

Orwell and Hitler

by Ron Capshaw (April 2015)

Throughout his life, George Orwell was labeled a fascist by the Communist Left. Reviewing *1984*, Harry Politt, head of the British Communist Party, characterized Winston Smith as a Nazi, based on his willingness when asked by O'Brian, who was masquerading as a rebel against Big Brother, if he would murder a child for the revolution.

Today, leftist critics have continued this accusation. Of particular importance to their indictment was Orwell's "list," which he gathered during the war privately as to who he believed would act as a quisling should the Soviets invade Great Britain. In 1949 he turned said list over to British intelligence. Alexander Cockburn, writing in *The Nation*, offered this as proof that Orwell was a budding McCarthyite, waving his own red-baiting list as did the Senator and acting as a government snoop.

But by far the most damning indictment of him was his review of *Mein Kampf* in 1940. Critics have zeroed in on his admission that he had never had any "personal animosity" toward this "deeply appealing" figure. Of this appeal he wrote:

One feels it when one sees his photographs...{especially) in his early Brownshirt days...One feels, as with Napoleon, that he is fighting against destiny, that he can't win, and yet that he somehow deserves to.

Moreover, he found Hitler an astute critic of Western social aims:

He has grasped the falsity of the hedonistic attitude to life. Nearly all Western Thought since the last war, certainly all 'progressive' thought has assumed tacitly that human beings desire nothing beyond ease, security and avoidance of pain. In such a life there is no room for patriotism and military virtues...Hitler, because in his joyless mind he feels it with exceptional strength, knows that human beings *don't* want only comfort, safety, short working-hours, hygiene, birth control and common sense; they also, at least intermittently want struggle and self-sacrifice; not to mention drums, flags, and loyalty parades.

This world view, Orwell asserted "was psychologically far sounder" than that of Western capitalist societies. For many on the Left, these utterances closed the case on the matter of Orwell's fascism.

But they quote only portions of the review. Just because Hitler was appealing did not mean that Orwell let the appeasement policies of the Western powers off the hook. As with the Communists (at least until 1939, when because of the Hitler-Stalin military partnership, they stopped criticizing Hitler), he condemned Western "property-owning classes'" shallow support of Hitler because he had "crushed the German labour movement." Nor did he let the appeal of Hitler compromise his negative views of Nazism. To him, Hitler's refusal to let world events alter his "fixed vision" was that of a monomaniac. The aims of the Nazis were to create a "horrible, brainless empire," where "nothing ever happens except the training of young men for war and the endless breeding of cannon fodder." Of his attitudes toward Hitler himself, Orwell feeling his appeal did not mean that he would not "certainly kill him if given the chance."

The entire thrust of the essay wasn't a display of Orwell's admiration of fascism, but an attempt to understand its appeal in order to fight it more effectively. But in a bit of irony, the Left who accused him then and now, have adopted the selective editing that is Big Brother's metier.

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