

The Political George Orwell

George Orwell was born 115 years ago today. He is often remembered as a paragon of lucidity and truth-telling. But he was also deeply serious about socialist politics.



Getty

[*George Orwell Illustrated*](#) is out now from Haymarket Books.

George Orwell was serious about politics.

That might seem obvious, given the pervasively political valence of “Orwellian” discourse and the politically charged touchstones of Orwell’s famous novels, the Bolshevik revolution in *Animal Farm* and totalitarian thought control in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. But the degree to which Orwell was steeped in the crosscurrents of radical politics has been routinely underestimated. So much has been said about Orwell’s legendarily plain speech and his free-thinking worldview that he now figures, for many, as an icon of non-doctrinaire and even anti-doctrinaire thought. George Orwell, whose most celebrated novel features a thirty-page tract by a fiery Trotsky-like ideologue on “the theory and practice of oligarchical collectivism,” is often treated as a quixotic naïf whose socialism was moral rather than theoretical, intuitive rather than intellectual. The truth is more complex.

Orwell was an iconoclast, but within the socialist tradition, not outside it. His satires of ideological excesses rang true because he knew those excesses intimately — ideologically, culturally, and theoretically.

As we now know, thanks to his *Complete Works* published between 1986 and 1998, Orwell was very much at home in the arcana of left politics. In 1945, when he rebuked

pro-Soviet writers for exaggerating Stalin's role in the Russian revolution, he drew his evidence from an unexpected source: the man who had served as Stalin's Foreign Minister from 1930 to 1939 and who had returned to the foreign ministry after serving as Russia's ambassador to the United States during World War 2.

"I have before me," Orwell wrote, "what must be a very rare pamphlet, written by Maxim Litvinoff in 1918 and outlining the recent events in the Russian Revolution. It makes no mention of Stalin, but gives high praise to Trotsky, and also to Zinoviev." Readers who may have casually noticed, in passing, that characters inspired by Leon Trotsky are central to both *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Goldstein) and *Animal Farm* (Snowball) are often surprised to encounter discussions of Trotskyism in Orwell's letters and essays — unfiltered, heretical Trotskyism. In his 1945 essay "Notes on Nationalism," Orwell offered a regular catalogue of political tendencies, including "3. Trotskyism," in which he said that this term is frequently "used so loosely as to include Anarchists, democratic Socialists and even Liberals. I use it here to mean a doctrinaire Marxist" and "hostility to the Stalin régime."

He warned, further, against confusing the doctrine with its namesake: "Trotskyism can be better studied in obscure pamphlets or in papers like the Socialist Appeal than in the works of Trotsky himself, who was by no means a man of one idea." He was equally interested in many other currents, major and minor.

This was not an eccentricity. Orwell never romanticized left groups, even those he favored, like the Independent Labour Party in Britain or the militia of Spain's Workers' Party of Marxist Unification, with which he fought in the Spanish civil war. But he admired dissent, and he knew that building an oppositional force, however small, is an achievement. "I have never seen him so enthusiastic," Arthur Koestler later reminisced, as when they decided to work together to found a human rights organization in 1946.

When groups he opposed but respected were victimized, he rallied to their defense, both privately and publicly. During the war he was sharply critical of anarchist war resisters, but when Scotland Yard raided their press in 1944, Orwell published a stinging criticism in the socialist *Tribune*.

When Vernon Richards and others were jailed for opposing the war, Orwell accepted their invitation to serve as vice chair of the Freedom Defence Committee. Upon their release, he helped Richards and Marie Louise Berneri set themselves up as photographers. He was newly famous as the author of *Animal Farm*, and the photos they took (of the reticent author and his son Richard) were commercially valuable. They also remain our best photos of Orwell.

Organizing takes effort and courage, and Orwell saw no shame in starting small. He collected pamphlets from even the smallest groups, and he took them seriously. The 214-page inventory of his 2,700-item collection includes pamphlets by the All-India Congress Socialist Party, the People's National Party (Jamaica), the Polish Labour Underground Press, the Leninist League, the Groupe Syndical Français, the Workers' Friend, Freedom Press, Russia Today, the Meerut Trade Union Defence Committee, the Anglican Pacifist Fellowship, and myriad others.

This is not how Orwell is ordinarily understood. His publishers, and his critics,

capitalized on his early death to promote the stereotype of the steadfastly anti-intellectual prophet, whose dystopian fables sprang from either good common sense or pitiable idiosyncrasy.

Neither stereotype is helpful. Orwell wrote lucidly, and he scorned casuistic hair-splitting, but he was far from naïve or anti-intellectual. Even in his tubercular final years, as his energy flagged and he labored to finish *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, he read prolifically.

This had been true for many years, but I was struck when I learned, from the final volume of the *Complete Works*, that Orwell became acquainted with Ruth Fischer in the spring and summer of 1949. Fischer, who had briefly been the General Secretary of the German Communist Party — before breaking with Russia in 1926 — had just published a massive study, *Stalin and German Communism*, published in 1948.

In April 1949, Orwell wrote to Fischer: “No doubt you have been overwhelmed with congratulations, but I would like to tell you how much I enjoyed reading your book *Stalin and German Communism*.” Fischer replied soon after, thanking him for his “encouraging remarks” and saying she hoped to “squeeze out enough time” to visit him in the Cotswold Sanatorium during her impending visit to England. She had just re-read Orwell’s “very stimulating” *Homage to Catalonia*, and she hoped to discuss it with him in person.

On May 23, she wrote again, thanking Orwell for sending her an advance copy of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, “which arrived just this morning,” two weeks before its official publication. A month later, shortly after Fischer visited him, Orwell wrote to his friend Tosco Fyvel, who had originally sent him Fischer’s book: “it was fun meeting somebody who had known Radek & Bukharin & others intimately.”

In July, Orwell and Fischer exchanged gifts (*Burmese Days* from Orwell, chocolates from Fischer) and Orwell sought Fischer’s advice about a request he had received from a journal, *POSSEV*, which had just been founded by displaced Russians in Frankfurt. (Fischer was briefly in Frankfurt as well.)

“I suppose,” Orwell asked Fischer, that “the editors of this paper are bona fide people, & also not Whites?” (referring to the forces of reaction in revolutionary Russia). In another letter, to his agent, Orwell indicated that he had asked Fischer to reach out to *POSSEV*.

All this piqued my curiosity. Ruth Fischer is now obscure, unknown to most Orwell scholars and neglected even by many current specialists on communism. But she was formidable, called, by the novelist Arthur Koestler “probably the most brilliant woman in Communist history.” Fischer was close to several of Orwell’s friends, including, besides Koestler, Dwight Macdonald, and Franz Borkenau.

Borkenau and Orwell had long been politically close. Orwell first used the phrase “oligarchical collectivism” in an appreciative review of one of Borkenau’s books, and he warmly reviewed several of Borkenau’s other books as well, including Borkenau’s critical history of the Communist International from 1938. In March 1949, when David Astor asked Orwell to name a scholar who could write expertly about the Spanish civil war, he proposed Borkenau, whose *Spanish Cockpit* he had called the best book on the Spanish war as early as 1938. When, a month later, Celia Paget asked

him who could be relied upon to effectively defend democracy against Stalinism, he again named Borkenau.

In August 1949, Ruth Fischer and Franz Borkenau met with Melvin Lasky, whose American-sponsored, German-language magazine, *Der Monat*, was then serializing *Animal Farm*. That meeting, in a German hotel, is widely regarded as the crucible in which the idea of Congress for Cultural Freedom was forged. Later that month, Fischer wrote to Lasky from Paris: “I am running about with the project for the Berlin Congress and find sympathy everywhere and response. For instance, with Koestler, whom I saw yesterday.”

Two days later, Koestler sent Fischer a typed proposal for a human rights league “which some years ago I wanted to found with Russell and Orwell. It is out of date and was written for a different purpose, but one or the other formulation might be of some use.”

That typescript, which I found last year in an obscure archive, I call “Orwell’s Manifesto.” Written by Orwell in early 1946 in dialogue with Koestler and the philosopher Bertrand Russell, this manifesto called for the creation of a new kind of human rights group, which would fight to promote “equality of chance” for every “newborn citizen,” deepen and extend democracy, and oppose economic exploitation. Orwell also hoped to promote “psychological disarmament” between nations. These were ambitious aims, which were expounded only in this manifesto. But they were characteristic of the political Orwell, whose orientation was always practical as well as literary.

Brewing tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union soon drove a wedge between Orwell and his erstwhile co-authors, as both Koestler and Russell became militantly Russophobic. Orwell believed that the best way to avert the danger of a third, atomic world war was to press for the unfettered exchange of news and views across borders. But his former collaborators moved in a different, more belligerent direction.

Orwell died in January 1950, shortly before the founding meeting of the Congress for Cultural Freedom in Berlin. Opinions differ about whether he would have joined Koestler, Russell, and Borkenau in that fiercely anti-Soviet organization, which not only sided unblushingly with the West in the Cold War but (it was later discovered) was covertly funded by the Central Intelligence Agency.

Koestler doubted that Orwell would have joined them, explaining in his obituary of Orwell that his dear friend George had been too obstinately idealistic to dilute his socialism or mute his criticisms of capitalism and the West. That stubbornness, Koestler said regretfully, was unfortunate, since he would have liked to see Orwell join him in the US camp. But, he added, in the tone of an older but wiser uncle, that idealism was endearingly typical. George was George and that was that.

Koestler thus reverted to what has become the default option for so many of Orwell’s political critics: the charge of naïvete. Rather than taking Orwell seriously, he simply maligned him as a quirky innocent, a lovable eccentric.

Fortunately, Orwell’s vast readership takes him much more seriously. And those among his readers who dig deeply — reading his lesser-known essays and reviews as

well as his prophetic novels — soon learn that his fiction was rooted in a familiarity with real-world politics that was no less expert for being unpretentious. In these days of disinformation, political clarity and integrity are rare and precious.

Orwell was, and remains, a paragon of lucidity, truth-telling, and genuine insight. May he find an even wider audience.