

## “HARD AS THE METAL OF MY GUN”: JOHN CORNFORD’S SPAIN<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT.** *John Cornford, who died on the Cordoba front in December 1936, is most frequently seen, by both enthusiasts and detractors, as a loyal Communist cadre, subscribing unequivocally to the Party line on the situation in Spain. Yet in his most powerful poem, “Full Moon at Tierz: Before the Storming of Huesca”, there is a significant hesitation, focused by a reference to the Seventh Congress of the Comintern. A close scrutiny of this poem, of letters and a “Political Report” he wrote from Spain, and an examination of some of his pre-Spain political writings, indicate a more complex picture, and suggest that he had considerable reservations about Party policy, particularly in relation to the “Popular Front” strategy, and to Communist dealings with other movements in the Republican camp.*

### 1. THE TEST

“All presented their lives”, W. H. Auden (1937: 10) wrote of the young men who flocked to Spain to serve the cause of anti-fascism, in the wake of the Francoist rebellion against the Republic on July 17, 1936. John Lehmann (1955: 273), co-editor with Stephen Spender of the influential anthology *Poems for Spain*, recalled in his autobiography that in Spain “everything, all our fears, our confused hopes and beliefs, our half-formulated theories and imaginings, veered and converged towards its testing and its opportunity, like steel filings that slide towards a magnet suddenly put near them”. Subsequently, however, he (332)

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1. This article extends and in places reprises an argument first developed in my article “From ‘Class Against Class’ to the Hitler-Stalin Pact: Some Reflections on the Unwavering Line” (Smith 2007: 3-16). A version of this article will also appear in the journal of the Raymond Williams Society, *Key Words: A Journal of Cultural Materialism*, in October 2009.

reached the conclusion, along with many of his contemporaries, that the Spanish War “dragged us all deeper into the morass of ideological conflict, putting to the sharpest test the idealism that the advance of fascism in Central Europe had awakened in us”.

Lehmann’s concept of a test recalls Christopher Isherwood’s (1979: 46) declared conviction in *Lions and Shadows*, first published in 1938, that his generation, which was too young to serve in the Great War, had felt from the start the need for some personal test of manhood, in “a complex of terrors and longings connected with the idea ‘War’”:

“War”, in this purely neurotic sense, meant The Test. The Test of your courage, of your maturity, of your sexual prowess: “Are you really a Man?” Subconsciously, I believe, I longed to be subjected to this test; but I also dreaded failure.

For Isherwood’s generation, as for that a decade younger, Spain was the first instalment of this “Test”. It soon became apparent, however, that a crucial part of such a testing for the liberal intellectual was the struggle with one’s conscience to achieve what Auden’s (1937: 11) pamphlet poem *Spain* notoriously dubbed “conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary murder”, reluctant but willed acquiescence in the brutality that characterise all civil wars, made particularly vicious in this instance by the class and ideological antagonisms of a country torn in the 1930s between modernity and reaction. “Our generation”, Stephen Spender (1992: 25), Lehmann’s co-editor on *Poems for Spain*, recalled half a century later, “was conscripted into politics by Hitler”, more or less innocently accepting “the Marxist interpretation of history” and believing that “Communism would lead to the freedom of oppressed people, to a world of social justice, and to a depoliticised egalitarian anarchist utopia”. In 1951, looking back on the Thirties in his autobiographical Cold War *apologia pro vita sua*, *World Within World*, Spender (1951: 311) had already admitted that a major part of his impulsion towards Communism, as a young bourgeois leftist, was a desire to expunge his class guilt:

Communism [...] seemed to offer a way out of my dilemma. It suggested to me that after all I was not myself. I was simply a product of my bourgeois circumstances. By “going over to the proletariat” and entering a different set of circumstances I could become another kind of social projection. I would be “on the side of history” and not “rejected” by it, like one of the disused mines in Auden’s early poems.

Auden (1955: 9), who himself subsequently laid claim to a similar political naivety, chose to fall silent after returning from Spain, explaining, later, that at the time progressive writers like himself felt compelled to defend the bad against the

worst, but that "Nobody I know who went to Spain during the Civil War who was not a dyed-in-the-wool Stalinist came back with his illusions intact". The anonymous *TLS* reviewer of *Poems for Spain* in 1939 registered the nature of these writers' liberal dilemma:

The tragic conflict in Spain cannot be evaded by the modern poet. Whether or not it compels him to direct expression, it must haunt his mind with painful questions and torture his imagination. For here, as in a theatre but with the appalling realism of indiscriminate slaughter, the discord at the heart of our civilization is nakedly displayed. ([Fausset] 1939: 131)

But, in the reviewer's (131) opinion, what "makes the conflict so peculiarly tragic" is that, "believing that in supporting the Spanish republic they are defending the very life-principle of civilization", these writers found themselves required to use "weapons that inevitably deny the very values they wish to affirm". This is not the place to go over yet again the complex amalgam of faith, illusion and self-delusion, credulity and *Realpolitik*, idealism and cynicism, that characterised the international response to the Spanish Civil War. What I want to revisit, rather, is the fraught encounter with Spanish realities of one dedicated and talented young poet, who was prepared to and did in fact die in taking that "Test".

## 2. CALCULATED ACTS

One of the writers the *TLS* reviewer singled out from *Poems for Spain* was John Cornford, whose poetry, he observed, was "written by the will rather than from the sensibility... the calculated acts of a fighter determined in vindicating his creed to be 'invincible as the strong sun, / Hard as the metal of my gun'" ([Fausset] 1939: 131). Rupert John Cornford, the son of a distinguished Cambridge academic family, christened in honour of that earlier poetic war casualty, his parents' friend, Rupert Brooke, joined the Communist Party of Great Britain while still at Cambridge University, in 1935. He died on the Cordoba front a day after his twenty-first birthday, on December 28 1936.

Cornford is usually seen as an aggressively orthodox Communist, a posture, it could be argued, maintained partly out of guilt at his privileged and therefore suspect class origins, a stick which the British Communist Party regularly used in the 1930s to beat dissident intellectuals back into conformity with whatever was the current Party line. Yet Cornford's major poem, "Full Moon at Tierz: Before the Storming of Huesca" (Galassi 1976: 38-40), is riven by the contradictions of the poet's subject-position. In the idiom of its time, it speaks of Spain as the place where "our testing has begun". But it also records that such testing is a matter not

only of personal courage in risking one's life in battle. It also involves an inner struggle to overcome personal doubts and uncertainties, what the poem calls the "private battle with my nerves", a "battle" to compel oneself to accept in practice what intellectually one might dispute, in the name of Party discipline (39).

"Full Moon at Tierz" in fact discloses a more complicated, less doctrinaire reality than that of the public manifestos and pronouncements with which it might be associated, and which are echoed in its closing lines, and it is this very complexity which contributes to its value as a work of literature transcending its polemic origins. The "testing" announced by the full moon rising over friend and foe alike on the bare hills of Aragon is not only a test of physical courage in the fight with an external and ubiquitous fascism. It refers also to an internal moral struggle with one's bourgeois self, to maintain loyalty to the Party amidst misgivings about its policies and practice.

Such a dilemma was revealed in a letter of Cornford's from the Aragon front to his lover, Margot Heinemann, written over several days between 16 and 30 August 1936 (171-181). In it, he writes of his sense of solidarity with "German comrades" in his unit. It is, he says, "The luckiest accident of the whole war... that put me in touch with the German comrades", amidst what had previously been "the same loneliness and isolation as the first term in a new school, without the language and without any kind of distraction of something to do". "All the revolutionary enthusiasm was bled out me", he continued, until he met this "splendid lot", who have "treated me with a quite extraordinary personal kindness; and at last I can live in the present, get outside of my own mind..." (180).

If, however, he was "never more glad of anything in my life than the accident which threw me together with them", he feels compelled to report to his ultra-orthodox Communist lover, almost as if seeking absolution, that "Four of them are ex-members of the party; one still a member", adding that they had left the KPD "because they genuinely believe the C.I. [Communist International] has deserted the revolution" (180). "Partly, perhaps", he adds by way of exoneration, "it is the uprootedness of emigrants". His own reluctance to contest their views is explained, a little evasively, on grounds of ignorance: "I do not know enough of the Spanish position to argue with them successfully". However, a kind of bravado confidence is restored in the assertion: "But I am beginning to find out how much the Party and the International have become flesh and blood of me. Even when I can put forward no rational argument, I feel that to cut adrift from the Party is the beginning of political suicide" (180).

If Cornford really had no doubts, of course, such a cutting adrift would have been quite literally unthinkable. It is a significantly ambivalent note towards the

close of a long and variously restarted letter, particularly in that intellectually unprincipled antithesis of "no rational argument" and "political suicide", and the strategic position of this particular revelation suggests a deeper disturbance than it will actually admit. The implicit struggle with the nerves involves disciplining the self into the iron resolve of the unquestioning cadre, even if there is "no rational argument", and these paragraphs almost seem like an appeal to his hard-line lover for ratification in one direction or another.

The strain of such an inner conflict is apparent in the paradoxical fusion of solidarity and solitude in a single line at the heart of "Full Moon at Tierz": "Now with my Party, I stand quite alone" (39). In the midst of all this enforced solidarity, it is the loneliness which persists. This is the subject steeling himself to a commitment that remains abstract and hortatory, a wish rather than a reality. A hesitant and solitary being wills himself, in a kind of prayer to an absent Marxian deity, not to lose his faith, to be a good Communist:

Then let my private battle with my nerves,  
The fear of pain whose pain survives,  
The love that tears me by the roots,  
The loneliness that claws my guts,  
Fuse in the welded front our fight preserves. (39)

The poem's closing exhortation, to "Raise the red flag triumphantly / For Communism and for liberty" (40) is not however actually uttered by the poet himself. It is, rather, an imagined affirmation, projected rhetorically into that "Time future" which the opening section had said "has no image in space" (38), when "the workers of all the world" will gather on the plain of Huesca to raise the red flag and "swear that our dead fought not in vain" (40). This last formulation recalls the earlier anxious desire to "prove the agony was not in vain" (39), and suggests deep forebodings about any actual future. The echo of the Italian Communist anthem "Bandiera Rossa" is a way of strengthening personal resolve, cheering himself up. The poem's real climax comes at the beginning of this last stanza, in the acknowledgment that "Freedom is an easily spoken word / But facts are stubborn things" (40). Far from being the utterance of what the *TLS* reviewer called "a fighter determined in vindicating his creed to be 'invincible as the strong sun,'" Cornford's poem embodies in its very ambivalences and hesitations a more profound sense of the stress involved in steeling oneself to continue believing in that creed, to be ideologically as "hard as the metal of my gun". The ambiguous, deceptive, equivocal light of the moon, not the direct glare of the sun, after all, is what defines the moral space of the poem. This is a poem riddled with doubt, a

doubt detectable in the celebration of “the impartial beauty of the stars” and the indifference of “the unfeeling sky”, or in the references to the “Crooked... road that we must tread”, to “freedom’s crooked scars”, and the “innocent mask” concealing that “our freedom’s swaying in the scales” (38-40 *passim*). The poem’s harrowingly dramatic power derives from the way it enacts the very processes by which the isolated individual steels himself rhetorically to sink his ego in a “welded front” (39).

### 3. A PUNISHMENT FOR PREVIOUS ERRORS

A bad-tempered exchange in the pages of *Socialist Register* in 1981-1982 squabbled over Cornford’s literary remains. The dispute was waged between the historian and ex-CP veteran John Saville and the (by his own account) independent socialist Oxford literary critic Valentine Cunningham, whose *Penguin Book of Spanish Civil War Verse* (1980) Saville had attacked in a withering review in the 1981 issue of the annual. Saville, who joined the British Communist Party in 1934 and had been active in its campaign on behalf of Spain, quit the Party in 1956, along with several other distinguished members of the Communist History Group, to found the *New Reasoner*, one of the first stirrings of an incipient New Left which, to begin with, was predominantly ex-Communist in origin. Saville’s review, however, remained loyal to the CPGB line on Spain, and to those figures, such as Harry Pollitt, well known and clearly fondly recalled by Saville (1981: 279) as “a tough-minded working-class militant with an engaging and warm personality”, who had led the Party at the time.<sup>2</sup> It is not my purpose here to adjudicate between these two conflicting but in many ways complementary readings of Cornford’s life and commitments. The differences between them have to be read in the context of the different political and cultural agendas from which they emerge. Each contains elements of a partial truth about this complex and conflicted figure, and each in turn witnesses to the historical pressures and what Cunningham calls the “ideological constraint” exerting a gravitational drag on their interpretations.

Neither writer disputes the quality of Cornford’s poetry, but Cunningham claims that its quality arose despite its author’s subscription to the Stalinist orthodoxy of CPGB politics at the time, from which he argues Cornford probably

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2. Pollitt was indeed far from being a simple Stalinist hack, to the extent that at the time of the Nazi-Soviet pact he was sacked from the position of General Secretary of the CPGB by its central committee, since he was unable to endorse the official party line. He was only restored to leadership when Hitler’s invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 instantly converted what had previously been designated an inter-imperialist conflict into a war of proletarian patriotism.

demurred, as evidenced by his joining, on his first visit to Spain, a POUM unit; while Saville seeks to justify those politics and to present Cornford as a convinced adherent of the Party line, and his POUM connection an accident which he rectified on his return to Spain by joining, with Pollitt's encouragement, the Communist-dominated International Brigade.

Both positions seem to me incorrect, or at least incomplete, and both, at the same time, contain a rational kernel. At the centre of the dispute, quoted by both men, is a report on "The Situation in Catalonia", portions of which appeared in *The New Republic* on December 2 1936 under the title "On the Catalonian Front", and is reprinted in full in Galassi's selection of Cornford's writings (Galassi 1976: 108-25). In this report, Saville says, "Cornford made abundantly clear his understanding and analysis of POUM", and he quotes it at length in order to refute "Cunningham's political assessment of Cornford [which] rests entirely upon the supposed POUM-Cornford connection", stressing in particular the sentences with which his extract begins:

POUM is a punishment for previous errors of the Communists and Socialists. The leaders are mostly Communist renegades (like Oranin) and ex-Trotskyists like Andrés Nin. Before 19th July it was as strong as the Communist Party, and its Trade Unions were stronger than the reformist UGT. But the sweep of the workers into all revolutionary organisations has meant that hundreds of revolutionary workers have swept also into the ranks of POUM. For instance, Grossi, the leader of the second column of POUM, an Oviedo miner under sentence of death at the time of the elections, though he may be both reckless and theatrical, is without question a sincere and courageous revolutionary with a mass following. But in spite of divisions in the leadership, the dominant policy is provocative and utterly dangerous. It is a parody of the Bolshevist tactics of 1917...

[Saville's ellipsis]

Fortunately, their influence is not growing dangerously. Their trade unions, a few months ago stronger than the UGT, have now very little influence, while the UGT grows in a geometrical progression. Their militia is the worst organised on the Aragon front; even brave and intelligent leaders like Grossi are incapable of giving their troops proper political, military, or organisational training. Thus their splitting policy is no longer a serious danger. They have little left beyond their sectarian political leaders: a well-produced newspaper, *La Batalla*, and two to three thousand of the worst-organised militia; brave enough, but incapable of a real sustained offensive through sheer inefficiency. (Saville 1981: 274; Galassi 1976: 112-113)

As might be expected, Cunningham's (1982: 279) reply stresses, instead, Cornford's admiration, for all his reservations, for Grossi and for the genuine revolutionary motives of his "mass following", which Saville glosses over, and adds a jibe at political interference in the original *New Republic* text of Cornford's essay by a commissar of Party orthodoxy:

Nor does Saville mention the footnote [omitted from the Galassi version] that Pat Sloan, the Communist, Left Book Club author and Stalinising Russophile who edited *John Cornford: A Memoir*, added to Cornford's report on "The Situation in Catalonia". He added it in fact to the passage that Saville quotes, where Cornford is dismissing the political threat of the POUM despite the presence in it of such a magnetic leader as the miner Grossi, a "sincere and courageous revolutionary" ("even brave and intelligent leaders like Grossi are incapable of giving their troops proper political, military, or organisational training"). Sloan's footnote interrupts such reflections sternly: "The optimism of these remarks concerning the Anarchists and the POUM seem [sic] to be the only particular in which John Cornford's judgment erred. It was precisely the penetration of Fascists into these organizations –noted by J. C.– that made possible the Barcelona uprising of May 1937".

"Evidently", Cunningham (279) concludes, "what Saville calls Cornford's 'understanding and analysis of POUM' was not sufficiently (in Saville's words) 'abundantly clear' for the Party".

Sloan's intervention in fact provides the clue to the particular tone of Cornford's article. As Saville (1981: 274) reveals, possibly for the first time, the article was originally a "Political Report", "in case the point has not been taken... written for the British CP and was read, among others, by Harry Pollitt, its general secretary.... Pollitt certainly read the Political Report". Cornford was writing in the idiom of the Party, in a formal Report where Stalinist rhetoric was *de rigueur*, and no alternative interpretations of the historical realities to those of the current Party line would be acceptable. Thus he has to engage in the usual denigratory reference to Trotskyists and, in the passage just before Saville's excerpt, to POUM's "provocative campaign for the arming of every man, woman and child in Barcelona for 'the second revolution' at a time when all arms were wanted at the front" (Galassi 1976: 111). The context of this, however, is Cornford's clearly expressed approval of the Anarchist Durruti's response to the POUM campaign, in a telephone call to Barcelona, appealing "for all Anarchist workers to send all sons to the front", and Cornford's commendation, a couple of paragraphs earlier, of the "magnificent responsibility and organising power of the [Anarchist] workers in their own Trade Unions, who are more and more adopting, though not yet

consciously, the line of the Communists and Socialists, and will not permit wrecking tactics by their leaders". Though "they still refuse to take part in the official government" these Anarchists nevertheless "gave their provisional support to the Government for the duration of the war" (111).

By beginning his quotation from Cornford with the latter's ritual allusion to "renegades" and "ex-Trotskyists", Saville isolates this passage as if it were a specific and central indictment of POUM, when it is merely part of a reasoned and balanced analysis of all the elements in the Republican camp, starting with the "bourgeois" coalition government headed by Companys and Casanovas. Nowhere does Cornford indulge in the sectarian indictments and denunciations of treachery, subversion and "objectively fascist" behaviour which characterised much Communist commentary on the other movements in the supposed "united front" against fascism. He does indeed refer to the unsuccessful "efforts of the semi-Trotskyist POUM (Partido Obrero d'Unificación Marxista) to break the People's Front", but adds at once that "there has been no question of any serious political division" (109-111). There is no indication that Cornford regards these as anything other than disagreements within the ranks of the genuine workers' movement, not acts of subversion and provocation by the "Fifth Columnists" spoken of in the Nationalist General Emilio Mola's 1936 broadcast during the siege of Madrid, eagerly seized upon by many within the Republic's ranks to settle old scores. On the contrary, in speaking of POUM as "semi-Trotskyist", Cornford departs from Communist orthodoxy, which would recognise no such halfway house, and seems to allow scope for reconciliation and re-education, as in his wishful belief that the Anarchist workers are "adopting, though not yet consciously" the PSUC line. Spelling out the initials of POUM, with all the emotional resonances attached to words like "worker" and "Marxist unity", might also have an incorporative polemic intent, while in speaking of Nin as an "ex-Trotskyist", Cornford tries to hold the door open for a wider consensus than Party orthodoxy was prepared to tolerate. In similar vein, in a passage Saville omits between the two paragraphs he quotes, Cornford expands on what he means in writing of "a parody of the Bolshevik tactics of 1917":

The opposition to the People's Front and proposal instead to form a workers' bloc at the elections would have driven the Republicans into the arms of the reactionaries; it would have allowed the Lerroux Governments to continue in office: would have led the unarmed workers into struggle with the whole State machine. A further example of the pseudo-Bolshevism of POUM: Budyenny organised cavalry in the Russian revolution. So what must POUM do but organise cavalry too. They forgot that if Budyenny had had at his disposal roads

in perfect working order and a fleet of fast lorries, he would not have organised cavalry but motorised columns instead. (112)

Possibly Cornford had not yet encountered the state of Spanish roads away from the urban centres, particularly during winter rains. If he had, he might have been a little less dismissive of POUM policy on this matter. But his sarcasm here is certainly not an indictment of “objectively counter-revolutionary” activity. On the contrary, in invoking “Bolshevik” analogies from the heroic days of the Russian Revolution, he is quietly advising his orthodox Party readers that these people are genuine militants, whose errors may be comical but arise from an excess of revolutionary zeal, not from treachery. Nor is he convinced that the Party has always been right in the line it pursued. He is implicitly arguing for a wider tolerance and ecumenism in defining the forces of the Republic, and suggesting, too, that this is not only a moral precondition of revolutionary solidarity, but sound political strategy also, if the Party is to forge that “welded front” without which the Republic will be defeated. More interested in asserting Cornford’s disapproval of POUM than in listening to what the man actually says, John Saville seems not to have noticed the astonishingly reckless departure from “democratic centralist” norms in this twenty-year-old petty-bourgeois intellectual’s rebuke to the unquestionable certainties of Party orthodoxy: “POUM is a punishment for previous errors of the Communists and Socialists”. How dare this neophyte defector from the ruling class, still wet behind the ears, impute “errors” to the infallible Party? Cornford’s coded references to the Popular Front programme in his “Report” are crucially significant in this context.

#### 4. WHAT THE SEVENTH CONGRESS SAID

What is going on here is indicated most explicitly in the heretical hesitation, suppressed as uttered, in the fifth stanza of the published text of “Full Moon at Tierz”:

All round the barren hills of Aragon  
Announce our testing has begun.  
Here what the Seventh Congress said,  
If true, if false, is live or dead,  
Speaks in the Oviedo mausers tone. (Galassi 1976: 38)

It is surprising that there has been no critical consideration of these lines, particularly since, according to his biographers Peter Stansky and William Abrahams (1966: 347), they are, in their draft form, the first words Cornford wrote in his diary,

and constitute the opening stanza of the diary version, only moved to the fifth stanza in the published version. The words are, that is, the germ and stimulus of the whole poem, and indicate what was foremost in Cornford's mind as he confronted his first test in action with this POUM battalion. The next stanza of the poem, in the published version, opens up the specific significance of this allusion to the crucial Seventh Congress of the Communist International: "Three years ago Dimitrov fought alone / And we stood taller when he won" (Galassi 1976: 38).

The reference, reinforced by the subsequent allusion to "the Leipzig Dragon", is to Georgi Dimitrov, the Bulgarian Communist leader, accused by the Nazis, in the Leipzig show trial in 1933, of setting fire to the *Reichstag* building, which event provided the pretext for Hitler's suspension of the German constitution and his seizure of unconditional state power. Partly as a result of massive international publicity and pressure, Dimitrov was acquitted. Cornford's reference to him fighting alone is not quite accurate. His co-accused was the mentally unstable young Dutch anarchist and ex-Communist Marinus van der Lubbe, who was not so fortunate, being found guilty and subsequently beheaded by the Nazi state. Stephen Spender (1934: 39-40) wrote a poem about van der Lubbe's manic laughter, manifest throughout the trial, while W. H. Auden (1936: 51) also alluded to it in another, more famous poem. Cornford's ignoring of Dimitrov's less successful co-defendant may be tactful silence in deference to the Party line: the Comintern was not interested in saving the life of a renegade ultra-leftist, whether innocent or not, and did not want any competition to detract from its internationally celebrated triumph. Or it may be simply a matter of poetic expediency: it is important for the rhetoric of the poem that Dimitrov "fought alone", so that lonely and isolated cadres like the poet himself can learn to stand taller in their solitude and, in the process, find a solidarity and shared identity ("Now with my Party, I stand quite alone").

But there is more to the Dimitrov reference than this, and it takes us right into the ambivalent heart of the poem. It was at the Seventh Congress of the Communist International in 1935 that Georgi Dimitrov, as its General Secretary, proposed, in a speech entitled "The Unity of the Working Class against Fascism", a new strategy of anti-fascist collaboration with non-Communist organisations and movements. This strategy involved a major volte-face in Comintern policy, though it was not of course announced as such. Prior to this, the Comintern had espoused the so-called "Third Period" strategy which ran from 1928 until Hitler's seizure of power after 1933, and the growing threat of fascism throughout Europe, called for a belated rethink. "What the Seventh Congress said", through the mouth of

Dimitrov, was the need for a policy of a “United Front Against Fascism”, more commonly known as the “Popular Front”.

The ultra-leftist “Third Period” strategy had insisted that capitalism was now entering its third and final period, after its temporary stabilisation in the 1920s. National Communist parties had been required to denounce all other workers’ and socialist organisations as “false lefts”, and to reject collaboration with them and any participation in “United Front” strategies. A cult of armed insurrection was advocated, irrespective of local circumstances, logistical capacity, or the likelihood of success. “United front at the base”, or “from below”, was contrasted with the allegedly “revisionist” and “opportunist” imposture of the “united front from above”, at the level of party leaderships. Unity “from below” between all workers, irrespective of affiliation, required, in fact, that such workers would sooner rather than later subscribe to the leadership of the Communist Party, and be “won” to the Moscow line. The “Popular Front” strategy, by contrast, went even further than advocating collaboration with the leadership of the previously reviled “social fascist” parties. It now involved collaboration across classes with what was henceforth called the “progressive bourgeoisie”. The French Communist leader Maurice Thorez, whom Cornford invokes in the subsequent stanza of “Full Moon at Tierz”, was one of the architects of the Popular Front in France, having resisted overtures from the Socialists until 1934. While supporting from outside the Popular Front Government formed there after the 1936 elections, he kept the PCF out of direct participation in government, presumably on instructions from Moscow. He becomes, then, for Cornford, a figure of the disciplined cadre loyally implementing Party policy, irrespective of possible personal misgivings.

While the Popular Front policy was widely welcomed by liberal leftists such as Stephen Spender, many traditional Communists initially regarded the programme with distrust. Cornford’s balancing formula, “If true, if false, is live or dead” suggests that he shared these doubts, seeing resolution of the debate to lie in the outcome of armed conflict, “the Oviedo mausers tone”. Whether the Oviedo provenance of the POUM leader Grossi, singled out as a “sincere and courageous revolutionary with a mass following” in his “Political Report”, unconsciously influenced Cornford’s choice of this particular carbine rifle as the authoritative voice of the revolution is now beyond speculation. But there is much evidence from his earlier writings that Cornford would, in the very recent past, have had considerable sympathy for the criticisms of Comintern policy, particularly in regard to the Popular Front, of the Anarchists and “semi-Trotskyists” among whom he was serving in Aragon, sentiments clearly shared, in fact, by those German ex-Communists of whom he writes with such admiration and affection in his letter to Heinemann.

In his essay "What Communism Stands For" in *Christianity and the Social Revolution*, which was published in 1935, Cornford was convinced that the present era was "the epoch of imperialist wars, of wars between the great powers for the redivision of the world", in which "each successive crisis in the imperialist epoch is the prelude to a more desperate world war" (Lewis 1935: 242). For, he (256) continued, "the whole structure of capitalist rule eliminates the possibility of the peaceful conquest of power by the working class. If the working class ever wishes to take power, it must prepare for civil war". Indeed, he went further, in terms not often heard in the period of Popular Front politics, calling attention to "The fate of the dozens of constitutional 'socialist' Governments – in Germany, Austria, Australia, Great Britain, Scandinavia, Spain, etc., not one of which has been able to introduce an atom of lasting Socialism", which is "the fate of the Socialists who 'reject' civil war", and he (257) continued with an attack on the policy of "the left of the English Labour Party" for misunderstanding "the whole structure of the capitalist State".

The writing of Cornford's essay probably predates the official formulation of the Popular Front policy, though by the time it was published that policy was in place. As a loyal Communist, he would have sought to accept the change in the Party line. Nevertheless, the essay shares the insurrectionary assumptions of Third Period strategy, and is clearly closer to the continuing criticisms of Popular Front strategy after 1935 by the non-Communist left and by the Party's internal "left opposition", not of course made public at the time. Such assumptions are even more apparent in the article "Left?", which appeared in *Cambridge Left* in the winter of 1933-34. This essay asserts, in attacking Stephen Spender, that "there is no middle position between revolution and reaction" (Galassi 1976: 59), and actually quotes with approval two caustic stanzas from Auden's "A Communist to Others", with the comment "There is no ambiguity about this", commending that poem's "far more virile and direct revolutionary form" (61). Similarly, the essay "The Struggle for Power in Western Europe", published in *Cambridge Left* in Spring 1934, shows little sign of a burgeoning Popular Front mentality, pouring scorn on Social Democracy for facing "in two directions – to show the bourgeoisie its absolute loyalty and to present the revolutionary workers revolutionary phrases without giving any lead in the immediate struggles" (66). The tone as well as the tenor of all this corresponds closely to that subsequently to be found in "left" critiques of the "Popular Front" policy. Indeed, quoting D. Z. Manuilsky's denunciation of the Second International at the CPSU's 17th Congress for seeking "socialism but without the proletarian revolution", he concluded that "In sharp opposition to the theory and practice of the democratic transition from Capitalism to Socialism [of the Second International] stands the Communist International. It

has always resolutely put forward the slogan of class against class" (66-67). "Class against class" was the precise formula of Third Period politics, rejected once the Popular Front was inaugurated. Cornford's private battle with his nerves, then, was also a struggle to convince himself that "what the Seventh Congress said" was true, not false. If, as "Full Moon at Tierz" reports, "Communism was my waking time", it was for Cornford the Communism not of the Popular Front but of the Third Period strategy, now branded an ultra-leftist, sectarian, "Trotskyist" deviation. Cornford's perplexity, focused in the poem in that succinct antithesis, "If true, if false", is apparent in the personal admission to Margot Heinemann early in his letter of 16-30 August:

Now a bit about the political situation. That isn't easy to get straight, particularly as I haven't yet heard anyone explain the position of the Party (and the militia here I am with are POUM – left sectarian semi-Trotskyists). But roughly this. The popular front tactics were worked magnificently to begin with. They won the elections. And under the slogan of the defence of the Republic, they enabled us to arm the workers when the Fascist revolt started. Up till then the position is quite clear. But now in Catalonia things are like this. There is a left Republican government. But, in fact, the real power is with the workers. There are 50,000 or more armed workers in Catalonia – and in the Barcelona patrols they are organised in the following proportions: 325 CNT (Anarchist), 185 ERC (left Republican). But this means simply the Civil Guard and the Guardia de Asalto, the police; 145 UGT (Soc.-Com.); 45 POUM. Thus the Anarchists predominate.... The Anarchists appear to be preparing to attack the Government after the fall of Saragossa. That would be disastrous. The only possible tactics for the Party are to place themselves at the head of the movement, get it under control, force recognition from the Government of the social gains of the revolution, and prevent at all costs an attack on the Government – unless the Government actually begins to sabotage the fight against Fascism. That may be what the Party is doing. But I have a fear that it is a little too mechanical in its application of People's Front tactics. It is still concentrating too much on trying to neutralise the petty bourgeoisie – when by far the most urgent task is to win the anarchist workers, which is a special technique and very different from broad Seventh Congress phrases. But I don't really know.... (173)

In Barcelona, he continues, "one can understand physically what the dictatorship of the proletariat means", adding, a little later "It is genuinely a dictatorship of the majority, supported by the overwhelming majority" (174). The description of POUM as "left sectarian semi-Trotskyists" is orthodox enough, though that "semi-" again adds a cautionary note, but there is no indication that he regards them as untrustworthy comrades to fight alongside. One has to recall that, exactly

contemporaneously, the first of Stalin's "show trials", of the "Trotskyite-Zinovievite Terrorist Centre", was being conducted in Moscow in the week of the 19th-24th of August, though how aware of this Cornford was at the time is unclear. The ostensible loyalty of the disciplined cadre to Party policy on the Popular Front seems more formal than real: significantly, he twice speaks of the policy as mere "tactics", in a context where the duality of "tactics" and "strategy" was part of everyday discourse. The main purpose of such "tactics" is perceived as winning the election and ensuring the arming of the workers "under the slogan of the defence of the Republic". Behind the formula "a little too mechanical" lies, I would suggest, a deeper unhappiness with the line. This becomes sharper in the light of that clearly "Third Period" emphasis on the priority of having an armed working class with "real power" from below. Cornford does not here see an armed, largely Anarchist-oriented working class as a threat to the cause, but rather as the precondition of its survival. Though "The Anarchists appear to be preparing to attack the Government" his proposal is not their suppression, but, in terms clearly derived from the Third Period strategy of "unity from below", the need for the Party to place itself "at the head of the movement", not only to protect the "left Republican government" (unless it "actually begins to sabotage the fight against Fascism") but also to "force recognition from the Government of the social gains of the revolution", in short, to preserve "the dictatorship of the proletariat". This is very far, of course, from the actual trajectory taken by the Spanish Communists and their Soviet mentors in the months that followed.<sup>3</sup> On the contrary, the Communist line was to continue to concentrate "on trying to neutralise the petty bourgeoisie", that is, to placate that body, at the expense of what Cornford believed to be "the most urgent task... to win the anarchist workers". Whatever (in Communist parlance) the "correct line" was in these circumstances, Cornford's scepticism about the theoretical, "textbook" nature of the policy's implementation, and his countervailing insistence on the real complexity of class and political interests and opportunities on the ground, not only derives from his Third Period predispositions, but is hardly distinguishable from the kind of critique George Orwell offered of Communist policy in Catalonia a year later, after the Barcelona pogrom of May 1937. Cornford's implicit and, for such a loyal cadre, somewhat astounding dismissal of Party orthodoxy, in that contemptuous reference to "broad Seventh Congress phrases", full of the activist's contempt for theorising dogmatism, feeds right into the moment of stumbling and prevarication which provided the initial impulse for "Full Moon at Tierz": "Here

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3. The most balanced and scrupulously impartial narrative of these times is that provided by Paul Preston in *The Spanish Civil War: Reaction, Revolution and Revenge* (2006).

what the Seventh Congress said. / If true, if false, is live or dead”, to be proven only by hard practical reality, the praxis of “the Oviedo mausers tone”.

Far from being a Communist hack then (something on which at times Cunningham and Saville appear almost to be agreed), Cornford, struggling to conform to Party doctrine while holding on to his fundamental commitment to an insurrectionist, Third Period agenda, seems to be trying to imagine a strategy that would reconcile defence of the Republic with the cause of proletarian revolution, of which the Spanish War, and his own life, were in his perception only single, isolated moments. It is in this light that we must read his tribute, in the closing paragraph of his letter to Heinemann, to the integrity and authenticity of his German comrades, men, he had already told her, who “genuinely believe the C. I. has deserted the revolution”, but who remain for him “the finest people in some ways I’ve ever met”, and who gave him back a conviction of his own identity as a principled fighter for the world revolution, “For Communism *and* for liberty” (181; my emphasis):

Since meeting the Germans I feel like myself again, no longer lost, and revolutionary again. Before I was too lost to feel anything but lost. Now I’ll fight like hell and I think I’ll enjoy it. They are the finest people in some ways I’ve ever met. In a way they have lost everything, have been through enough to break most people, and remain strong and cheerful and humorous. If anything is revolutionary it is these comrades.

What emerges from “Full Moon at Tierz”, then, is the strain of such an internal struggle. But what that struggle witnesses to is the integrity and dignity of Cornford’s commitment to Spain, and to the wider anti-fascist cause, which for him were inseparable from the international proletarian revolution, a cause for which he was prepared to present his life.

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