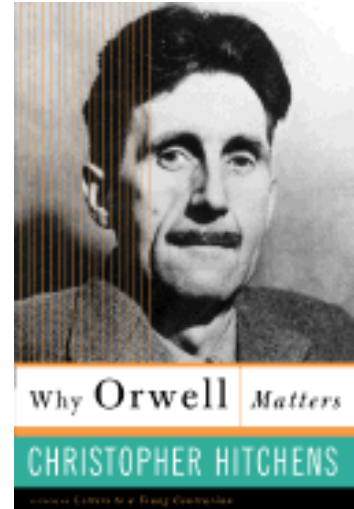


# **“Orwell as Integrity, Defying Both Left and Right”**

A Review (2-2023) by Dick Burkhardt of

## **“Why Orwell Matters”**

By Christopher Hitchens (2002)



As “Orwellian” attitudes and behavior spread on both the Woke Left and Conspiracy Theory Right, it’s worthwhile understanding how George Orwell himself navigated these waters. Just like Orwell, Christopher Hitchens is well-known for his wit, insight, and fearlessness in taking on sacred cows. In this short and readable book, Hitchens shows why he was so inspired by Orwell, especially the trials and tribulations Orwell suffered whenever he became immersed in some new experience and started asking too many questions. These ranged from British colonialism in Burma, to the hardships of working class life in England, to the terrors of the Spanish War between Communists and Fascists.

It was such experiences that compelled Orwell to write “1984” after WW II – to graphically demonstrate the extreme dangers of alluring ideologies run amok. It was a time when Communism especially still drew in many in the West who believed the Stalinist propaganda. But some Eastern Europeans had actually lived “1984”, with Hitchens quoting the Polish writer Milosz that “Such a form of writing is forbidden by the New Faith because allegory, by nature manifold in meaning, would trespass beyond the prescriptions of socialist realism and the demands of the censor. Even those who know Orwell only by hearsay are amazed that a

writer who had never lived in Russia should have so keen a perception into its life” (p 55).

Many Ukrainians, especially, felt the same way about “Animal Farm”, presaging today’s Ukraine War: “The survivors of the Ukraine famine were able to decipher the meaning of the pigs (and of the name Napoleon) without any undue difficulty” (p 92), leading to a Ukrainian edition of the book. Orwell had actually worked as a farm hand and took a very practical, not romantic view of nature – “It was a prefiguration of the universal humanism to be found in all his work” (p 137).

Orwell exposed the Stalinist purges and show trials against the Trotskyites for what they were, joining a Trotskyite group in the Spanish War and later modeling the heretic “Goldstein” in “1984” on Trotsky. Today most international socialists declare themselves to be followers of Trotsky to establish their anti-Stalinist credentials. I once read Trotsky’s “History of the Russian Revolution” just out of curiosity, much like Thucydides “History of the Peloponnesian War”.

It is interesting that it was Orwell who coined the term “Cold War” and who quickly foresaw the crucial role that would be played by nuclear weapons and the arms race. In addition, he said that “the scene of the book [“1984”] is laid in Britain in order to emphasize that the English-speaking races are not inherently better than anyone else and that totalitarianism, if not fought against, could triumph anywhere” (p 85).

Christopher Hitchens concludes that George Orwell illustrated the maxim that “it matters not what you think, but **how** you think; and that politics are relatively unimportant, while principles have a way of enduring, as do the few irreducible individuals who maintain allegiance to them” (p 211).