



Fighting in Spain (Penguin Great Journeys)

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From Reader Review *Fighting in Spain* (Penguin Great Journeys) for online ebook

Emilie says

I really enjoyed this account of Orwell's stay in Spain during their Civil War in the 30s. His style is so engrossing, even when he is writing autobiographically. Unlike some of the other Great Journey books, his descriptions don't drag out and he really keeps the reader hanging on his every word. A fantastic introduction to the war and the forces at work on either side.

Daren says

So this is the only Orwell book I have read in the last few years, and it is also the first book I have read on the Spanish Civil War.

I will be honest, and admit I know little about the Spanish Civil War, and even in reading through the Wikipedia page on it, I am still quite confused. There seem to be a great number of militias and armies who fall loosely onto two sides, but as I say it appears pretty confusing for me. This book didn't set out to, and didn't succeed at explaining the in depth politics or parties involved.

I did enjoy the observations of war in this book. The overriding theme seems to be futility and a lack of progress. I think this is probably a more realistic summary of any war than most books on the topic offer.

A lack of uniforms, supplies, but most importantly weapons underlines the inadequacy of the force Orwell fought with. For the record he fought for POUM (Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista - Worker's Party of Marxist Unification): An anti-Stalinist revolutionary communist party of former Trotskyists formed in 1935 by Andreu Nin, one of the many parties on the Republican side, against the Nationalists (fascists), led by Franco.

Orwell reports in the book that in a three week period at Huesca, he fired only three shots in the direction of the enemy. The opposing forces were over 700 yards apart in trenches, with weapons capable of accuracy at around 150 yards. Even on leave in Barcelona he became involved in a standoff with the Assault guards - the urban police force, which I think makes them on the same side? Confusing huh? While maintaining a friendly but cautious relationship they were still opposing each other, and occupied adjacent buildings. Again the entire force had enough rifles for those on guard to have one, and needed to surrender the weapon to their replacement each watch change.

One of the Assault Guards opposite knelt down and began firing across the barricade. I was on guard in the observatory at the time. I trained my rifle on him and yelled across:

'Hi! Don't you shoot at us!'

'What?'

'Don't you fire at us or we'll fire back!'

'No, no! I wasn't firing at you. Look - down there!'

He motioned with his rifle towards the side street that ran past the bottom of our building. Sure enough, a youth in blue overalls, with a rifle in his hand, was dodging around the corner. Evidently he had just taken a shot at the Assault Guards on the roof.

'I was firing at him. He fired first. (I believe this was true.) We don't want to shoot you. We're only workers, the same as you are.'

He made the anti-fascist salute, which I returned.

'Have you got any more beer left?'

'No, it's all gone.'

His explanation of being shot, and his recovery is also a good read.

I didn't mention this is an excerpt, and a part of the Penguin Great Journeys series - which is a bit strange, as it wasn't really a journey like the others in the series. It comes from his book *Homage to Catalonia*. Not sure I will seek out the full book - but this was good starter on the Spanish Civil War. I have another book on a couple of New Zealand volunteers who fought, so I will try and get to that soon, and see if that explains the situation more!

Jack says

As soon as I was committed to *Fighting in Spain*, I realised that it was in fact an abridged version of *Homage to Catalonia*. I'm not sure how much of that book is omitted in this 'Penguin Great Journeys' edition, but I feel like it certainly retains the nuts and bolts of the themes and narrative structure. *Fighting in Spain* is a piece of extreme journalism about a reality of war that's often overlooked by those who have never experienced it; not the horror of war, but the squalor - the grinding, relentless squalor. And yet even Orwell's bleakest, most spartan experiences are made compulsively readable by his revered style, which was one of cogent brevity and wry humour. Indeed, it is when things go wrong that Orwell makes his funniest observations, such as when he describes the edge of the fields being 'crusted with dung' or lamenting the Spaniards' 'maddening unpunctuality'. The funniest example of this is on pg. 13, where Orwell bemoans how a particular train will run an hour late week after week until one day, based entirely on 'some private whim' of the engine driver, it will depart half an hour early. In this passage one can feel both Orwell's frustration and affection for the chaotic Spanish character, and it caused me to laugh out loud.

Another memorable passage can be found on pg. 118, where he muses on what it's like to be on the frontline of history. Far from aggrandising himself as 'an historical character', he writes that 'the physical details always outweigh everything else', explaining that he did not 'think about the rights and wrongs of the miserable internecine scrap, but simply the discomfort and boredom... and the hunger which was growing worse and worse'. Passages like these communicate the miserable tedium of war.

Donna Boulton says

Some great descriptive passages. Although the politics of war didn't interest me, Orwell's first hand experience was fascinating.

Drew Pyke says

It's been many years since I read Orwell (1984, Animal Farm and Down & Out in London and Paris). I forgot how accessible and moreish his style is.

It comes in 2 main parts for me: trench warfare in Huesca and the urban guerrilla like shootouts in Barcelona.

In the first it is sometimes comic how inadequate POUM's arsenal is and how bad the Spanish marksmanship when they got the rare chance of contact. It was really interesting how Julie's rat scene from 1984 seems to have borne from his experience in this spell: "one thing I hate more than another it is a rat running over me in the darkness". He did well in demystifying war by explaining the mundaneness of life in the parapets (coldness, boredom etc).

The second half was his time in Barcelona which at the beginning was far removed from war until tit for tat broke out. Favourite part of this was the deterioration of relations among laymen and organisations when the lies and propaganda came through, stirring tensions. This is also another precursor to 1984: "the foreign communist papers were beginning to arrive, and their accounts of the fighting were...wildly inaccurate as to facts". Demonstrating his first exposure to Stalinist Communism (he fought for anti-stalinist Marxist POUM).

At the end, with his return to Huesca, he did get shot in the neck. This only added to his humble heroism. His short synopsis of the war at the end pits fascist Italy and Germany against an inept Popular Front and devious Russia. Most shocking is effectively describing Britain's role as "pro-fascist".

Amazing story, but not 5 stars just because it isn't as powerful as his other 2 classics

Víctor says

I found this book while visiting the Scottish city of Inverness. I thought it could be nice and kind of funny to read about my country's civil war through the words of an english man. I was not wrong but what I did not expect was to learn so much about the subject.

Orwell narrates in a wonderful clear simple and somehow charming way what he encountered in Spain since his arrival. He speaks about Spanish manners, explains clearly how the militia worked and what his thinking was about it all. He tells his routines and describe his everyday life on the trenches with no romantic tone on it. Plain simple he talks about it like a friend could do while sharing a drink.

Perhaps that is why I enjoyed so much this book and why I have ended almost wishing for a chance to hug this guy.

His words have shown me a part of my country's history like no teacher before, but also this book gave me the chance to 'meet' a great man who will no longer be 'just' a name on a cover.

Thanks so much 'Hullo', thanks for this book and thanks for your common sense and your effort against Fascism.

Lyn says

An on-the-ground, insider's account of the Spanish civil war; a really interesting book written in the usual engaging and crafted Orwellian style. A highlight was the chapter on being wounded - if you ever wondered how it might feel to be shot, George Orwell will tell you in the most extraordinary and revealing way. Beats

anything you might have seen on film or read elsewhere.

Graham says

Rain today, so after a trip to South Morton and back via a wrong turning to the Slate factory, this little book asked to be read. Fighting in Spain is Orwell's account of his fighting, or lack thereof, during the Spanish Civil War. There are strong echoes of what is happening in Syria at the moment, but this is true of any of the internecine conflicts that pop up around the world: the foolishness, the deprivation, the lack of organisation, intelligence and resources, the politics. As an eyewitness account this is worth reading: it is told as it is, even the lack of Spanish marksmanship which allowed him on several occasions to be able to write with gratitude about the lack of Spanish marksmanship. His telling of eventually being shot in the neck is lacking in self pity; instead he is quite happy that his doctors were wrong in their prognosis.

Five stars: the economy of writing and painting of characters and situations in a few words is masterful.

Started and finished on 5-8-14

PeterJ says

I love how this man writes. No matter what the subject, his style is perfect.

Gary says

What a fantastic and honest depiction of the Spanish civil war. Orwell has an uncanny knack of describing the unfolding events of warfare in all its brutal and beautiful hues with comic panache and startling realism. Nothing happened yet everything seemed to happened all at once!

My favourite quote can be found on page 46: "I hate mountains even from a spectacular point of view. But sometimes the dawn breaking behind the hill-tops in our rear, the first narrow streaks of gold, like swords slitting the darkness, and then the growing light and the seas of carmine cloud stretching away into inconceivable distances, were worth watching even when you had been up all night, when your legs were numb from the knees down and you were sullenly reflecting that there was no hope of food for another three hours."

Read it!

Adam says

a bit perplexed why this is in the Great Journeys section, tbh

M. says

Essays from Orwell's account of his experiences as a soldier during the Spanish civil war, which is quite an interesting historical event, when of course it's being read about on a comfortable couch, not quite so for the real people who lived through it.

I truly enjoyed Orwell's observations of the war; losing innocence gradually and slowly understanding the big picture, the informal structure of command and the peculiar relationship between officers and privates, the change of mood in Barcelona in a matter of months, the poor resources and weapons and the appalling conditions of the front in Huesca, the Spanish way of dealing with different matters, the boredom and the fear, and how it felt to get shot. The short conclusion that was included in the end, and that I wish were a little longer, about the stances of western democracies and USSR at that time and its effect on the civil war and WWII, opens the door to many future reads about this subject.

Most probably these essays were parts of others longer books as: *Homage to Catalonia* and *Orwell in Spain*. Admittedly, I hitherto knew so little about the Spanish civil; just the headlines, so this was a really exciting and eye-opening read. Sure now I'll read more about it, probably starting with *Homage to Catalonia*, I think it's also worthy if your knowledge about this war is as limited as mine at the time of this writing, to gain wider knowledge from reading different views and interpretations other than Orwell's. For this book, I recommend it as a short read for those who, like me, know little about this war.

Ape says

I don't know whether this would have been better as some kind of first-hand history experience book; rather than a travel book. There's not a lot about Spain, culture etc etc other than the war experiences.

George Orwell went to Spain to fight in the civil war just before the second world war broke out. He fought with POUM which was a communist faction on the same side as the government; all against Franco and the fascists, who ended up winning. Orwell was at the front for a few months, and also on leave in Barcelona - and the general overall feeling is that it was slow, not a heck of a lot happened, and a lot of it felt like a joke. On the front there were a lot of teenaged kids who really had no idea; they were all living in these muddy trenches where people went to the toilet, there was little food, virtually no guns or ammunition; and that which they did get was so old and dodderly that half of it didn't work. No uniforms, and not enough suitable clothing for the chilly conditions. Then when he is in Barcelona he sees these properly dressed soldiers who were obviously never at the front, trotting around in pristine neat uniforms, each with a new pistol.

He ends up getting shot in the neck, and gets to experience the war time Spanish health service, which, I guess pretty much puts an end to his fighting aspirations (? - it doesn't say exactly) - although obviously he did survive it all, go back to the UK and write some great books.

Stuart Macbeath says

An entertaining human evaluation of the Spanish Civil War.

Don says

Chapters taken from 'Homage to Catalonia'. War is not so much hell, as very boring, cold, and when it's a civil war, mystifying. My favourite bit deals with the way she squares up to the fighting in Barcelona... when it comes to a fight between a workers and his natural enemy, the policeman, you don't have to ask me who's side I'm on. Bravo!
