

Orwell on Poland and Political Controversies of his Time

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There could hardly be a more appropriate 20th-century British author to bring up for discussion under the theme of “conformity and controversy” than George Orwell. One of his well-known characteristics as an author and political commentator was that of striving to think independently and to boldly present his own conclusions to the public, irrespectively of how controversial they could be at the time. This paper will examine some of his texts that responded to specific issues concerning Poland during the turbulent period of Europe’s transition from war to post-war, in which his statements were not always compliant with those held by much of the British public or with the British censoring policy. It aims to discover more about how Orwell approached conformity and controversy surrounding some contentious problems of his time and, by doing so, also about their political contexts in both Britain and Poland. The texts taken into consideration include his responses to the Warsaw rising, the abduction and trial of sixteen Polish leaders by the Soviets, and the settlement of Polish refugees in Britain after the war.

A Socialist’s Disappointment with the USSR Unappreciated at Home

Orwell was one of few British left-wing intellectuals to question the government and left-wing press’s uncritical reception of Stalin’s politics in Britain well before the beginning of the cold war (the name of which he coined). His epiphany came during the Spanish civil war where he witnessed the insidious way in which a Soviet-sponsored communist organisation began eliminating fellow socialists, including members of the POUM¹ in which Orwell had served, jeopardizing the whole socialist agenda only to gain more power. He also noticed that much of the British press favoured partial accounts of the war that glossed over the nature of the Soviet involvement, a trend that reached its peak when Britain sought to secure an alliance with the Soviet Union during the war in order to jointly fight Germany and Japan. Unfavourable views of the Soviet policy were discouraged in influential papers, and this applied also to foreign-language press: too insistent drawing of attention to Stalin’s wrongdoings could result even in papers’ closure.² Orwell, too, felt this on his own skin. Even the manuscript of his *Animal Farm*,

¹ POUM: *Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista* – Workers Party of Marxist Unification; it was denounced by Stalin as a ‘Trotskyist’ organisation.

² For more information on British unofficial war-time censorship see e.g. Alina Siomkajlo, ‘Dyskretny urok cenzury emigracyjnej (1940–2008)’ [The Discreet Charm of Émigré Censorship (1940-2008)], *Polska Akademia Umiejetnosci* [Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences], 3-7, accessed 14 January 2015, <http://pau.krakow.pl/AS.pdf>. For instance, the Polish weekly *Wiadomosci* was closed down at the beginning of 1944. For more details on this case see Mieczysław Grydzewski, ‘*Wiadomosci – Od Wojny*’ [*Wiadomosci – Since the War*], *Wiadomosci* [The News] 2/9/16 September 1979, 35/36/37. Unless otherwise stated, the English translation of foreign titles in square brackets is provided by the author.

an immediate success once published, would need to knock at many publishers' doors and wait 18 months, till the end of the war in Europe, before it could see the daylight.³

Broken Hopes and Alliances

Poland found itself caught in the midst of that politics. Britain and France were its war allies, London gave shelter to the Polish government after the fall of France, and despite the rapid fall of Poland, hundreds of thousands of Poles abroad continued fighting under the Allied arms in Europe, including e.g. the Battle of Britain, and Africa, and prepared for the campaigns planned in the Middle East, while the resistance movement in the occupied country continued supplying intelligence to the Western world, since various Polish military leaders – attached to the 19th-century notions of honour and a word being a bond – saw this as their duty as allies and hoped that continued Polish military effort would eventually lead also to Polish liberation. However, Stalin, the Allies' new ally, had other designs for Poland, and when Churchill and Roosevelt were faced with a choice between conformity and controversy towards them, conformity was often the uneasy answer. As the Big Three of the time finally met in Teheran at the end of 1943 to discuss the war and post-war plans, they agreed, among others, that Poland should fall under the Soviet sphere of influence in the forthcoming war effort and that Stalin may annex to the Soviet Union nearly half of its territory, largely the part seized in September 1939, and “move” Poland slightly to an undetermined west. Aware of the contentiousness of these decisions, Franklin Delano Roosevelt requested Stalin's secrecy since, “as a practical man”, he did not wish to risk losing the vote of “six to seven million Americans of Polish extraction” in the 1944 elections,⁴ and the Poles were kept in the dark. Their first major realisation of this situation came with the Warsaw uprising, from 1 August to 3 October 1944 – an event to which Orwell felt compelled to react:

It is not my primary job to discuss the details of contemporary politics, but this week there is something that cries out to be said. Since, it seems, nobody else will do so, I want to protest against the mean and cowardly attitude adopted by the British press towards the recent rising in Warsaw.⁵

Orwell on the Puzzling Rising in Warsaw

The rising against the Nazi occupation in Warsaw broke out in the advent of the Red Army's approach on its way to Berlin. Even though a rising in the capital was excluded from the initial “Tempest” plan, which envisioned freeing the Polish territory

³ *Animal Farm* was finally published in the UK by Secker & Warburg on 17 August 1945, after having been rejected by, among others, Victor Gollancz, Jonathan Cape and T. S. Eliot's Faber & Faber on political grounds. See Ian Angus, Appendix II: Chronology in vol. III of *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, eds. Peter H. Davison, Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (London: Secker & Warburg, 1968), 410.

⁴ ‘Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers, the Conferences at Cairo and Tehran, 1943,’ United States Department of State, University of Wisconsin Digital Collections: U.S. Government Printing Office, 594, accessed 18 May 2015, <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/FRUS.FRUS1943CairoTehran>.

⁵ George Orwell, ‘As I Please,’ *Tribune*, 1 September 1944, in vol. III of *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, eds. Peter H. Davison, Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (London: Secker & Warburg, 1968), 224-5.

by the underground Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*, AK) when the German position has weakened and before the Red Army has captured it, and that its success could not be guaranteed, there were important issues at stake for it to happen.⁶

Germany and the Soviet Union had invaded Poland in September 1939 according to the 1939 Russo-German pact, and the USSR had occupied the eastern half of Poland until being expelled by Germany and seeking an alliance with the Western Allies in 1941. In 1943 it had broken the re-established fragile diplomatic relations with Poland once more, following the Polish request for an International Red Cross investigation of the mass graves of over twenty thousand Polish officers and elite discovered in the Katyn forest. When in 1944 the Red Army entered the Polish lands again, by the time it arrived near Warsaw the Poles had plenty of evidence that the Soviet intentions were again hostile. The Polish Resistance had engaged in expelling the German occupant from major eastern cities, but many who declared loyalty to the Polish government and refused joining Stalin's formations afterwards were subsequently executed, arrested or deported to the USSR. Thousands of civilians had not been spared a similar treatment, while local officials had been swiftly substituted with Soviet-imported ones. An uprising in Warsaw was a forlorn attempt to get hold of the capital and act as hosts for the oncoming Red Army in the only remaining hope that this could transform the politics of the future. It was also seen as a chance to bring the Polish predicament to international attention.⁷

Militarily miscalculated, counting on the Western Allies to return the favour of Polish continuous war-time assistance⁸ and not anticipating that the approaching Western Allies' Eastern ally in its hurry to get to Berlin first would afford to halt by the eastern bank of the river Vistula for months before entering the city, the rising on the western bank failed after sixty-three days. It left nearly 200,000 inhabitants dead, around 800,000 survivors dispersed or deported to Germany, the historic city and no less than 93 percent of the housing turned into rubble, since Hitler wanted Warsaw razed without a trace so as to send a message to any other potential insurgents, and an enduring trauma on the entire nation.⁹ Given the heavy toll and meagre gains, the propitiousness of the rising itself continues to evoke controversy in Poland to this day, when the communist censorship no longer suppresses discussion on such subjects.

In view of its political interests, the British government often endeavoured to put a gloss on Soviet politics in the media, but in the case of the Warsaw rising it encouraged the press to discuss the matter, and Orwell took to his typewriter. His response came in his weekly *Tribune* column 'As I Please' published on the meaningful date of 1 September 1944,¹⁰ the fifth anniversary of the breaking out of WWII in Poland. Although officially

⁶ Jan Mieczyslaw Ciechanowski, *The Warsaw Rising of 1944* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 249 and p. 314.

⁷ Jan Mieczyslaw Ciechanowski, 'Rozmowa z gen. T. Borem-Komorowskim, dowodca AK' [Interview with Gen. Tadeusz Bor-Komorowski, Commander of the Home Army], *Nieznane kulisy katastrofy Powstania Warszawskiego, 1 VIII 1944 - 2 X 1944* [The Unknown Story of the Catastrophe of the Warsaw Rising, 1 VIII 1944 - 2 X 1944], accessed 13 August 2015, <http://www.powstanie.pl/?ktory=34>.

⁸ The support expected from the Western Allies did not quite materialise, largely due to Stalin's refusal to let them land in the area that the Soviet troops had supposedly liberated.

⁹ Ciechanowski, *The Warsaw Rising...*, p. 314; Norman Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland in Two Volumes*, vol. II, 1795 to the Present (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 355.

¹⁰ Orwell, 'As I Please,' 1 September 1944, 224-8.

welcomed, Orwell's article still proved controversial. So much so that it sparked a polemic that lasted for a few weeks and involved responses even from Kingsley Martin and Arthur Koestler.¹¹ Orwell questioned there the insufficient Allied help for the rising, pointing out that the Western Allies had previously called upon the people to rise. He also enquired why the nearby Soviet Army were not supporting the insurgents. Although not a supporter of the Polish government exiled in London himself, he was even allowed to query why the bulk of British left-wing intellectuals dismissed it and favoured a rival organisation appointed entirely by Stalin, suggesting that it happened simply because Stalin said so. The main target of Orwell's criticism was precisely the British Left's "nationalistic loyalty towards the USSR"¹² and lack of criticism of its policy, best resumed in the memorable quote:

Do remember that dishonesty and cowardice always have to be paid for. Don't imagine that for years on end you can make yourself the boot-licking propagandist of the Soviet regime, or any other regime, and then suddenly turn to mental decency. Once a whore, always a whore.¹³

Orwell's controversial response to the rising not only triggered a polemic in the paper, but had also some professional consequences for him. It is likely that Orwell referred to this article when two years later he confessed in a letter that the *New Statesman and Nation* "won't touch me with a stick, in fact my last contact with them was their trying to blackmail me into withdrawing something I had written in *Tribune* by threats of a libel action"¹⁴ – since the paper's editor, Kingsley Martin, inferred that Orwell accused his journal of being one of those "licking the boots of Moscow". While angering some members of the British society, Orwell's article was much appreciated within Polish circles. Not allowed to appear officially in communist Poland, it would be commented on, translated, published and republished in both émigré and clandestine publications in the years to come.¹⁵

¹¹ See *Tribune*, 8, 15 and 22 September 1944.

¹² Orwell, 'As I Please,' 1 September 1944, 227.

¹³ Orwell, 'As I Please,' 1 September 1944, 227.

¹⁴ See Orwell's letter to Dwight Macdonald of 15 October 1946 and footnote no. 3 in *Smothered under Journalism, 1946*, eds. Peter H. Davison, Ian Angus and Sheila Davison, vol. 18 of *The Complete Works of George Orwell* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2001), 450-1.

¹⁵ See e.g. a response in a Polish London daily: 'Przeciw bezmyślności' [Against Thoughtlessness], *Dziennik Polski i Dziennik Żołnierza* | *The Polish Daily & Soldier's Daily*, 4 September 1944, 4; an underground edition in collected essays: 'Powstanie i krytycy' [The Rising and its Critics], in *I ślepy by spostrzeżl* [Even a Blind Would Notice], trans. H. Lewis Allways [Bartłomiej Zborski] (Warsaw: Biblioteka Historyczna i Literacka, 1981), 45-52; an émigré translation: 'Orwell nadal aktualny. Jak mi sie podoba: O Powstaniu Warszawskim' [Orwell Still Relevant. As I Please: About the Warsaw Rising], *Kultura* 313 (1983): 48-51; an émigré edition in collected essays: 'Jak mi sie podoba (1 IX 1947[sic])' [As I Please (1 IX 1947[sic])], *Eseje* [Essays], trans. Anna Husarska (London: Puls Publications, 1985), 223-6; an underground reprint: 'Jak mi sie podoba' [As I Please], *Antyk* 6 (1988): 51-3; and finally an official edition in collected essays: 'Powstanie Warszawskie i jego krytycy' [The Warsaw Rising and its Critics], in *I ślepy by dostrzeżl* [Even a Blind Would See], trans. Bartłomiej Zborski (Krakow: Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza, 1990), 145-50.

Foreign Terror, Leader Kidnapping, and Business as Usual

Orwell's contested article on the Warsaw rising was a rather isolated compassionate voice coming from the West. It also marked one of the turning points of the war for Poland, the poignancy and political, social and economic consequences of which would haunt that country for decades. It captured the moment when the Poles started to realise that they may be caught in a hopeless political position and that their sacrifices for the benefit of the Allies may have been futile when it comes to their own liberation. This tragic diagnosis was soon confirmed openly by the outcomes of the Yalta Conference. The Yalta agreements sanctioned axing away nearly half of the Polish territory with cities of important Polish heritage. They did require "free and unfettered elections as soon as possible"¹⁶ but they lacked both specificity and Allied commitment for Stalin not to easily by-pass them. As anticipated, the Red Army, which would not leave the remainder of Poland until 1993, continued to facilitate installing puppet local and national public officials and hunting down the Poles suspected to oppose the Soviet-communist takeover of their country. One of the most telling symbols of the Western Allies' conformity to this Soviet repression and the subjugation of Poland to the USSR in 1945 was the abduction and trial of sixteen Polish underground leaders invited to political negotiations in Moscow.

They were kidnapped on their way to the meeting, imprisoned and put on trial in Moscow. All but three received a prison sentence which some of them did not survive. The event – which saw no major international protest – implied not only that leaders of one country were unlawfully abducted by foreign forces and prosecuted by and in another country. It also implied barring them from taking part in the political life of their nation at a critical point. Their show trial took place on the same days on which a few streets away the Provisional Government of National Unity (*Tymczasowy Rząd Jedności Narodowej*, TRJN) was being shaped under the watchful eye of Stalin and a blind eye of the Western Allies' ambassadors, from which politicians from the genuine Polish government exiled in London were also excluded. Even though London continued to host the Polish government, the Western Allies again conformed to Stalin's demands and soon ceased to recognise it, pronouncing that the Moscow-appointed organisation were now the Polish authorities.

Orwell again tried to voice his unpopular concerns at this point. Following the abducted politicians' show trial, he sent a letter to the editor of *Tribune* where he expressed his disappointment with the manner in which the editor had "seemed to imply that they had behaved in a discreditable manner and deserved punishment".¹⁷ In it he points out that on the news that the Poles were to travel to Moscow for political talks they were referred to in the British press as "political delegates", but that this term was entirely dropped after their arrest, while most of the British press seemed to suggest that they were somehow "guilty". Orwell enquires:

¹⁶ Krystyna Kersten, *The Establishment of Communist Rule in Poland, 1943-1948*, trans. John Micgiel and Michael H. Bernhard, foreword Jan T. Gross (University of California Press, 1991), 123.

¹⁷ George Orwell, 'Unpublished Letter to the Editor of *Tribune*' (of 26? June 1945) in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, vol. III, eds. Peter H. Davison, Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (London: Secker & Warburg, 1968), 389.

[...] just what were they guilty of? Apparently it was merely of doing what everyone thinks it right to do when his country is occupied by a foreign power – that is, of trying to keep a military force in being, of maintaining communication with the outside world, of committing acts of sabotage and occasionally killing people. In other words, they were accused of trying to preserve the independence of their country against an unelected puppet government, and of remaining obedient to a government which at that time was recognised by the whole world except the USSR.¹⁸

Orwell complains there once again about the double standards of political morality amongst the British Left when it comes to the Soviet Union:

With one side of our mouth we cry out that mass deportations, concentration camps, forced labour and suppression of freedom of speech are appalling crimes, while with the other we proclaim that these things are perfectly all right if done by the USSR or its satellite states: and where necessary we make this plausible by doctoring the news and cutting out unpalatable facts.¹⁹

Orwell's brief text seems to give as much evidence on the Polish situation at this historic moment as of the British. Even if passionate, Orwell's voice was not able to exert any influence on the UK or US politicians' decisions and help divert Poland from a course towards Soviet subjugation. Neither was it able to make some sections of the British public more aware of the Polish predicament. In fact, it stood no chance of doing so since, as Orwell noted on the printer's proof of his letter set up in type, it was "Withdrawn because *Tribune* altered attitude in following week."²⁰ Despite the author's close ties with the paper – having until recently been its literary editor and a regular columnist for a year and a half and remaining a contributor for another two – his letter on such a sensitive issue concerning the Soviet ally still needed to be censored. With the Western powers' inaction as a response to the miscarriage of the peace agreements in Poland, rigging the elections in January 1947 completed the Soviet-communist takeover of that country and, subsequently, led to the implementation of the Soviet model of the communist system that would be perpetuated there for over four decades. Within a few years, the Soviet-cued Polish communist party would gain control over all sorts of economic and social activities, including the media and the publishing market. Then the censoring policy in Britain and Poland would reverse. No longer an ally but enemy of the USSR in the ensuing cold war, Britain would finally allow its press to comment more freely on the Soviet misuse of power,²¹ whereas its witnesses living in the communist Poland would be

¹⁸ Orwell, 'Unpublished,' 390.

¹⁹ Orwell, 'Unpublished,' 391.

²⁰ Footnote no. 1 in Orwell, 'Unpublished,' 389.

²¹ Although certain sensitive issues concerning the Soviet Union would still be excluded from public discussion in the United Kingdom for decades as, for example, the Katyn Forest massacre, where the UK and the US leaders had connived to falsely attribute the blame to the Nazis and not the Soviet Union for fear of offending the Soviet ally. See e.g. Siomkajlo, 'Dyskretny urok,' 7-8; Pawel Machcewicz, *Druga Wielka Emigracja: Emigracja w polityce miedzynarodowej* [The Second Great Emigration: Emigration in the International Politics] (Warsaw: Biblioteka 'Wiezi,' 1999), 81; footnote 1 and 4 to Orwell's letter to Arthur Koestler of 5 March 1946 and Arthur Koestler's letter to Orwell of 3 April 1946 in, *Smothered under Journalism*, 137-8 and 215; or Benjamin B. Fischer, 'The Katyn Controversy: Stalin's Killing Field,' Central Intelligence Agency,

consigned to silence for an unforeseeable future. The communist system had the means to – using Orwell’s terminology – relegate any uncomfortable historical events to “a memory hole” and turn anyone daring to challenge the totalitarian regime, whether home or foreign, into an “unperson”.²² With his record so critical of Stalin’s politics and totalitarian regimes, George Orwell would be one of the most affected foreign authors.

Orwell and Polish Refugees in Britain

Many Poles who survived the war in the West and were given a choice decided not to return to their homeland, which was facing an uncertain future. As a token gesture to the let-down ally, Britain, although advocated, did not force the Poles who had served under the British command to return to Poland and allowed them to settle in Britain or its colonies. While the United Kingdom population was around 50 million,²³ some 157,000 Poles, predominantly former servicemen and their families, found home here by the end of the 1940s.²⁴ Although the number may not seem particularly high or compare to the current figure of Polish expatriates in Britain, in the austere post-war conditions their presence evoked a degree of resentment among parts of the British society. Orwell again explored this contentious topic. Typically, he often concentrated on prevalent contradictions and stereotypes. Sometimes he would juxtapose the two opposing statements common in the British press:

Many recent statements in the press have declared that it is almost [...] impossible for us to mine as much coal as we need [...] because of the impossibility of inducing a sufficient number of miners to remain in the pits. [...] Simultaneously [...] there have been statements that it would be undesirable to make use of Poles or Germans because this might lead to unemployment in the coal industry. [...] there must certainly be many people who are capable of holding these totally contradictory ideas in their heads at a single moment.²⁵

In a similar context: “Recently we have seen a tremendous outcry at the T.U.C. conference against allowing Poles to work in the two places where labour is most urgently needed—in the mines and on the land.”, he would also tackle the lingering perception of pre-war Poland being comprised merely of bourgeoisie and Fascists, and try to contrast it with the war-time reality:

It will not do to write this off as something “got up” by Communist sympathizers, nor on the other hand to justify it by saying that the Polish refugees are all Fascists who “strut about” wearing monocles and carrying brief-cases. The question is,

last modified 27 June 2008, <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/winter99-00/art6.html>.

²² George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (first edition: London: Secker & Warburg, 1949).

²³ ‘World Population Prospects, the 2012 Revision,’ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, accessed 26 May 2015, http://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/unpp/panel_population.htm.

²⁴ Machcewicz, *Druga Wielka Emigracja*, 38.

²⁵ George Orwell, ‘In Front of Your Nose,’ *Tribune*, 22 March 1946, in vol. IV of *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, eds. Peter H. Davison, Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, (London: Secker & Warburg, 1968), 122.

would the attitude of the British trade unions be any friendlier if it were a question, not of alleged Fascists but of the admitted victims of Fascism?²⁶

Orwell was visibly concerned with the obliviousness of some Britons to the significant political changes brought by the war and its aftermath. Given the pro-Soviet censoring policy of the previous years, that may seem hardly surprising, but Orwell could be unforgiving. He would sometimes reproach his compatriots and try to raise awareness of the difficult situation that Polish refugees and their country found themselves in. For example, in 'As I Please' from 24 January 1947 he described an exchange between two businessmen he had allegedly witnessed, which he summed up as follows:

The thing that most depressed me in the above-mentioned conversation was the recurrent phrase, "let them go back to their own country". If I had said to those two businessmen, "Most of these people have no country to go back to", they would have gaped. [...] They would never have heard of the various things that have happened to Poland since 1939 [...].²⁷

In 'As I Please' from 14 February 1947, he even decided to quote from a letter that deconstructed the saying that an Englishman's word is his bond and pointed to the dishonourable part Orwell's beloved England had played in leading Poland to this difficult position.²⁸

Conclusions

Studying Orwell's texts concerning Poland only reaffirms the wide breadth of his interests, capacity for political observation and his sensitiveness to injustice. They are an encouraging example of an independently thinking man who was able to resist officially propagated ideas, which were so often readily accepted by much of his contemporaries including fellow left-wing intellectuals, and instead himself interrogate the current affairs of a – then still seemingly rather remote – foreign country to a considerable level of understanding. Even more encouraging is the fact that he ceaselessly tried to make the public opinion more aware of the transgressions affecting Poland, despite risking struggles with censorship and producing work that might be denied publication as well as risking unpopularity to the degree of losing publishing prospects and facing threats of being taken to court. After all, this courage and dedication to causes thought just may be one of the reasons why 65 years after his death Orwell's works are still widely read, his name recurrent in the press, and his scholarship constantly growing. Orwell's voice on Polish matters, too, continues to provide lessons no less relevant to our times.

²⁶ George Orwell, 'As I Please,' *Tribune*, 15 November 1946, in vol. IV of *The Collected Essays*, 238.

²⁷ Orwell, 'As I Please,' *Tribune*, 24 January 1947, in vol. IV of *The Collected Essays*, 273.

²⁸ Orwell, 'As I Please,' *Tribune*, 14 February 1947, in *It Is What I Think 1947-1948*, eds. Peter H. Davison, Ian Angus and Sheila Davison, vol. 19 of *The Complete Works of George Orwell* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1998), 43.

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