fact that both authors take firm political stances in their books, they grapple with various topics such as the possibility of a revolutionary transformation of capitalist society. Also, both works describe totalitarian methods that were employed both in the Nationalist and the Republican zones. There are two main differences between their memoirs. The first lies in the fact that Koestler was a committed Communist during his stay in Spain while Orwell had been critical of the Soviet regime before departing for Spain. The second has to do with the part of Spain that both authors were more familiar with. Orwell spent all of his time in Spain on the territory controlled by the Republican forces, whilst Koestler spent a great deal of time in the Nationalist zone. Their memoirs also carry a personal note because both authors had near-death experiences. Because of their experiences during the conflict, both authors would leave Spain with different outlooks on the 1930s reality.

key words: pacifism, propaganda, revolution, totalitarianism, war