

◆ 2

Remembering Capa, Spain and the Legacy of Gerda Taro, 1936–1937

Hanno Hardt

Press photographs are the public memory of their times; their presence in the public sphere has contributed significantly to the pictures in our heads on which we rely for a better understanding of the world. Some photographs have a special appeal, or an extraordinary power, which makes them icons of a particular era. They stand for social or political events and evoke the spirit of a period in history. They also help define our attitudes towards people or nations and, therefore, are important sources of emotional and intellectual power. War photography, in particular, renders imagery of this kind and easily becomes a source of propaganda as well.

The Spanish Civil War (1936–39) was the European testing ground for new weapons strategies by the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. Both aided their respective sides in the struggle between a Popular Front government—supported mainly by left-wing parties, workers, and an educated middle class—and “Nationalist” forces supported by conservative interests, the military, clergy, and landowners. The conflict resulted in about 500,000 deaths, thousands of exiles, and in a dictatorship that lasted until Franco’s death in 1975.

It was a time when large-scale antifascist movements such as the Republican army, the International Brigades, the Workers’ Party of Marxist Unification, and anarchist militias (the Iron Column) united in their struggle against the military rebellion led by Francisco Franco. Foreigners joined the International Brigade, organized in their respective units, e.g., the Lincoln Battalion (USA), the British Battalion (UK), the Dabrowski Battalion (Poland), the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion (Canada), and the Naftali Botwin Company (Poland and Spain, including a Jewish unit).

As a major European political event, the conflict attracted many foreign journalists and photographers, like Hans Namuth and Georg Reisner working for *Vu*. Along with their Spanish colleagues, most notably Agustí Centelles, they meticulously documented the struggle between Republicans and rebels, adding to the creative efforts of antifascists like George Orwell (*Homage to Catalonia*) and Ernest Hemingway (*For Whom the Bell Tolls*),

who would write extensively about their experiences during the conflict.

This article will not re-visit the conflict, but will focus on the photographic work of two photographers, Robert Capa and Gerda Taro, who have become closely identified not only with documenting the struggle against Franco as it surfaced in the European press of the late 1930s, in particular, but also with helping construct the image of the conflict in the minds of the European public for years to come. Indeed, one of the most extraordinary images produced during the rise of magazine journalism in 1930s Europe and the United States was Capa's photograph, "Death of a Loyalist Militiaman" (view image online [here](#)). The photograph was taken on September 5, 1936 at Cerro Muriano, Spain, and was first published by *Vu* (Paris) later that month, before it was picked up by *LIFE* magazine. It also drew attention to its author and helped establish his reputation as a war photographer. The photograph has since appeared in countless publications and constitutes an important chapter in the history of war photography, not only because of its unforgettable power as a single image, but also because of the subsequently raised issue of authenticity and war photography.

This photograph, however, is only one of a series of remarkable photographs Capa produced during his travels in Spain, where he documented the effects of the conflict on the civilian population, often in collaboration with his companion, Gerda Taro, who worked initially for *Vu* and *Paris-Soir*, and had accompanied Capa when he took the picture of the militiaman. The latter (with his comrades on reconnaissance) had been photographed by Taro earlier in the day. It could be argued that Capa's work in Spain benefited greatly from his association with Taro, who had not only helped him invent "Robert Capa," (his real name was André Friedmann), but who also collaborated photographically with him by selling pictures under both names to mostly left-wing magazines and newspapers. Taro's work was also published in *Regards*, *LIFE*, and the *Illustrated London News*, as well as in the *Volks-Illustrierte*, the exile version of the German *Arbeiter-Illustrierten-Zeitung*. She had typically worked with a Rolleiflex camera until she switched to a Leica, a camera also used by Capa.

Taro's strongly humanitarian approach to documenting the conditions in Spain features not merely armed conflict, but focuses on the effects of a major human catastrophe unfolding in Southern Europe. It is an approach that also appealed to Capa and would imbue his work throughout the rest of his career: for instance, when he singled out individual soldiers to tell the story of an armed conflict in a very personal way. Indeed, the humanitarian consequences of social and political problems had been part of their earlier concerns while living among leftist writers and photographers in Paris; consequently, they arrived in Spain with a strong sense of social justice and an understanding of working-class issues.

Taro photographed refugees in deplorable living conditions; she also photographed in a morgue after air raids in Valencia, which left many dead,

and she succeeded in showing individuals as unfortunate victims. Earlier she had photographed women training and fighting, often posed heroically, suggesting the dedication and strength of women to fight alongside men. Taro's work addresses the idea of suffering, an age-old topic of European painting, or the fine arts in general, which surfaces here in photographic form as a modern representation of an intolerable state of body and soul. Since it is an intensely visual topic that attracts and holds the attention of the viewer, suffering as a photogenic subject becomes a desirable commodity for wide-spread circulation by the press. At the same time, it is also an effective instrument of propaganda, offering convincing arguments regarding the state of the political struggle.

The portrayal of suffering of innocent victims, in particular, becomes a necessary element for the construction of a dramatic and utterly tragic visual narrative which helps make the conflict personal and, therefore, comprehensible for the distant reader/observer. In this process, the successful photographer as author challenges the commonly held belief in immortality by visually articulating the experience of hardship and the consequences of violence. Turning to stereotypes of battle, agony, and death culled from the record of human experience, Taro and Capa helped invent the genre of modern war photography while fueling the vicarious experience of the spectator by offering an approximation of life in the conflict zone. The result is a complex relationship of culturally specific expectations between the exegeses of the photographers, the project of their editors, and the gaze of the readers.

This cultural and professional context shaped Taro's style, while also suggesting her dedication to the cause, rooted in political conviction; it resembles a one-sided, leftist view of the conflict, which characterizes her work and indicates that, like for many others who fought in the Spanish Civil War, joining the conflict was an ideological decision. She approached her work not unlike David "Chim" Seymour, a Polish-born photographer and a frequent contributor to *Regards*, who covered the plight of refugees and the bombardment of Barcelona by German and Italian pilots with great respect and compassion for those suffering the consequences of the conflict.

Taro and Capa, as refugees from Hitler's Germany, fought in their own way on the side of a democratic, Republican Spain. Their photographic work focused on the fight against fascism, while questions of journalistic objectivity, for instance, were out of place or perhaps restricted to finding different ways in which to reveal the suffering of civilians and to document the armed struggle against Franco and his allies, including Nazi Germany. Also, their photographic coverage catered to the interests, at least in Europe, of left-leaning, if not outright socialist and communist publications. They photographed according to how they understood their respective assignments, obviously with a great deal of freedom and without any influence on editorial decisions regarding the propaganda values of any of

their images.

Thus, when Taro photographs individuals from unusual, tilted angles or from below, it is reminiscent of the “new vision,” a photographic style which had emerged from the Bauhaus era and the attempts of László Moholy-Nagy to overcome established habits of visual representation. More specifically, her work is reminiscent of Soviet Constructivists, like Alexander Rodchenko, who believed in the role of photography and its dynamics in the remaking of the country. But she remained beyond the control of Moscow (exerted through the Republican press bureau which controlled access to the war zones) and proceeded to work independently, like during the battle of Brunete, 15 miles west of Madrid, her last self-assigned project.

Her death in 1937 remains shrouded in mystery. Was she crushed accidentally by an out-of-control Republican tank during a retreat of the Republican forces, or killed deliberately, as has been suggested, because she had become too uncontrollable as a propagandist for Moscow? Apparently, propaganda efforts on the left were managed by Stalin, and Taro, associated with the Socialist Workers Party in Germany (targeted by Moscow) and warned by Willy Brandt in the summer of 1937 against working in Spain, had documented the lost battle of Brunete, which represented a crushing defeat for the Republican cause. She not only died during the retreat of the Republican forces, but her camera and the images she had produced disappeared from the scene (Stummer). The French Communist Party declared her an antifascist martyr and organized a spectacular funeral procession with thousands of mourners, with Louis Aragon and Pablo Neruda among those in attendance. Her head stone in the Père-Lachaise cemetery, designed by Alberto Giacometti, is still visible, although turned 180 degrees (Schneider 22–23).

Yet, her short but remarkable career, mostly as a war photographer, yielded a small portfolio of outstanding photographs (Schaber and Whelan), exhibited and published only recently, while her definitive biography (Schaber 1994) was published 70 years after her death. Earlier a fictional account of her relationship with Capa had appeared in Martha Gellhorn’s 1958 novel, *Two by Two*.

Overshadowed by Capa and the success of his work, Taro’s accomplishments remained hidden for a generation of war photography; their rediscovery adds not only to the photographic assessment of the Spanish Civil War, but also to the history of women photographers and their role in forging the style of war photography, not unlike the accomplishments of Gellhorn (*Collier’s*), Virginia Cowles (*New York Times*), or Barbro Alving (*Dagens Nyheter*), who worked as war correspondents for their respective publications. It was Taro, in all likelihood, who introduced a strong political dimension to their work, which after her death is reduced by Capa to a more general humanitarian concern, when he would work for

different publications, beginning with *LIFE* magazine, whose editors saw him primarily as a successful war photographer.

And finally, revisiting her work may help explain the professional dynamics between Taro and Capa, who seemed to have shared the creative ability to reduce complex human conditions to a single image. Both photographers favored the dramatic representation over the fact; their approach to documenting the conflict was one typical of a central European understanding of photojournalism as an expression of raw experience and dramatic detail, rather than of facts, and with little concern for objectivity as a desirable professional goal. Consequently, it was the focus on the heroic values of a war that characterizes Capa's work throughout his career, from Spain to Indochina.

Much later, Capa reveals, in a *Life* magazine article (1945), this power of observation which he had produced photographically already with his *Death of a Loyalist Militiaman*. In *Slightly Out of Focus* he describes the death of a young American soldier at the end of World War II:

But the boy had a clean, open, very young face. . . . [It] was not changed except for a tiny hole between his eyes. The puddle of blood grew beside his fallen head, and his pulse had long stopped beating. . . . I had the picture of the last man to die.
(229)

The available record of Capa's work in Spain, and therefore his contribution to modern war photography in terms of style and subject matter, have been strengthened by the discovery and retrieval from Mexico City of three small cardboard boxes in December, 2007, left behind by Capa in Paris on his way to the United States in 1939. They contained 128 rolls of film by Capa, Taro, and Seymour with several important stories of the conflict. However, the negative of the fallen soldier, sought to help solve the controversy surrounding the image, was not among the 3,500 images contained in the boxes. Nevertheless, this latest discovery may help solidify Taro's reputation and provide evidence of similarities of style and subject matter of photographing Spain between Capa and Taro, who had started working independently by the summer of 1937. It also foreshadows Seymour's later reputation as a photographer of human suffering, such as the plight of refugees in Europe after World War II.

Capa had spent considerable time in Spain between 1935 and 1939, first to work on photographic assignments arranged by Simon Guttman and later to cover the civil war for *Vu* until the fall of Barcelona towards the end of the conflict in January of 1939, when he photographed exiled Republican soldiers in internment camps in France. During this time he had already been a refugee of Hitler's Germany. His approach to war photography introduced a new standard and has provided a challenge for other photographers ever

since. It is not uncommon in reminiscences of photographers to find what one of them, *LIFE* photographer Bill Eppridge said, “I wanted to make the pictures Robert Capa made. Capa was a photographer of people who happened to go to war. His sympathy was to the innocent person caught up in a war, rather than toward the glory of a war” (Loengard 388). In fact, Capa’s advice to fellow photographers, according to his brother, Cornell Capa, was “like people and let them know it” (*Robert Capa* 9).

Capa moved the individual into the frame to catch gesture and expression in his photograph to overcome distance and to convey the humanity of the moment. He tried to convey a sense of being—or struggle—at a particular moment while telling a story about the collective destiny of a people. Thus, his photographs of Spain, in general, are documents of a particular period. At the time, they succeeded in making the tragic conflict real and the experience personal for the reader. More specifically, his photograph of the falling Loyalist represents the beginning of a style of war photography that would characterize his later work (and that of others). Capa’s photograph of the militiaman helped define the struggle and brought worldwide attention to the plight of the Loyalists, whose cause was eventually strengthened by international brigades, which were formed by volunteers from many countries, including the United States of America.

Capa typically told a complex story through the image of an individual. He reduced conflict to a private episode. The image of a man dying in defense of a revolutionary idea, alone, with his arms thrown back, and his rifle flung to the side, is a powerful statement. The moment between life and death turns into a photographic monument to the ultimate sacrifice, but also to the defense of freedom. The photograph was taken from slightly to the right and ahead of the falling soldier. In fact, Capa must have accompanied the militiaman into the gunfire when he saw him fall only a few meters away, mortally wounded.

According to a 1937 interview (in the *New York World Telegram*), he was stranded with the soldier, when the man took a chance and—followed by Capa—left the trench. He was gunned down, while Capa took the picture instinctively before falling back into the trench himself (Miller 28). Since then, various theories have emerged about the actual event; most recently it has been suggested that the soldier died during a reenactment or an exercise when he was shot by the enemy (Knightley; *British Journal of Photography*). The identification of the soldier as Federico Borrell García from Alcoy, near Alicante, by an amateur historian and subsequent recognition by relatives, as well as the confirmation of his death on the day Capa took the picture, by military archives in Madrid, seemed to put the story to rest (Miller 28–29).

However, the recent production of a Spanish documentary film, *The Shadow of the Iceberg*, revives the issue of its authenticity, because Capa was known for seizing the moment and making the best use of his work

under the pressure of wanting to provide powerful imagery. The film doubts previous claims of the identity of the soldier. For Susan Sontag, the Capa photograph had also raised some issues regarding its authenticity: helped in every case by the lack of the negative or contact sheet to see the photograph in a possible sequence of images.

Regardless of the true circumstances, however, the photograph as an icon of a heroic battle against fascism proved to be an extremely powerful symbol of individual commitment and ultimate sacrifice. Its widespread publication, especially at the time of the conflict, assured Capa a place among the sought-after photographers of the 1930s and, in the context of his considerable, total production of imagery in Spain, confirms his talent and forebodes the beginnings of a successful career. It was a goal pursued by Taro and Capa, beginning with their Paris days.

Capa had risked his life, as he would time and again throughout his career, and provided the evidence that being there and staying close to the subject becomes the key to a successful image. No telephoto lens, no other technical gimmicks, but the sheer presence of the photographer makes this image into a remarkable example of professional commitment, perhaps empathy, but certainly, determination to capture the essence of a much broader and more complicated story in a single image.

Capa was known to have been an excellent storyteller; this photograph represents his skills as a visual artist who understood the power of the medium and relied on his creative intuition to project his story as picture. And this was his story, the struggle against the fascist forces and their foreign allies. Like many stories, this is one of a single individual who represents a political idea and demonstrates personal commitment, touches the story-teller and somehow becomes his own. Capa creates a symbol of the suffering of a Republican Spain, which becomes stronger and more effective than a blazing gun and remains an important contribution to the biography of the engaged photographer.

What drives a photographer to take these risks is the conviction that he is on the right side of an important issue that needs to be defended and, ultimately, contains the risk of dying for an idea. Capa lived to cover many wars, but the Spanish Civil War, perhaps, touched him more personally than all the other wars in the decades to come. Partly, this may be because he lost his partner, Gerda Taro, in the conflict; and also, because he was aware of the political consequences of this conflict for Europe. He was young, in his early twenties, when he became famous. He had been able to define this war in a single image that inspired a young generation to act on its idealism and to join the struggle for liberty on the fields of Spain in a rare show of solidarity, but also as a gesture of defiance and in response to alarming political conditions at home. It may well be that Capa entered the battlefield at Cordoba with a similar sense of mission, namely to document the pending threat of fascism and the sacrifice of ordinary people in the name of

freedom.

Since then, a series of memorable single images has helped define the course of humankind through the twentieth century, from Dorothea Lange's "Migrant Mother" to Joe Rosenthal's "Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima" or Eddie Adams' "Execution of a Vietcong Prisoner on a Saigon Street", all powerful photographs that have defined specific periods in modern history. Capa's image belongs among them.

Many wars later, the public has seen remarkable photographic coverage of violence and suffering in its numerous forms by legions of talented and dedicated photographers. But the value of this photograph, in particular, is the fact that it was taken at the very beginning of modern warfare, when photographic technologies had matured and the craft of photography had been nurtured and encouraged by a public demand for the image fed by the rise of magazine journalism. The latter provided an effective way of letting readers participate in the events of the time, since photographs, next to newsreels, promised visual access to the world and provided emotional proximity. War was rendered observable from a safe distance; it became a detailed episode in weekly installments, and Capa had demonstrated the circumstances under which extraordinary insights could be gained, or made visible, by a photographer.

Beyond the specific story, however, this photograph has defined Spain for decades later as the place where freedom and democracy were defended against the threat of a dictatorship, unlike in Germany or Italy, where dictators had assumed power and ruled supreme. In fact, the work of Capa, Taro, Seymour, and other foreign photographers has defined the image of the Spanish Civil War around the world and constitutes a visual archive of the conflict on which common knowledge draws to re-visit those times. Seventy-five years later, Capa's photograph has survived and taken on a new meaning; not only as a personal document of an individual's commitment to his craft, but also as the recollection of a historical moment for Spain in its collective struggle against fascism and, therefore, as a timely reminder of the continuing need to take risks and make sacrifices in the never-ending struggle against injustice and violence in the world.

Notes

1. Capa's image "Death of a Loyalist Militiaman," can be viewed through the following link on the web site of [Magnum Photos](#).

Works Cited

British Journal of Photography. "Capa Mystery Revealed." 1 Oct. 2008. Web.

www.bjp-online.com.

- Capa, Robert. "An Episode: Americans Still Died." *LIFE* 14 (May 1945): 40B-C.
- _____. *Robert Capa: Photographs*. New York: Aperture, 1996.
- _____. *Slightly Out of Focus*. New York: The Modern Library, 1999.
- _____. *This is War! Robert Capa Photographs: 1936–1945*. London: Steidl, 2007.
- Capa, Robert and Gerda Taro. *Death in the Making*. New York: Covici Friede, 1938.
- Capa, Robert *Heart of Spain: Robert Capa's Photographs of the Spanish Civil War*. New York: Aperture, 1999.
- Gellhorn, Martha. *Two by Two*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1958.
- Knightley, Phillip. *The First Casualty: The War Correspondent as Hero and Myth-maker from the Crimean to Iraq*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004.
- Loengard, John. "Bill Eppridge." *LIFE Photographs: What They Saw*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1998.
- Miller, Russell. *Magnum: Fifty Years at the Frontline of History*. New York: Grove Press, 1997.
- Schaber, Irme. *Gerda Taro: Fotoreporterin im spanischen Bürgerkrieg: Eine Biografie*. Marburg: Jonas Verlag, 1994.
- Schaber, Irme and Richard Whelan. *Gerda Taro*. London: Steidl, 2007.
- Schneider, Angela, ed. *Giacometti*. Munich: Prestel, 2008.
- Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.
- Stummer, Robin. "Accidental Heroine." *New Statesman*. 9 Oct. 2008. Web. www.newstatesman.com.
- Whelan, Richard. *Robert Capa*. New York: Knopf, 1985.

Hardt, Hanno. "Remembering Capa, Spain and the Legacy of Gerda Taro, 1936–1937." *On Photography, History, and Memory in Spain*. Ed. Maria Nilsson. *Hispanic Issues On Line Debates* 3 (Spring 2011): 30–38.
<http://hispanicissues.umn.edu/debates/DebatesOnPhotography.html>.
