

# John Cornford(1915-1936) and the Spanish Civil War

Kawanari, Yo

---

(出版者 / Publisher)

法政大学小金井論集編集委員会

(雑誌名 / Journal or Publication Title)

法政大学小金井論集 / 法政大学小金井論集

(巻 / Volume)

3

(開始ページ / Start Page)

37

(終了ページ / End Page)

64

(発行年 / Year)

2006-03

(URL)

<https://doi.org/10.15002/00004336>

# John Cornford (1915 — 36) and the Spanish Civil War

Yo Kawanari

## 1 The Battle of Lopera

There is a small village named Lopera 50 kilometers to the south of Jaen and 60 kilometers to the east of Cordoba, Andalucia in the southern part of Spain. It is a tiny village barely noticeable on a map drawn to a scale of 1:1, 000, 000.

Like most Spanish villages and towns, Lopera has a square in the form of patio at the center. A grand church stands in the center of the square. On its wall memorial letters were engraved in praise of soldiers who fought in General Franco's "La Cruzada" and were killed.

A few remains of Islamic culture make Lopera slightly different from many other Spanish villages. Mosaic paving stones, Islamic towers and the rows of old houses with white plaster tell us that they have been through centuries of wind and rain.

At the rear of the church was a fort, looking like a natural stronghold. Perhaps it was built by the Romans and has silently kept watching many a war that broke out on the Iberian Peninsula, including the Spanish Civil War.

At an early stage of the Spanish Civil War, Franco's rebel army brought the whole of Andalucia under control. On 26 December 1936 the operations to capture Lopera were carried out in order to block Franco's advance to the north and win back Cordoba.

Just before this, at the International Brigade base of Albacete, Murcia, no less than 145 British volunteers, including Irish and Scottish, had arrived. At the nearby village called Madrigueras they were training as the 'No. 1 Company'

which consisted only of British volunteers. The commander of the Company was George Nathan, a warrant officer of the British Army at World War I and afterwards of the Imperial Guard Division. The Company was attached to the newly established French Battalion of the International Brigade.

On the Christmas Eve 1936, the No. 1 Company together with the French Battalion and the two French Companies, was given instructions to make a sortie and got on a train bound for Andujar at Madrigueras. Then at Andujar they advanced along the road to their strategic goal, Lopera.

On 26 December the attack at Lopera began. In front was the British No. 1 Company. Then the French Battalion and the two Spanish Companies. The vanguard soldiers advanced to Lopera with olive branches as their cover. When they arrived at the top of a hill where rows of houses with white plaster could be seen, suddenly the volley firing began at the village fortress. To order to proceed covering fire from the newest machine gun should be provided by the French Battalion as had been planned in their tactics. However there was no covering fire. The Battalion Commander, Lt. Col. LaSall, did nothing but gave orders from behind to the soldiers in forward positions to advance. The French Battalion remained waiting at a place far from the village church and the two Spanish Companies were even farther away.

Toward evening the attack by the Franco rebels was getting stronger and No. 1 Company had to retire to the rear slope of the hillside, which was later called 'the English Crest'. For two days the battle continued, each side now advancing and now retreating.

At dawn on 28, No. 1 Company launched an all-out attack from 'the English Crest'. This time the French Battalion began the covering fire, disobeying Commander LaSall's order to stand by. No. 1 Company managed to reach the external wall of the village, though they were sometimes mistakenly attacked by the Battalion from behind because of lack of proper communication in the hastily planned operations. As the sun rose, the Franco troops struck back more fiercely with strafing raids and after a four hours' desperate fight Captain George Nathan ordered the Company to retreat to 'the English Crest'.

The operation was a complete failure. Casualties were high and No.1 Company had to retreat, leaving the dead bodies behind in the battlefield. Among those was the body of John Cornford (1915 — 36), a graduate student of history at Trinity College, Cambridge University.

John Cornford was killed either on the night of 27th or before dawn on the 28th, in other words, on his 21st birthday or on the next morning. According to one of his fellow soldiers, he last saw John covering the retreating No.1 Company. No one saw John die in the battle, and his body was not identified.

The battle by the Republicans to capture the small village of Lopera was lost. Its front strangely isolated from other Republican fronts and made a sacrifice of many lives on their side. However, the general headquarters of the Republican Army surprisingly issued the victorious communique: 'During the day the advance continued without the loss of any territory' .<sup>(1)</sup>

In the evening of 28 December, after the failure of the operations at Lopera, Commander LaSalle of the Battalion was accused of spying for Franco and of taking a bribe from the Italian Army by Andre Marty (1886 — 1956), commander of the International Brigade Base and a member of the Central Committee of Comintern whom Joseph Stalin put unchanged trust in. LaSalle was tried, and declared guilty though he cried out for his innocence. He was shot twenty minutes after the decision.<sup>(2)</sup> LaSalle might have been a coward as a commander but he seems to have been the last man to be engaged in spying.<sup>(3)</sup>

With his incomparably heroic participation in the Spanish Civil War, the early death of John Cornford on the very day of his 21st birthday or the following morning yielded a lot of 'legends' about him in line with the Communist Party's propaganda at that time.

## **2 John's Awakening to Politics**

On 27 December 1915, Rupert John Cornford was born in Cambridge as the first son of Francis M. Cornford (1874 — 1943), Professor of classics at Cambridge University, and his wife Frances Cornford (1886 — 1960), herself a

well-known Georgian poet. The Cornfords were descendants of the poet laureate, William Wordsworth (1770 — 1850) and the evolutionist, Charles Darwin (1809 — 82). The first name of their son was named 'Rupert', after the Georgian poet Rupert Brooke (1887 — 1915) himself a Cambridge graduate and close friend of the Cornfords. In April of the same year John was born, Brooke had died of a disease contracted at the Greek warfront. Soon after his death an anthology of his poetical works, *1914 and Other Poems*, was published and he became the National Poet overnight. <sup>(4)</sup> John was called 'Rupert John' only in his infancy. He didn't like his first name 'Rupert' much and before long he came to be called simply 'John'.

In his infancy and childhood John was a shy and fastidious shut-in child. When he began reading, he tried to express what he had read in a book by drawing pictures. He also spent hours and hours studying plants and animals in illustrated books. In the course of time he became absorbed in reading books of history. He paid no attention to works of fiction or religious ones, saying that those had no reality. In October 1929 he entered Stowe School, a public school in Buckinghamshire, as a scholar. Perhaps partly for just relieving the boredom of his dormitory life, John often wrote to his mother and good friends, including his poems and essays on poetry which showed his keen interest in literature. <sup>(5)</sup>

When John's younger brother Christopher entered the same school, he found John very critical of the educational policy and regulations of the school. He was especially opposed to those of Officer's Training School (OTS) to which every student should join, and called himself an antimilitarist. He also yearned for socialistic society and while taking a walk with his brother in the school yard, talked about the nationalization of industries, and economic unfairness in a capitalistic society. Nor did he forget to advise his brother, saying, "Don't go shouting about it, or you'll make yourself unpopular." <sup>(6)</sup>

Once John thought out a plan of 'revolution', where all the teachers expelled and the school administered only by students. His ideas about poetry had changed drastically. Now he despised his mother's favorites like Alfred Tennyson (1809 — 92) and Robert Browning (1812 — 89) and was repelled by

the “social escapism” of the Georgian Poets. His view on poetry and his mother’s were split definitely.

John was then fascinated by the work of Robert Graves, a poet who had survived of ‘the War Poets’ in World War I, and a little later on by T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden. At the same time his concern turned from literature towards politics, especially to socialism. His brother Christopher recalls; ‘It was partly through the search for a sociological or historical explanation for the nature of a poem that he came to consider contemporary society, and so Communism’ . <sup>(7)</sup>

It was the birth of the MacDonald National Government in August 1931 and the sharp decline of the Labour Party in the general election in October that awakened young John at the age of 15 to the reality of contemporary politics. In February he wrote to his friend Sidney Shiff, saying;

The election seems to me a piece of sheer political lunacy on the part of the electorates. The government has no sort of program or policy whatever and it takes into office nothing whatever except a record of political dishonesty almost as great as the Socialists, or greater. I think there’ll be trouble in the North before long if the Communist organizes the unemployed as well as the suffragettes were organized in 1913. <sup>(8)</sup>

About the same time, John wrote to another friend asking to remove misunderstanding about the Soviet Union. Thus John was hastily approaching the Communism and the Communist Party.

His letter to Tristan Jones, another friend of his, in October 1932, in which he complains of his busy life reading *The Capital* and writing an essay on Auden, ends with the following questions.

Can you tell me what the recent instructions of Comintern to the Communists here were? All I have found about it was a very biased paragraph in *The Times*, from which I couldn’t gather the facts. The Book-room, ‘we don’t know why,’ can’t get the *Daily Worker*! Is there any

Communists weekly paper that would do instead? <sup>(9)</sup>

In December 1931, at the age of 16 John passed the scholarship examination to Trinity College, Cambridge to be grant of 100 pounds a year. He chose this College since the Cornford family had graduated from that most prestigious college of Cambridge for generations and so it was considered best for his study.

Trinity College was founded by Henry VIII (1491 — 1547) in 1546 and it was its convention that they would not accept students under the age of 18. However, in October 1933 when he became 17 years old, John was accepted one year earlier than usual. He was a special case.

John had almost one year then before entering Cambridge University. On receiving the notice of his admission from Cambridge, he quit Stowe School without his parents' approval. In January 1933 he registered in two classes for the following semester at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). He chose LSE since he wanted to live a free life by himself and LSE was the strategic point of student movements at that time.

On 17 March he became a member of the Young Communist League (YCL), a youth organization of the Communist Party. He devoted himself not only to the activities of the League but also more widely to other youth and labour movements so that those movements should join hands with one another. He wrote to one of his friends, Tristan Jones, that he had little free time, hardly enough to write letters as he was working so hard in several important posts such as Chief Secretary of the National Student Union, Chief Editor of the Union's journal, *The Student Vanguard*, Assistant Editor of *The Young Worker* and a secretary of a study group on the transportation industry in the research section of a labour union. He had been very active in such various fields.

While busy with all these doing social activities, he often dropped in Barton Street Bookstore a few doors away from his lodging house in Barton Street. The bookstore was the favourite haunt of young poets and leftists in the

1930's. At the store were on sale bulky red-cover classical books published by Marx-Engels-Lenin Association, yellow-cover pamphlets written by Harry Pollitt (1890 — 1960) <sup>(10)</sup>, Chief Secretary of the Communist Party, and by Palme Dutt (1896 — 1924), Assistant Secretary of the same, poetry books by W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Cecil Day Lewis (1904 — 72) and Louis MacNeice (1907 — 63) , *New Signatures*, *New Country* and *New Verse*. In short, the bookstore was a suitable information center to provide with the news about the development of new socialist movements in Britain and new trends in literature and poetry.

At this bookstore John met Esmond Romilly (1918 — 41). The 15 year-old nephew of Sir Winston L. S. Churchill, had published a magazine with the keynote of anti-public school, *Out of Bounds*, at his own expense after leaving Wellington College in opposition to its conservatism, militarism and fascism and later met John again accidentally at the Madrid front. Philip Toynbee was another person with whom John became acquaintanance at the bookstore. Philip had run away from the prestigious public school, Rugby, stimulated by Esmond's magazine.

In August when John, his brother and other LSE activists were camping at a Norfolk beach, East Anglia, he became on intimate terms with a young woman activist from Wales named Ray Peters, who was several years older than he and from a working class family. Soon John began to live with Ray in London.

### **3 Radical Student Movements and John's Wanderings in Youth**

In October 1933, John entered the Trinity College of Cambridge University at the age of 17, one year earlier than usual. His beloved, Ray, was living in London and he came back to London every weekend. Before long she came secretly to Cambridge and they lodged together with an acquaintance, Marxist philosopher. Thus John had two places to live in, his own room at the College and the lodging house with Ray.

John's parents knew about John's relationship with Ray but overlooked it and he often took her to his house, with no intention to hide their cohabitation



in London.

Soon after John entered the College, a rumour spread among activist students that a belligerent activist had arrived from London. At a tearoom near Market Hill in the centre of Cambridge, so-called Sunday Tea Meetings were often held by the Socialist Society, which gave strong influence to the student movements. One day, invited to the meeting, John made a speech there for the first time, severely criticizing the university administration and the British national government for their decision to reduce the number of new students and scholarships at Cambridge University. His speech was so uncompromising that moderate students of the Labour Party there showed their displeasure openly.

After the speech at the Tea Meeting John was invited to the group of forerunners in the Cambridge student movements. At that time a considerable number of students had been getting involved in the student movements, as national political conditions were in great confusion and Hitler took over the reins of Germany, but their main policy was to harmonize socialism with pacifism. As a leader of the Communist Party group in 'the Socialist Society' John worked with his comrades for strengthening public feelings against fascism and establishing a large scale organization of revolutionary socialists.

During the one-week armistice of World War I in November 1933, a documentary movie of the British Navy, "*Our Fighting Navy*" was going to be presented at the Tivoli Cinema near Market Hill. There had been angry clashes between the students who supported the presentation of the movie and those who opposed to it, and on the Armistice Day an antiwar demonstration group began fighting with those who tried to prevent the demonstration. Such incidents interested those students who had not been active in political movements before because of their emotional sympathy with pacifism. They began to show strong dislike to jingoistic groups getting stronger and could no longer stand just watching the fight of 'the Socialist Society' demonstrators against the rightwingers and armed policemen.

In February 1934 when the Hunger Marchers of the unemployed passed

through Cambridge on their way to London, 'the Socialist Society' sent the vanguard for holding a welcome demonstration. In concert with it each College raised donation and gathered food and clothes to welcome them. The welcome demonstration by students ended in great success with no interference nor hindrance by the police or the right-wingers, <sup>(11)</sup> unlike the earlier antiwar demonstration on Armistice Day in November the year before.

The success of the welcome demonstration was due to the carefully planned campaign of 'the Socialist Society'. Students who took part in it saw the reality of unemployment, poverty and famine and through their experience they realized the real situation was much more serious than what had been reported by the media. Since then students who were urged to be more active either in the humanitarian belief or in the revolutionary socialistic belief responded immediately. The number of 'the Socialist Society' members increased in an instant.

On the other hand, arguments over the welcome demonstration of the Hunger Marchers led to a split in 'the Socialist Society'. The Communists argued that the idle government having no policy caused hunger and starvation, and that unemployment and low wages would lead the nation to war and fascism. Labour Party members insisted that the government was not for war and that their welcome demonstration should be conducted not as a political campaign but on humanitarian basis.

The welcome demonstration ended without serious split one way or the other but in June that year the Labour Party members left 'the Socialist Society' in opposition to the Communists' leadership and revived their Labour Club which had been temporarily closed. The Communists on the other hand took it easy and imagined thanks to the split they could acquire the unshakable legitimacy in the left-wingers. The Labour Club joined the University Labour Federation and began their campaign independently. The Communists came to consider the split seriously and proposed to the University Labour Federation to join forces in the Armistice Day demonstrations against war in November and against Sir Oswald Mosley's presence at the dinner of the Cambridge Branch of

the British Fascist Federation held in March 1935. They succeeded in joining forces. In December 1935 a joint-meeting of 'the Socialist Society' and the University Labour Federation was held in Cardiff, southern Wales and they were reunited as 'the Socialist Society', having about 3000 members in the 28 branches. John was appointed as the vice chairman of the Society. In March 1935, John had left the Young Communist League to become a regular member of the British Communist Party. In the general election in November John canvassed for the Labour Party candidate of the Cambridge constituency Dr. A. Wood, who lost by a wide margin of more than 5000 votes. His cooperation with Dr. Wood in the election campaign was based upon his political resolution that he should grope for a path to change cold relationship between the Communist Party and the Labour Party to more friendly one.

On November 5, Guy Fawkes Day, John made a speech at the general meeting of the Cambridge University student body for the first time, and put forward a motion declaring, "We, regarding parliamentary institution as an obstacle to progress, deplore the failure of Guy Fawkes." <sup>(12)</sup> His motion was rejected but one student strongly supported it. He was Peter Kemp, a Trinity College student. Peter had a political viewpoint opposite to John's but supported his motion only because he agreed with the point that Parliament should be abolished. In his opinion it should be replaced by the royal family members or aristocrats. Peter Kemp's voluntary participation in the Spanish Civil War on Franco's side will be treated later.

In December John was elected as a member of the standing committee of the student body.

In addition to such burdensome political activities, John published poems, literary criticism and political essays one after another.

In his essay "Art and Class Struggle" published in the May 1933 issue of *The Student Vanguard* John criticised the classless and nonpolitical aspects of some artists saying, "Art like any other expression of man, such as science and politics, cannot be divorced from reality, i. e. , from man in relation to his material surroundings. The idea of a detached, impartial artist is therefore

utterly false. The class struggle is a conflict between the dynamic force of revolution and what Engels called the 'inertia force of history'. Any 'detachment' from this conflict means siding with the inertia force." <sup>(13)</sup> John published another essay "The Class Front of Modern Art" in the December issue of the same journal to similar effect. The latter essay was criticized in the January issue by Julian Bell, the poet who will be up discussed. John argued in the same issue against Julian, who in turn published further reply in the March issue. In this way their polemics continued. Both of them were Marxists who would not accept artists 'detachment from class struggle as well as writers' non-political attitudes. However, Communist John's idealistic or purposeful theory of literature was never compatible with the Labour Party member Julian's realistic theory.

In their polemics John's orthodox logic seemed superior to Julian's heretical one. John argued that revolutionary writers should be active participants of class struggle and not impartial observers. Judging from a historical standpoint on the fact that Marxist literature resulted in a complete failure in the 1930's. Bell's comment at the end of his counterargument ; "How many of our 'revolutionary' poets can be trusted not to turn Fascist?" may be said to have shown keener insight. <sup>(14)</sup>

A little after this John published an essay titled "Left?" in *Cambridge Left*. Then he wrote political essays as a legitimate Marxist in various magazines such as 'The Struggle for Power in Western Europe', 'What Communism Stands For', 'Communism and Universities' and 'Notes on the Teaching of History at Cambridge' in which he thoroughly criticised history education at the university. He also published a book of joint-authorship, *Young Minds for Old*, 1936. James Klugmann, John's roommate at the Trinity College and a student member of the Communist Party, says in his memoir, "We, an extraordinarily erudite and arrogant generation of Cambridge students, who thought that we were the best intellectuals" . <sup>(15)</sup>

While devoted to such political activities and writing earnestly, young man John at the age of 20 was spending his spring time of life. It was said by tea-cup

Cambridge that “the Cornfords’ eldest son, who was said to be a Communist, was keeping a Russian mistress in the town” . <sup>(16)</sup> But John and Ray never worried about such a gossip. The couple were often seen intimately walking together along the street like an actor and an actress.

Before long Ray was pregnant. She stayed with her relatives for three months in London and their first son was born. The baby was named ‘James’ after his parents’ good friend, James Klugmann. The family moved to a flat downtown on Mill Road.

Ever since Ray left for London to prepare for childbirth, John had felt that he was not somehow getting well with Ray. After they started living together with the baby the split between John and Ray became much deeper.

John expressed his feelings at that time in “Sad Poem”;

I love you with all that was in me, hard and blind,  
Strove to possess all that my arms could bind,  
Only in your loving found my peace of mind.  
But something is broken, something is gone,  
We’ve loved each other too long to try to be kind,  
This will turn to falseness if it goes on.

Though partings as cruel as the surgeon’s knife,  
It’s better than the ingrown canker, the rotten leaf.  
All that I know is I have got to leave.  
There’s new life fighting in me to get at the air,  
And I can’t stop its mouth with the rags of old love.  
Clean wounds are easiest to bear. <sup>(17)</sup>

In December 1935 when everybody was joyfully celebrating Christmas, John and Ray had to endure their parting ‘as cruel as the surgeon’s knife’. Ray left with James for London having no place in mind to live.

After the separation from Ray, John met a female member of the

Communist Party at Newnham College, Margot Heinemann, at his parent's home. She was a few years older than John as Ray was, and a research student graduated with the English Tripos. At that time the Cornfords regularly held an informal chamber music concert and Margot was a cellist in the group. She and John became intimate in a short time.

After her study period as a research student was over, she began to teach at Birmingham and John often visited her there. The purpose of his visit was not only to see her but also to take part in political activities in the industrial city. Once he got arrested while handing out pamphlets in front of a factory and was brought to trial. Spending the days with Margot and participating in political activities, he began to feel that he might be able to find a new way to his future.

In June 1936 John graduated from Cambridge University with the History Tripos and applied for a position of a fulltime office worker at the Labourers' Education Society in Birmingham with recommendation of Prof. Ernest Baker, a political philosopher. He failed to get the job, so he became a graduate school student working on Victorian history, having won the Earl of Derby Research Scholarship from Trinity College. It seems that he became a graduate student not because he wished to continue his academic work but because he wished to continue his political activities as a student at Cambridge for at least one more year. He was only 20 years old then and there was no need for him to hastily decide his future profession.

## **4 The Mecca of the Catalonia Revolution**

On 17 July 1936 the Spanish Civil War began. At first John's plan during the summer vacation in August was to stay with Margot in southern France for a while and then to participate in an international peace meeting in Brussels.

The plan was changed because of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. John insisted on going to Spain. Thus they changed their plan and agreed that John would stay in Madrid to see the, real state of the war for a week or so and then he would meet Margot to spend the rest of their vacation in southern

France. John managed to get a reporter's pass from the leading left-wing paper *News Chronicle* in order to avoid having troubles at the Spanish border. On 7 August John and Richard Bennett, his friend from the Trinity College crossed the border into Spain through Figueras, a border town on the Mediterranean Sea. They went down south along the Mediterranean, passing through calm and peaceful villages in the bright sunshine and enjoying a landscape quite different from the image created by the news reported in the British papers. They arrived at Barcelona the next day on 8 August.

Barcelona was the mecca of the Catalonia Revolution under way, where the militia of workers and common people had succeeded in suppressing the military riot by Fascists. In John's diary letter to Margot written at the Aragon front from 16 to 30 August John says;

In Barcelona one can understand physically what the dictatorship of the proletariat means. All the Fascist press has been taken over. The real rule is in the hands of the militia committees. There is a real terror against the Fascists. But that doesn't alter the fact that place is free - and conscious all the time of its freedom. Everywhere in the streets are armed workers and militiamen, and sitting in the cafes which used to belong to the bourgeoisie. .... The streets are crowded all day, and there are big crowds around the radio palaces. But there is nothing at all like tension or hysteria.<sup>(18)</sup>

John wrote such a vivid description of Barcelona as he saw the real condition of the proletariat revolution different from what he had expected. George Orwell came to Barcelona five months later than John, just about the time he was killed in the war, and later recollected the fascination of Barcelona as the city of revolution.<sup>(19)</sup>

On the day John arrived at Barcelona, he visited the offices of PSUC (Communists) , POUM (anti-Stalinist Communists), and CNT (Anarchists), but as he did not understand the Spanish language, it was next to

impossible for him to get the latest information about the war. On the next day, 9 August, John accidentally met an Austrian sociologist, Dr. Franz Borkenau on the street of Barcelona. Dr. Borkenau was an ex-Communist who had been a fulltime office worker at the Comintern but left the German Communist Party because he was disappointed in the Party's pedantry and lack of realism. Borkenau asked John to go and see the operation of regaining Zaragoza with a correspondent of a paper on the Republican side, *Paris Fleche*. Zaragoza was a town at the Ebro riverside in Aragon which had been captured by the Franco army since the beginning of the Spanish Civil War. John thought it a very big chance for him.

On 11 August the three started for the war front in a car with a driver and some guards provided by Catalonia Militia Central Committee which was then in control of the whole of Catalonia in place of the Generalidad. Villages near the front were heavily guarded all around, which was a very different from what John had seen on the way to Barcelona after crossing the border to Spain. At the entrance of every village they had to show their passport and press card to the guards who were on the strict alert.

They had an itinerary covering five days, with the village of Lecinena 30 kilometres from Zaragoza as their turning point. On 14 August John abruptly joined the POUM militia, parting from the other two at Lecinena .<sup>(20)</sup> The village had recently been occupied by POUM when they had expelled Fascists a week before John's arrival.

Why did John join the POUM militia that he had looked down on as 'semi-Trotskyists' before? He did not give Borkenau any reasons. Only this was certain: both John and Borkenau were deeply impressed by the charming personality of the POUM stationary troops commander Manuel Grossi there. John refers to Grossi favourably in his essay "The Situation in Catalonia" published in a weekly journal *New Republic* in Dec. 1936. Borkenau writes in his book, *The Spanish Cockpit* (1973) that Grossi was very cheerful even at the forefront<sup>(21)</sup>.

When Esmond Romilly heard of the news that John joined the POUM



militia, he said it was unbelievable. <sup>(22)</sup> Tom Wintringham, a graduate of Oxford and the poet and author of *English Captain*, joined Tom Mann-Centuria and later fought as the British commander-in-chief of the 15th International Brigade, surmised that John had no other choice but to join the POUM militia because he did not have the Communist identification card with him. <sup>(23)</sup> However, it would not be enough to explain why John joined the POUM militia so abruptly and took part in the fight. Soon after John's death, his father told that John escaped "from the hot entanglement of personal responsibilities" . <sup>(24)</sup> There may be some truth in it.

A few days after joining the militia, John was shot and injured with a bullet. On 27 August, his unit occupied Perdiguera Village which was 25 kilometres from Zaragoza. Then they abruptly began to advance for Huesca which was located 70 kilometres to the north of Zaragoza. On 31 August, they advanced to Tierz which was only 7 miles east of Huesca. but on 1 September, the enemy's counterattack became so severe that they could not advance any more. After a while the enemy ceased attack and then there continued a complete deadlock for a week. As John wrote, mosquitos were the only enemy during the ceasefire. John suddenly had a high fever and diarrhea on 8 September. The next day he had a bad stomachache and was sent in a military truck to Saliena field hospital at 50 kilometres southeast of Huesca. Although there was no diagnose, John was getting a little better and on 10 September, he was allowed to take a bath. Richard Bennett who had come to Spain with John and had got a job with the media in Barcelona visited John in hospital. John was getting so well then that he could talk with Richard about various problems in Barcelona. <sup>(25)</sup>

On 13 September, John was sent back to Barcelona on sick leave . On the same day Tom Wintringham wrote from Barcelona to Harry Pollitt, the Chief Secretary of the British Communist Party, as follows:

We ask you to encourage John to come back here in a fortnight or three weeks. He has had a very bad time with the worst organized gang on an unorganized front, but he can help us all the more by knowing the

necessary comparisons. <sup>(26)</sup>

On 14 September, John left Spain and on 16 arrived in London in order to be engaged in a special propaganda mission. That was the end of his 40-day experience in Spain. In Spain as he was in poor health and had little knowledge of Spanish language, John must have felt lonely and realized that he was an incompetent soldier, moreover, he must have grown sick of the lack of discipline and inefficiency in the POUM militia.

John wrote three poems during his stay in Spain; "Full Moon at Tielz — before the storming of Huesca", "To Margot Heinemann" and "A Letter from Aragon." The experience in the battlefield must have revived his long-forgotten poetic inspiration.

Here is one of the poems; "To Margot Heinemann" .

Heart of the heartless world,  
Dear heart, the thought of you  
Is the pain at my side,  
The shadow that chills my view.

The wind rises in the evening,  
Reminds that autumn's near.  
I am afraid to lose you,  
I am afraid of my fear.

On the last mile to Huesca,  
The last fence for our pride,  
Think so kindly, dear, that I  
Sense you at my side.

And if bad luck should lay my strength  
Into the shallow grave,

Remember all the good you can;  
Don't forget my love. <sup>(27)</sup>

John's letter to Margot from Spain had a little more optimistic tone than this poem: "I came out with the intention of staying a few days, firing a few shots, and then coming home. . . Having joined, I am in whether I like it or not. And I like it." <sup>(28)</sup> At that time no fight had begun yet and he had not seen anyone killed or injured in the battle. But soon such peaceful situation changed. Now John wrote about his bitter experience in "A Letter from Aragon":

This is a quiet sector of a quiet front.

We buried Ruiz in a new pine coffin,  
But the shroud was too small and his washed feet struck out.  
The stink of his corpse came through the clean pine boards  
And some of the bearers wrapped handkerchiefs round their faces.  
Death was not dignified.  
We hacked a ragged grave in the unfriendly earth  
And fired a ragged volley over the grave.

You could tell from our listlessness, no one much missed him.

This is a quiet sector of a quiet front.  
But when they shelled the other end of the village  
There is no poison gas and no H.E.  
And the streets were choked with dust  
Women came screaming out of the crumbling houses,  
Clutched under one arm the naked rump of an infant.  
I thought: how ugly fear is. <sup>(29)</sup>

As mentioned above, John had 'the special propaganda mission' to attend to after returning to London, that is to recruit new volunteers and to make excellent combatants of them. In cooperation with the Chief Secretary of the British Communist Party, Harry Pollitt he began his work of recruitment.

At that time the organization of the International Brigade was well under way Comintern but somehow neither Harry Pollitt nor John knew about it at all. So Pollitt considered that the Communist Party should take responsibility for the registration of volunteers as its members and sending them to Spain so that they would join the Communist militia. <sup>(30)</sup>

John was a soldier on leave from POUM, which he severely criticized as 'the worst militia.' Soon after that the Communist Party became sharply opposed to POUM. It is not known what conversation was had or promise made between John and Harry Pollitt but somehow John came to think that if only he had the formal identification as a member of the Communist Party he would be able to transfer to the Communist militia from the POUM in Barcelona.

## **5 The Battle of "Ciudad Universitaria"**

Thirteen volunteers applied to the recruitment with the special propaganda carried out by John and six including a German defector were selected.

While engaged in this work, John saw Margot and other friends of his but he was always unwilling to speak about his experience in the Spanish battlefield. Once he told Margot that thinking what he had seen at the front such an easy victory as was shown in the propaganda would never be gained.

He went back home to Cambridge to talk with his father about his second trip to Spain. His father perceived that John's wish to go to Spain was not for any political cause but from a very 'private motive' <sup>(31)</sup>. However, following his principles of not meddling in his son's business he gave up persuading John not to go and instead gave him a gun which he had carried with him during World War I.

John's mother was in hospital then. Afterwards his father looked back and said that if his mother had been at home then they would have talked about John's 'private motive'. Like most liberal intellectuals at that time his father was in sympathy with the Spanish Republicans. After his son left for Spain, he became one of the official sponsors for the British Medical Aid to Spain. After seeing John off, he wrote down in the diary;

I see a boat slipping out of harbour & breasting the first waves beyond the bar. The youth at the helm is so confident ..... set his course closer to the wind that is driving him into the heart of the storm. <sup>(32)</sup>

Paying no attention to his father's worry, John got in a night train for Paris with six other volunteers at Victoria Station in London on 5 October. They had new boots, ocher overalls, light knapsacks with daily necessities in it. John had his father's gun, the first volume of *The Capital* and Shakespeare's *Tragedies* in his knapsack. On leaving London, John called Margot and told her his determination that he would fight to the last of the War. Ray came to see him off at the station and found him saying farewell to people cheerfully.

One of the six volunteers was a writer, John Sommerfield. Later he wrote a detailed memoir *Volunteer in Spain* covering the period from departure for Spain until the battle at Madrid University. The book was dedicated to John Cornford who was killed in the battle.

On 6 October the seven volunteers went to the volunteer office in Paris and registered their names there. After a week they joined 14 other British volunteers who arrived later and got on board a ship which belonged to Spanish Anarchists at Marseilles. The ship arrived at Alicante on the Mediterranean coast. At the Alicante customs office the flag of the Spanish Republic, that of Anarchists, and the Soviet Union's flag were waving. That was the scene symbolizing the friendly atmosphere among the Republicans before a sharp conflict between the Communist Party and Anarchists on the Republican side. Sommerfield wrote as follows:

Then a flag ran up to the masthead and broke in the early morning breeze; it was red and black, the colours of the F.A.I.

Well, we weren't Anarchists ourselves, but we felt good about that flag and we hoped that the gentlemen across the way with the gold braid on their cuffs were satisfied.

Then the anchor was got up, we moved slowly forward towards the quay and everyone went to fetch his pack. Now we could see the bright stucco houses and the palms, the shuttered cafes, the little yellow trams, the long white road winding up the mountain to the fortress. On the way were men in overalls carrying rifles, some dock labourers, a youth with an Anarchist cap and a Sam Browne belt with an enormous revolver stuck in it. The water gap between the side of the ship and the quay swirled and narrowed and we looked right down into the eyes of the men standing there. Over the customs house three flags floated, the Republican and the Anarchist colours and a yellow hammer and sickle on the blazing red. This was Spain. <sup>(33)</sup>

They left Alicante for inland Albacete. Albacete was the concentration and training base of the International Columns. The 21 British volunteers were enrolled in a machine gun company of the French Battalion. The People Army of the Republic was organised on 10 October and the International Brigade was formally organised on 22 October. John and his comrades were re-enrolled in the 15th International Brigade consisting 1900 soldiers under the command of General Emilio Kleber. On 5 November the 15th International Brigade was ordered to make a sortie to the Madrid front.

In the rebels' camp, on 23 July just after the military rebellion, the Junta de Defensa Nacional was organised in Burgos with General Miguel Cabanellas appointed as the chairman. On 27 August the rebel soldiers who had been besieged in Alcazar, Toledo, were released after forty days of confinement. The Toledo operation delayed the attack on Madrid planned by Franco for two weeks earlier.

On 29 September Junta de Defensa Nacional elected Franco as Jefe de

Estado. On 1 October Franco formed a provisional government called Junta de Administracion Nacional consisting of nine departments. The government was later named 'Gobierno Burgos'. In the rebel camp Franco held an unshakable position as a man of power, using the two names 'Caudillo' (chief) and 'Generalísimo' (general) separately.

The major strategic objective of the Franco's rebel army was to conquer Madrid. The battle began on 6 October. At that time the password 'No Pasaran!' which later became a famous slogan for the defence of the Spanish Republic was very often cried out. On 4 November, the Republican Cabinet was reshuffled by the prime minister Largo Caballero (1869 — 1946) who was called 'el Lenin español'. Four CNT members joined the Cabinet. On 6 November the three-pronged Franco army got control over Casa de Campo, the hill to the east of Madrid. Largo Caballero's government now decided to move to Valencia, leaving the defence of Madrid to Junta de Defensa de Madrid led by General Miaja. At dawn on 8 November, Franco's artillery began to make their first fierce attack on Madrid. Despite the strenuous fight by militiamen and citizen volunteers for the defence of Madrid, the city lost command of the air and was in a desperate situation. Radio Lisbon, which had been supporting the military rising from the beginning, even broadcast that General Franco entered Madrid on a white horse. <sup>(34)</sup>

The false report on the rebel's side was made even in Japan, far away from the battleground. On 8 November, *the Tokyo Asahi* issued an extra with a headline 'Franco entered Madrid'. <sup>(35)</sup>

Contrary to general expectations Madrid did not fall easily. In the afternoon of 8 November, just when the Franco army gathered forces together and re-opened their attack a long line of Republican soldiers marched on Gran Via at the centre of Madrid in good order to the northwest defending camp. It was the first appearance of the International Brigade in Madrid, the 11th Brigade John belonged to. Their march greatly encouraged the people of Madrid who had been under enemy attack for a month.

The 11th International Brigade was stationed in the Hall of Philosophy and

Letters in Madrid University whose another name was 'Ciudad Universitaria'.

On 9 November, the Brigade began the mopping-up operation against the Franco army on Casa de Campo, the hill on the opposite side of the river Manzanares running on the east side of the department building. On 12 November, the 12th International Brigade of 1600 volunteers arrived at Madrid and were sent to guard the high way to Valencia. About the same time the legendary Anarchist leader Buenaventura Durruti (1896 — 1936) began participation in the War with his 3000 anarchists at the Aragon front. His troops were stationed in support of the attack on Casa de Campo.

On 15 November, the Anarchist troops began the attack but soon retreated from the front frightened by the powerful and accurate machine-gun fires of Moorish Army led from Morocco by Franco. Meanwhile The Moroccans advanced across the Manzanares River and to the University City. At the same time the 11th International Brigade was sent from Casa de Campo to fight against the Moroccans. The bloody battle continued at the University City till 23 November, when both sides were completely exhausted. Both armies made a fort of the school buildings, digging trenches and setting up camps around them. Franco's army occupied two thirds of the Madrid University campus but not an inch more could they advance.

The city of Madrid was under bombardment by the German Condor Legion which was covering the rebels, and artillery from Casa de Campo attacked the east and central part of Madrid. Madrid resisted tenaciously and the battle came to an impasse.

John's British Battalion stayed at the Hall of Philosophy and Letters again. Every morning around 2 o'clock there was gunfire, but apart from that it was a quiet front. One day when John was reading an Everyman classic he brought with him from the library, *The Cloister and the Heart* (1861), a great masterpiece of historical novels written by Charles Reade (1814 — 1884), the incident happened. John Sommerfield describes it in his *Volunteer in Spain*:



I heard an appalling crash and looked up and the room was thick with dust and smoke, in which figures moved confusedly. .... John's head was bleeding swiftly, Joe held his nose and swore. .... Both Joe and John went off bleeding profusely; they came back two days later, their pockets full of oranges, and with stories of the fine meals they had eaten. John's head was done up in a big bandage, and he looked the complete wounded hero. <sup>(36)</sup>

It was a misdirected shot from an anti-aircraft machine gun belonging to Republican troops.

On 14 December the Franco nationalists won Boadilla del Monte, a little village twenty five miles to the east of Madrid. Though not fully recovered from the wound, John took part in the Battle of Boadilla del Monte as the leader of the remaining 12 British volunteers to win back the village. On the way John met some volunteers of another British Battalion under a big holly tree.

The British Battalion, first consisted of 18 members in all, came to Spain soon after John's Battalion came, joined the Thaelmann Battalion of the 12th International Brigade, fought at the south-eastern Madrid and then in the battle of the University City. Eight were killed in the battle, 10 volunteers remain alive. Among them was a friend of John's in London Esmond Romilly. Romilly describes the time when he met John in his memoir of the Spanish Civil War, *Boadilla*: "For me the most important incident was when someone called my name, and I saw John Cornford with his head bandaged." <sup>(37)</sup>

On 17 December, after the close combat at Boadilla del Monte only five in John's Battalion and two in Romilly's survived. They went back to Albacete together with the French Battalion, and in a neighbouring village Madrigueras organized the first company of exclusively the British volunteers. Then Tom Wintringham heard of John's whereabouts and sent his man to invite John to dinner at the Battalion headquarters but John declined the invitation politely. <sup>(38)</sup>

When John's company made a sally into Lopera, John still had his head bandaged and looked gaunt. His commander proposed that he should remain at

the base to take charge of training scores of new British volunteers arriving every week, but John flatly declined the proposal and left for the front.

## 6 The Uncensored Last Letter

The four letters written by John to Margot are all left to us after he joined the International Brigade. Of those four, there was no date on two letters. So the letter of 8 December was the last one with a definite date, which was taken to her by a friend of John's on his way to the home country. John once referred to that letter as 'my first chance of an uncensored letter'. The letter begins with 'I'll assume none of my letters have yet got through, as I've had no answers' <sup>(39)</sup> and ends as follows:

No wars are nice, and even a revolutionary war is ugly enough. But I'm becoming a good soldier, longish endurance and a capacity for living in the present and enjoying all that can be enjoyed. There's a tough time ahead but I've plenty of strength left for it.

Well, one day the war will end — I'd give it till June or July, and then if I'm alive I'm coming back to you. <sup>(40)</sup>

Here we see John, who was burning himself out with his devotion to anti-fascism at the age of 21, though occasionally feeling a little anxious.

Just after John's death in the Battle of Lopera, what he had feared came true. The leaders of the Brigade were so bureaucratic and suspicious that they censored and crushed in their hands most of the letters written by volunteers in their troops. With such bureaucracy and unusually strong suspicion Andre Marty dictatorially executed his men as described above. It was the beginning of the absurd play of purge frequently occurred afterwards on the Republican side. <sup>(41)</sup> What would John have felt if he had witnessed those cruel and sorrowful scenes happened after his death?

Judging from his essays and papers, John must have been a steadfast and

polemic Communist. In this respect, George Orwell gave a rather critical comment on John; 'The young Communist who died heroically in the International Brigade was public school to the core. He had changed his allegiance but not his emotions'. <sup>(42)</sup>

In *Volunteer in Spain* written by John Sommerfield, John was described as a splendid and naive young man. When I asked him what sort of person John was, the author answered;

"So far as I know. John Cornford was a sincere Communist. I believe even now he was one of the purest and most intelligent members of the Communist Party that I have ever met. This would not contradict with the fact that he was a cheerful young man, an openhearted friend, and a useful friend. He did not always talk about his political belief in political terms, no politics was his only topics. If he had been such a person, I would not have kept good company with him. He charmed me with his tender attitude towards others, his total devotion to his belief and his young ardent passion. I still wonder how a young man like him came to have such a wealth of talents. He was really a wonderful man."

This talk about John by Sommerfield is probably quite different from most of the legends later associated with John.

John's brother Christopher who lives in a house called 'Spring House' in Cambridge told me about John, referring to the policy of the British Communist Party toward the Spanish Civil War. "If my brother had come back home alive, he would have left the Communist Party shortly, because he was the man who thought justice more important than political ideologies." It seems to me that these two people who were very close to John showed us his most real image.

<sup>(1)</sup> Thomas, Hugh . *La Guerra Civil Española, 1936-1939*, Editiones Grijalbo, 1979, p. 244.

<sup>(2)</sup> Levine, Maurice. *Cheetham to Cordona: A Manchester Man of the Thirties*, N. Richardson, 1987, p. 91.

<sup>(3)</sup> Thomas, op. cit., p. 430.

Johnston, Verle. *Legions of Babel: The International Brigades in the Spanish*

- Civil War*, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994, p. 68.
- Broue, Pierre & Temine, Emil. *La Revolution et la guerre d'Espagne*, Les Editions de Minuit, 1970, pp.379-80.
- (4) Baugh, Albert. C. ed., *A Literary History of England : The Nineteenth Century and After (1789~1939)*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1990, (BookIV), p. 1581.
- (5) Galassi, Jonathann.ed. *Understand the Weapon Understand the Wound: Selected Writings of John Cornford*, Carcanet New Press, 1976, pp. 19-28.
- (6) Sloan, Pat. ed., *John Cornford: A Memoir*, Jonathan Cape, 1938, p. 32.
- (7) Ibid. , p. 31.
- (8) Stansky, Peter & Abrahams, William. *Journey to the Frontier : To Road to the Spanish Civil War*, Stanford University Press, 1994, p. 184.
- (9) Sloan. op., cit., p.87.
- (10) Poillitt, Harry. *Save Spain From Fascism*, Communist Party of Great Britain, 1936  
 ———, *Spain and the T. U. C. ,* Communist Party of Great Britain, 1936.  
 ———, *Spain: What Next ? ,* Communist Party of Great Britain, 1939.
- (11) Hopkins, James K. *Into the Heart of the Fire: The British in the Spanish Civil War*, Stanford University Press, 1988, pp. 28-9.
- (12) Stansky. op. cit., p. 242.
- (13) Galassi. op. cit., pp. 44-5.
- (14) Ibid. , p. 36.
- (15) Klugmann, James. ‘ Introduction: Crisis in the Thirties : A View from the Left ‘ in Clark, Heinemann. et al. ,eds. *Culture and Crisis in Britain in the Thirties ,* Lawrence & Wishart, 1979, p. 29.
- (16) Stansky. op. cit., pp. 238-9.
- (17) Ibid., pp. 239-40.
- (18) Sloan. op. cit., pp. 200-1.
- (19) Orwell, George. *Homage to Catalonia*, Penguin Books, 1994, p. 5.
- (20) Borkenau, Franz. *The Spanish Cockpit*, The University of Michigan Press, 1983, pp. 107-8.
- (21) Ingram, Kevin. *Rebel: The Short Life of Edmond Romilly ,*Weidenferd &

Nicolson, 1985, p. 432.

- (22) Wintringham, Tom. *English Captain*, Faber & Faber 1939, p. 45.
- (23) Stansky . op. cit., p. 359.
- (24) Ibid., p. 346.
- (25) Hopkins. op. cit., pp. 129-30.
- (26) Stannsky. op. cit., p. 255.
- (27) Sloan. op. cit., pp. 248-9.
- (28) Galassi. op. cit., p. 174.
- (29) Cunningham, Valentine. *Spanish Front: Writers on the Civil War*, Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 259-60.
- (30) Hopkins. op. cit., p. 132.
- (31) Stansky. op. cit., pp. 330-2.
- (32) Ibid. , p. 360.
- (33) Sommerfield, John. *Volunteer in Spain*, Lawrence & Wishart, 1937, pp. 24-5.
- (34) Tunon de Lara, Manuel. *La España del Siglo XX, 1924-1937*, Liberia Española, 1988, p. 564.  
Parcell, Hugh. *The Spanish Civil War*, Wayland, 1937, p. 47.
- (35) Asahi Sinnbunn , Nov. 8, 1936.  
Kawanari, Yo. *30 nenndai nihonnno sinnbunnhoudou*, Sairyusya, 1982.
- (36) Sommerfield. op. cit., pp. 150-1.
- (37) Romilly. op. cit., p. 182.
- (38) Stannsky. op. cit., p. 387.
- (39) Sloan. op. cit., p. 239.
- (40) Ibid. , pp. 242-3.
- (41) Francus, Hywell. *Miners against Fascism*, Lawrence & Wishart, 1984, p. 223.  
Jackson, Michel , *Fallen Sparrow;: The International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War*, American Philosophical Society, 1994, p. 108.
- (42) Orwell, Sonia & Angus, Ian. eds., *An Age Like This* , Secker & Warburg, 1996, p. 540.