George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* memoir is a classic, but it’s bad history.

Eighty years ago, the writer took part in the battle for Barcelona. His *Homage to Catalonia* shaped our understanding of the war.

But, argues historian Paul Preston, his account was partisan and inaccurate.

Unleashed on 17 July 1936 by a military coup against the elected government of the Second Republic, the Spanish civil war was a rehearsal for the second world war.

The British, French and American governments stood aside and permitted General Francisco Franco, with the substantial aid of Hitler and Mussolini, to defeat the republic. To this day, the war is remembered as “the great cause”, the battle for the volunteer of the International Brigades, the bombing of Guernica and of the mini-civil war within the civil war fought in Barcelona as a CNT anarcho-communist and the Poum’s quasi-Trotskyist forces of the Catalan government, the Generalitat, backed by the communists of the PSUC.

Eighty years ago this week, the Ramblas of Barcelona echoed with gunfire. Much of what happened on the streets during the May days is well known thanks to George Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia*. But not why it happened. Herbert Matthews, the Y ork Times correspondent, summed up the problem: “The book did more to blacken the laurel cause than any work written by enemies of the Second Republic. This is unfortunate since for many people, Homage to Catalonia is the only book on the Spanish civil war that they will ever read.”

An eyewitness account of two fragments of the war, the book presents two priceless pieces of reportage: the first a verbal account of the experiences of a militant in an “overt sector of a quiet front” in Aragon, evoking the fear, the cold and, above all, the squallor, excrement and lies of the interned trenches; the second a vibrant description of several days spent on the roof of the roof terrace of the Poliorama theatre in Barcelona during the May events.

In his book he describes several days and nights spent in 1937 defending Poum headquarters from the roof of the Poliorama theatre. His Homage to Catalonia belongs in any list of important books on the Spanish civil war. It has informed opinion in the English-speaking world about the war – providing the inspiration, for instance, for Ken Loach’s *Land and Freedom*. However, limited in the time and place of Orwell’s presence in Spain, it was never intended as a reliable analysis of the politics of the war. He clearly knew nothing of its origins or of the social crisis within the civil war fought in Barcelona as a CNT anarcho-communist or of the mini-civil war within the civil war fought in Barcelona as a CNT anarcho-communist. In none of his writings does he mention having seen any prior acquaintance with Spain or ever reading a book in Spanish about the war or anything else.

In his essays he acknowledged “my partisanship, my mistakes, of fact, and the distortion inevitably caused by my having seen only one corner of events.”

Amendments to what he had written in *Homage to Catalonia* were reflected in his writings in later conversations in London with the exiled Spanish republican prime minister, Dr Juan Negrín. Negrín explained why the republic had been forced to turn to the Soviet Union as the only great power prepared to sell weaponry. He also outlined the problems of trying to fight a war while dealing with “the mutinous conglomerate of incompatible parties, labour unions and disaffected groups, and also the frequently self-appointed, largely unconstitutional, local and regional governments”. Negrín concluded that Orwell was “idealistic and very wrongfooted [unfairly].”

Perhaps he was not so unfairly. He had introduced himself to Negrín only as “an editorialist of the Observer” without mentioning his links with the Poum. Maybe he was uncomfortable with the association. He wrote in 1938: “I’ve given a more sympathetic account than it deserves of the atrocities committed against priests, landowners and merchants in Lérida by the Poum and in Aragón by anarchist columns from Barcelona. For instance, he completely misunderstood the case of Antonio Martín Escudero, an anarchist smuggler who controlled the area of the French-Portuguese Catalan frontier known as La Cerdanya. There, he and his group carried out acts of banditry, atrocities against the clergy and the extortion of people crossing into France. At the end of April, he was killed in a clash with local people determined to end the capitalist press and nothing but Idels in the leftwing press.” That spirit of fair play led to Orwell brushing over the final days of the republic. It seems irresponsible, given that he admitted that, prior to the May events, he was trying to transfer from the Poum to the International Brigades. That meant that he sympathised with the view of socialists, liberal republicans and communists that an effective war effort required state control of the economy and the mass mobilisation of a modern army.

He was in the Poum only because he had been rejected by the British Communist party. So he arrived with Independent Labour Party credentials. Taken to the Poum’s barracks, he was welcomed because of his literary celebrity. Orwell was not popular among fellow British militiamen, who regarded his “cut-glass Eton accent”. One said he looked like a “Scottish policeman”. In his eyes he held “the key to the working class” in the “saddles”, but the collective experiments of autumn 1936 had not created a war machine. The Poum events were about removing revolutionary obstacles to the war’s efficient conduct. He acknowledged this in his 1942 essay “Looking Back on the Spanish War.” The Trotskyist thesis that the war could have been won if the revolution had not been sabotaged was probably false. To nationalise factories, demolish churches, and issue revolutionary manifestos would not have made the armies more efficient. The fascists were aware that they were the stronger; they had modern arms and the others hadn’t.

However, in his book he expressed pre-revolutionary views based on ignorance of the damaging impact on the republic’s international image of the atrocities committed against priests, landowners and merchants in Lérida by the Poum and in Aragón by anarchist columns from Barcelona. For instance, he completely misunderstood the case of Antonio Martín Escudero, an anarchist smuggler who controlled the area of the French-Portuguese Catalan frontier known as La Cerdanya. There, he and his group carried out acts of banditry, atrocities against the clergy and the extortion of people crossing into France. At the end of April, he was killed in a clash with local people determined to end the capitulation of Catalan independence. The revolutionaries had 60,000 rifles in Barcelona. They refused either to give them up or to go to the front.