

Bernard Knox: Soldier and Scholar

In September of 1936, Bernard Knox received a letter from active communist John Conford, who was a friend from their days at Cambridge University. Conford had returned from fighting in the Spanish Civil War and was tasked with recruiting a British unit to take back to Spain. He was asking Knox to join the international fight against fascism that had captivated the hearts and minds of the world's leftists.¹ Sympathetic to the Republican cause and enraged at General Franco's support from Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler, Knox needed little encouragement. When he received the invitation to go to Spain, he later explained, "I did so without a second thought."²

Knox would become what some in the International Brigades labeled a "100 percenter" — a brigader who was committed wholly to the fight against Franco and the ideology of anti-fascism.³ His life story models that of many brigaders who joined for ideological reasons. Like them, his career of fighting fascism began before Spain — taking part in early protests against Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists — and continued after it — volunteering his services to the U.S. Army during the Second World War. But after his struggle against fascism was realized by Allied victory, Knox's line of work changed dramatically. He returned to the field of classics he had studied at Cambridge, eventually becoming one of the most famous classicists of the modern era.⁴ However (as many brigaders would also find) his experiences in Spain never left him, and their effect on him can be seen throughout his academic career. Ultimately, Knox is worth remembering, not only for his contributions to the field of classics, but

¹ John Simkin, "Bernard Knox," Spartacus Educational (Spartacus Educational, January 2020), <https://spartacus-educational.com/SPknoxB.htm>.

² Bernard Knox, "Premature Anti-Fascist," *The Antioch Review* 57, no. 2 (1999): p. 133, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4613837>.

³ Tremlett, Giles. *The International Brigades: A History of Resistance: Fascism, Freedom and the Spanish Civil War*. London, UK: Bloomsbury, 2021.

⁴ Laura Gordon, "Knox, Bernard, Macgregor Walker," Database of Classical Scholars (Rutgers School of Arts and Sciences), accessed June 1, 2022, <https://dbcs.rutgers.edu/all-scholars/8850-knox-bernard-macgregor-walker>.

because he so greatly embodies the spirit of the brigaders who joined out of devotion to their political beliefs and for whom fighting in Spain proved to be the defining moment of their lives.⁵

Born on November 24th, 1914 in Yorkshire, England, Knox grew up in a country physically and spiritually scarred by the horrors of the First World War. His earliest memory was of him at three years old being carried to a bomb shelter during a Zeppelin raid of London. His father had been one of the millions of Englishmen who had fought in the war and was also one of the millions who never talked about his experiences afterward. This upbringing cemented within Knox a hatred and fear of war, as well as an opposition to anyone who threatened to bring about such a war again — the roots of his later anti-fascism.⁶

His education was also a product of life in post-war England. As a child, he underwent military training as part of his school curriculum. He was taught how to use Morse Code, the Lee-Enfield .303 rifle, and the Lewis light machine gun. These would turn out to be very relevant skills for him to have. It was also as a child that he began to show a talent for languages, hinting at his future career as a classicist. At school, he studied French, Latin, and Greek, and took up Italian and Russian on his own time.⁷ In his adult life, his proficiency with these languages would bring him great acclaim, but would also at times be the difference between life and death.

In 1933, Knox received a scholarship to attend Cambridge University's St. John's College, where he studied classics. The worldwide depression of the 1930s, however, greatly diminished the future economic prospects of any student of the humanities. The contemporaneous rise of Adolf Hitler in Germany also reawakened fears of war in Europe. These two factors were enough to push Knox into leftism and firmly against fascism — an ideology he correctly believed would bring about a war similar to the one his father faced. After getting involved with anti-war demonstrations in his early years of university, he began heavily

⁵ Giles, 1-10.

⁶ John Simkin, "Bernard Knox," Spartacus Educational (Spartacus Educational, January 2020), <https://spartacus-educational.com/SPknoxB.htm>.

⁷ Laura Gordon, "Knox, Bernard, Macgregor Walker,".

reading Marxist literature and eventually considered himself a communist. He also joined the Cambridge Socialist Club where he helped disrupt meetings of the British Union of Fascists. It was through his membership in the club that Knox met and befriended an array of future prominent leftists who would also find their way to Spain in a few years — John Conford among them.

As Knox studied at university, tensions in Europe exacerbated. Hitler consolidated his power in Germany and was rearming the country's military in direct violation of the Treaty of Versailles. Mussolini launched his invasion of Abyssinia in 1935. By 1936, when Knox graduated from Cambridge, fears of a fascist coup in Spain were widespread. That July, those fears would become a reality.⁸

On July 17th in Spanish Morocco, military garrisons successfully revolted against the government and took control of key cities, with similar revolts taking place the next day on the mainland. Then, with the aid of German transport aircraft provided by an approving Adolf Hitler, some 15,000 rebel soldiers in Morocco were ferried to Seville, where they now posed a fatal threat to the Republic. The soldiers, the best of the Nationalist forces, were commanded by a rising star in the coup leadership, General Francisco Franco. Franco quickly secured a large portion of northern Spain and then turned south on a march towards Madrid.⁹

Understanding their peril, the Spanish government acceded to the Soviet Union's advice to create military units composed of foreign volunteers. But foreigners had been fighting for the Republic since the first day of the coup, with those in Spain at the time taking arms against the initial rebel revolts. Even in the temporary absence of formal units in the Spanish Army for international volunteers, foreigners immediately found ways to join the fight. Leftist political exiles from countries such as Germany and Italy who were living in Spain formed their own units to fight the fascists (for obvious reasons). Watching from outside of Spain, foreigners with

⁸ Bernard Knox, "Premature Anti-Fascist," *The Antioch Review* 57, no. 2 (1999): p. 133, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4613837>.

⁹ Giles, 49-54.

particularly strong ideological passions came to the country and joined militias associated with and organized by political parties or labor unions, such as the one created by the Workers' Party of Marxist Unification (POUM).¹⁰

John Conford was one of the early volunteers who joined a POUM unit in 1936. He participated in the combat on the Aragon front in northern Spain. But in September, he fell ill and was sent back to England to recover. During his convalescence, Conford was able to recruit a crew of around a dozen volunteers (including Knox) to go back to Spain with him, which they soon set out to do.¹¹

The volunteers rendezvoused in Paris and then smuggled themselves into Spain by taking a boat from Marseilles to Alicante. By November 7th they were in Madrid, where Franco was now making the first of his several attempts to conquer the city.¹² Knox and his comrades became integrated into an English-speaking group in the Commune de Paris Battalion of the Republic's XI Brigade (the first international brigade). Due to his proficiency in French, Knox was given the role of political commissar, which put him in charge of the welfare of the twenty-six English-speaking soldiers in his section — his first experience in military leadership.

As Knox was getting adjusted in Madrid, Franco planned to launch an attack on the city from the west, which required his forces to cross the Manzanares river and enter through the University City neighborhood. The Republic Army learned of his intentions and subsequently transported the XI Brigade to University City, giving it the task of preventing Franco from conquering the Spanish capital. Knox's battalion was holed up in the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters building and used Lewis guns - the same guns Knox was trained with as a boy - to keep the fascists at bay.¹³ It was there that Knox got his first taste of combat, facing artillery strikes from German gunners, strafing from Italian planes, and bullets from Moorish snipers. But

¹⁰ Giles, 63-66.

¹¹ John Simkin, "Bernard Knox".

¹² Bernard Knox, "Premature Anti-Fascist".

¹³ Giles, 80-106

through ardent defense, Knox and the XI Brigade were able to push back Franco's advance and keep Madrid out of his hands. At least, for the moment.¹⁴

Undeterred, Franco then attempted to force the city into submission by encircling it. The Spanish and International Brigades proved less adept at defending this maneuver, with many units retreating and many soldiers deserting. Hastily, Knox's brigade advanced into the nearby village of Boadilla del Monte out of fear that Franco would try to capture a vital road that connected Madrid to northwest Spain. But artillery bombardments overwhelmed the brigaders, forcing them to abandon their position. As Knox helped pull a machine gun away from the front, he was shot through his neck by a fascist bullet.¹⁵ With blood spurting violently out of his wound, Knox was left for dead by his comrades and then passed out. Miraculously, he regained consciousness and was able to walk back to the rear for assistance. He spent several weeks in a hospital in Madrid where he ended up surviving his injuries, to the great astonishment of his doctors. However, the wound damaged the use of his right arm, hindering his ability to fight for the Republic. He was advised to return to England for further treatment, and he eventually did after learning that Conford had been killed in combat.¹⁶ Though this was the end of Knox's time in Spain, his experience there was an integral part of his development and identity. In every development in the story of his life after the war, a thread can invariably be traced back to Knox's few months in the Spanish Civil War.

Between the end of his fight in Spain and the beginning of his fight in WWII, Knox began another transformative period of his life. Firstly, he fell in love with an American woman, Betty Baur who he married in 1939. They would remain married until her death in 2006, and, significantly, he moved to the United States to be with her. He also became increasingly disillusioned with communism.¹⁷ This further shows his commonality with his fellow brigaders.

¹⁴ Bernard Knox, "Premature Anti-Fascist".

¹⁵ Giles, 137-141.

¹⁶ Bernard Knox, "Premature Anti-Fascist".

¹⁷ John Simkin, "Bernard Knox".

As reports came back from the Soviet Union about Stalin's authoritarianism and brutality, many ex-brigaders began to reconsider the ideology they once admired and that the USSR represented to them.¹⁸ Stalin's invasion of Finland and the Baltic States in WWII completed Knox's rupture with communism, and he stayed out of politics between the wars.

But, like the other brigaders who felt betrayed by Stalin's actions, Knox never lost his animosity toward fascism. When the Second World War broke out, Knox was tempted to return to England to continue the fight he ended in 1936. He ultimately decided to remain in America out of love for his wife and an intuition that the country would soon also be dragged into the conflict. And when it did towards the end of 1941, Knox followed in the footsteps of thousands of Spanish Civil War veterans by continuing the fight against fascism in Western Europe — this time directly against the Axis powers who had aided Franco's victory.¹⁹

Knox enlisted in the US Army in 1942 and was commissioned as an officer in 1943. Fortunately, he was able to avoid the scrutiny given to many ex-brigaders, labeled as so-called "premature anti-fascists" (a pseudonym for "communist").²⁰ But his time in Spain and ability with languages did not go unnoticed. As the Allied powers would find, ex-brigaders like Knox possessed invaluable skills and combat experience that made them ideal candidates for the more sensitive combat operations that war required.²¹ Accordingly, Knox was assigned to work with the secretive Office of Strategic Services (OSS). On July 8, 1944, 29-year-old Captain Knox parachuted into France behind enemy lines as part of Operation Jedburgh, which involved three-man teams parachuting into Axis-occupied territory in Western Europe. The Jedburghs' (as the teams were called) purpose was to aid the Allied invasion through sabotage, guerilla warfare, and leading local resistance forces. Once again, Knox's knowledge of languages came in handy. As part of Jed Team "Giles", Knox's job was to aid in the capture of Brittany. Knox's

¹⁸ Giles, 521-539.

¹⁹ Bernard Knox, "Premature Anti-Fascist".

²⁰ Laura Gordon, "Knox, Bernard, Macgregor Walker".

²¹ Giles, 521-539.

team helped arm and lead over 2000 French Resistance fighters and launched ambushes against German units until Brittany was liberated by Allied Forces. For his participation in the operation, Knox was awarded the Croix de Guerre by the French government.²²

With his Jed Team's objective accomplished, Knox was assigned to another OSS unit in 1945, this time operating in Northern Italy. Due to the number of troops needed for the liberation of France, the US Army was lacking in men on the Italian front, and so had a number of its officers arm and lead divisions of partisans. Knox was especially well-equipped for this task, not only on account of his linguistic talents but because many of the leaders of the partisan groups were also Spanish Civil War veterans. Knox quickly established a good rapport with them and eventually led about 1,200 partisans.²³ It is worth noting that Knox's success as a combat leader in both Italy and France would not have been possible had it not been for his experience in Spain. Like the partisan leaders he worked with, the Spanish Civil War gave him the skills, experience, and connections to be able to perform so ably in WWII as well as after it.²⁴

While fighting in Italy, Knox liberated the town of Fanano and then continued towards the city of Modena. At one point on his advance, Knox and a group of his men were pinned down inside a bombed-out Italian villa by a German machine gunner. As he took a smoke break and waited for his soldiers to outflank the gunner, he spotted a book that turned out to be a text of Virgil. What Knox did next has become the stuff of academic legend. Performing a "Virgilian lottery", where the reader of the text closes their eyes, opens the book, and randomly points at a spot on the page, Knox's finger landed on the lines of Virgil's first *Georgic*, which depict an Italy at war. The lines reminded Knox of Italy's current state, with "its elegant bridges blown into the water by the retreating Germans, and its fields sown not with the seed by the farmers but with

²² "OSS in Action the Mediterranean and European Theaters," National Parks Service (U.S. Department of the Interior), accessed June 1, 2022,

<https://www.nps.gov/articles/oss-in-action-the-mediterranean-and-european-theaters.htm>.

²³ Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Robert Fagles, itr. Bernard Knox (London: Penguin, 2008). 39.

²⁴ Laura Gordon, "Knox, Bernard, Macgregor Walker".

mines by the German engineers.” Knox then resolved to return to the field of classics that he had studied in Cambridge almost a decade prior if he managed to survive the war.²⁵

Knox did survive and made good on his self-promise. In September of 1945, at the age of thirty-two, he was accepted into the graduate program of the Yale classics department where he obtained his doctorate and was hired as an instructor. It was there that he established his reputation in the academic world as a significant figure in the study of classics, gaining special notoriety for his ideas on the works of Sophocles.²⁶ His time at Yale was so distinguished that he was chosen as the first director of Harvard’s Center of Hellenic Studies (CHS) when it was founded in 1961. He continued to lead the center until his professional retirement in 1985.²⁷

By the time of his retirement, Knox was recognized as one of the world’s premier classicists and as one of the greatest living contributors to the field of humanities. His numerous essays in *The New York Review of Books*, *The Independent Republic*, and *The Atlantic Monthly* helped make the field of classics more accessible to the general public.²⁸ His leadership of the fledgling CHS was also noteworthy. One colleague wrote in admiration of his ability “to create an international nucleus of dedicated Greek scholars who had nothing in common except their excellence and their devotion to Greek studies”.²⁹ And even after his retirement, Knox continued to be active in his academic work, writing the introductions for Robert Fagles’ seminal translations of *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, and *The Aeneid* (Fagles was Knox’s former student from his days as a Yale professor).³⁰

Yet, what most distinguished Knox from his classicist contemporaries was not the sheer amount of work he wrote, nor his considerable list of awards and academic positions, but

²⁵Virgil, *The Aeneid*. 39 -41.

²⁶ Laura Gordon, “Knox, Bernard, Macgregor Walker”.

²⁷ John Simkin, “Bernard Knox”.

²⁸ James K McAuley, “Classicist Bernard Knox Passes Away: News,” *The Harvard Crimson* (The Harvard Crimson, Inc, August 22, 2010), <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2010/8/22/knox-sophocles-nagy-oedipus/>.

²⁹ G.W. Bowersock, “The Extraordinary Life of Bernard Knox, the Warrior-Humanist,” *The New Republic* (The New Republic, September 3, 2010), <https://newrepublic.com/article/77450/the-warrior-humanist-bernard-knox>.

³⁰ John Simkin, “Bernard Knox”.

instead his unparalleled ability to understand and describe the themes of violence and war that are so prevalent in classic texts. This skill developed directly as a result of his experience in Spain and WWII, and is shown in his writing.³¹ His introduction to *The Iliad* states that the play, “accepts violence as a permanent factor of human life and accepts it without sentimentality, for it is just as sentimental to pretend that war does not have monstrous ugliness as to deny that it has its own strange and fatal beauty.”³² Clearly the words of a man who has seen and felt the “monstrous ugliness” and “fatal beauty” so eloquently described. He stood in the shoes of Odysseus — stuck hundreds of miles away from home, separated from a beloved wife, facing a series of trials that could all result in death — and could therefore convey the emotion of the *Odyssey* with remarkable sensitivity. He could relate the violence described in the *Aeneid* so well to others because he witnessed — and contributed to — similar violence in the same location during the Second World War.

This ability is the most concrete example of the characteristic that makes Knox most like so many other brigaders: the permanent influence of his ordeal in Spain.³³ It was his fight against fascism in Spain that convinced Knox to join the US Army in WWII. It was the experience he gained in Spain that allowed him to fight so effectively in France and Italy. And it was his knowledge of war and ability to describe it that became his rise to fame. Even his leadership of the Center for Hellenic Studies would not have been so competent had it not been for his experience with leadership in combat — experience that began as a political commissar in Spain. Though Knox would spend the majority of his life away from the battlefield and inside of the comfortable halls of academia, the effect of his cumulative few years fighting fascism in Europe so heavily influenced his later work that both periods of his life are, and should always

³¹ Bowersock, “The Extraordinary Life of Bernard Knox, the Warrior-Humanist”.

³² Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles, intr. Bernard Knox (London: Penguin Books, 1991). 29.

³³ Bernard Knox, “Premature Anti-Fascist”.

be considered, interconnected. Any accurate retelling of his life must include mention of both Knox the scholar and Knox the soldier.

Ultimately, though he would gain more fame than the average brigader, Knox's life story is representative of the men and women who made up the International Brigades. Like so many of them, his commitment to ideology brought him to Spain, where he faced the most important trials of his life. And, as was common among brigaders, he was an anti-fascist before the war started and he continued the fight during WWII. Throughout Knox's entire life, even when his time as a soldier was over, the Spanish Civil War stayed with him — an experience almost universal among ex-brigaders. When Knox died in 2010, he was commemorated by the academic community in a series of obituaries from his former colleagues, and his ashes were interred in Arlington National Cemetery.³⁴ It is a fitting end for the man. Knox is remembered for his invaluable contributions to the field of classics, but his final resting place is next to his brother-in-arms who stood next to him in the fight against fascism that, for himself, defined his life.

³⁴ Laura Gordon, "Knox, Bernard, Macgregor Walker".

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