

**MEMORY BATTLES
OF THE
SPANISH CIVIL WAR**

History, Fiction, Photography

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Figure 1.1. Preparations for an exhibit about Spain. Right, standing: Harry van Kruiningen. Left, sitting: Peter Alma. International Institute for Social History, Amsterdam (BG B18/326).

PART I

MEMORY AND THE VISUAL ARCHIVE

I Memory as Montage

Spanish Civil War Photography

Scissors and Truth

The man at the table—sweater vest, checkered shirt, glasses—is working on a large panel on which we can distinguish images of women and children. Behind him, a finished panel of the same size shows a photograph of a bombed-out apartment building that almost covers the board's entire surface. The building's façade is gone entirely; we can see straight into living rooms. Superimposed on the bottom left corner are two images of a crowd looking up at the sky, with an old woman's face centrally in focus, her left hand on her cheek and temple in an expression of concern. A Dutch text, placed at a slight diagonal at the top of the panel, reads: "Pilots did their job."¹ The scene takes place in what looks like a studio. Behind the man in sweater vest are half a dozen others, working on more panels at a large drawing table. The atmosphere seems animated and optimistic.

We are somewhere in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, in late 1937 or early 1938. The person in the forefront is Peter Alma (1886–1969), a Dutch painter and graphic artist in his early fifties who had joined the Communist Party in 1919 and was active in various solidarity movements throughout the 1920s and 1930s.² The group is busy preparing an exhibit, "The Truth about Spain," consisting of thirty large mounted panels. It opened near the Amsterdam harbor on February 1, 1938, and traveled the country after that. The show was an initiative of the artists' union on behalf of the Committee to Aid Spain (Commissie Hulp aan Spanje), the Dutch subsidiary of the World Committee against War and Fascism coordinated from Paris by Willi Münzenberg, the Communist International's publicity czar (Flinterman 1985, 15–17). The Dutch exhibit was one of many such projects undertaken across the world by activists, intellectuals, and artists concerned with the fate of the Second Spanish Republic. In July 1936, Spain's legally elected government—a Popular-Front coalition that had been voted into office in February—had withstood a right-wing military takeover. But it was now engaged in a bloody armed struggle with the military rebels, who called themselves Nationalists. The conflict was much more than just a civil war, and for three years all the world's eyes were on Spain.³ Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy supported the rebels, and the Soviet

Union sold arms to the Republic, while all other major Western powers opted for neutrality or non-intervention. Still, concern about the events in Spain prompted massive mobilizations of civil society in Europe and the Americas. Thousands of people in scores of countries invested their time, energy, and talent to raise funds and public awareness about the dangers of fascism and the folly of non-intervention. They faced resistance from groups sympathizing with the Nationalists, who were led by the young general Francisco Franco Bahamonde and had the worldwide support of the Catholic Church. From San Francisco to Shanghai and Paris to Portsmouth, the Spanish Civil War divided public opinion everywhere.

The photograph of the bombed-out building on the panel behind Alma was by Robert Capa, a twenty-four-year-old Hungarian refugee who was just starting his career as a photojournalist (fig. 1.2). He had shot it in Madrid in late 1936, as part of a story documenting the material and human devastation wrought by the Nationalist bombing campaigns that targeted the civilian population in the major cities held by the Republic (Lahuerta 2010, 172).⁴ The pictures of the crowd were by his good friend David “Chim” Seymour, who was born in Poland. These photographs actually predated the military coup that had unleashed the war in Spain: Chim had taken them in April 1936 at a land reform meeting in a small town in the south-western region of Extremadura. The contact sheet of Chim’s negatives, which were miraculously recovered in Mexico City in 2007, makes clear that the crowd is not looking up at bomber planes—despite the apparent expression of concern—but at a speaker on the balcony of the city hall (C. Young 2010b: 16).⁵ The panel on the table that Alma is working on, meanwhile, is clearly inspired by a Republican propaganda poster, *Residencias*, which publicized the government’s efforts to keep the country’s children safe from the war (fig. 1.3). (Alma used the same design concept, although he dropped one of the poster’s five photographs and added two other elements: a picture by Capa of a mother and child and a drawing from yet another poster.⁶) Children’s safety was a prime concern in wartime Spain. From the beginning of the fighting, civilians were targeted on an unprecedented scale—not only with city bombings but also by extralegal executions, torture, sexual violence, and forcible displacement (Preston 2012).

As it happened, it wasn’t the first time the woman’s portrait by Chim had been on show in Amsterdam. Half a year earlier, in June 1937, it had been part of a legendary photography display at the Stedelijk Museum organized for the artists’ union by the Hungarian photographer Eva Besnyö. The exhibit’s title, “Foto ’37,” indicated the organizers’ intention to showcase the medium’s state of the art. The 1,500-piece show included all types of photographic work ranging from x-rays, color photos, and cartography to advertising, montage, and photojournalism, while one room was dedicated to the history of photography, starting with Daguerreotypes, and another section featured kitsch photography (Bool 1979, 127; Visser 2009, 60–63). The show was a smashing success, drew more than four thousand visitors, and was extended until the end of September.

The same crop of Chim’s Extremadura scene appears in the modest catalog (fig. 1.4), which came out as a special issue of the union’s magazine (Vank 1937). Going



Figure 1.2. Robert Capa, [Apartment building, destroyed by bombs, Madrid], November–December 1936 © International Center of Photography/Magnum Photos.

by newspaper reports on the exhibit—no installation shots have survived—it was one of a fairly extensive series of photojournalistic images from war-torn Spain. The artists featured in this section of the show not only included Capa and Chim, but also Henri Cartier-Bresson, the Dutch photographer Carel Blazer, and the cameraman John Fernhout. The latter shared stills from the documentary he was finishing up with filmmaker Joris Ivens and novelist Ernest Hemingway, *The Spanish Earth*, which would be pre-screened at the Roosevelt White House on July 8.⁷ Also on view was Spanish Civil War work by the young German photographer Gerda Taro, Capa's professional partner and off-and-on girlfriend. (To everyone's shock, she was tragically crushed by a tank in Spain six weeks after the exhibit

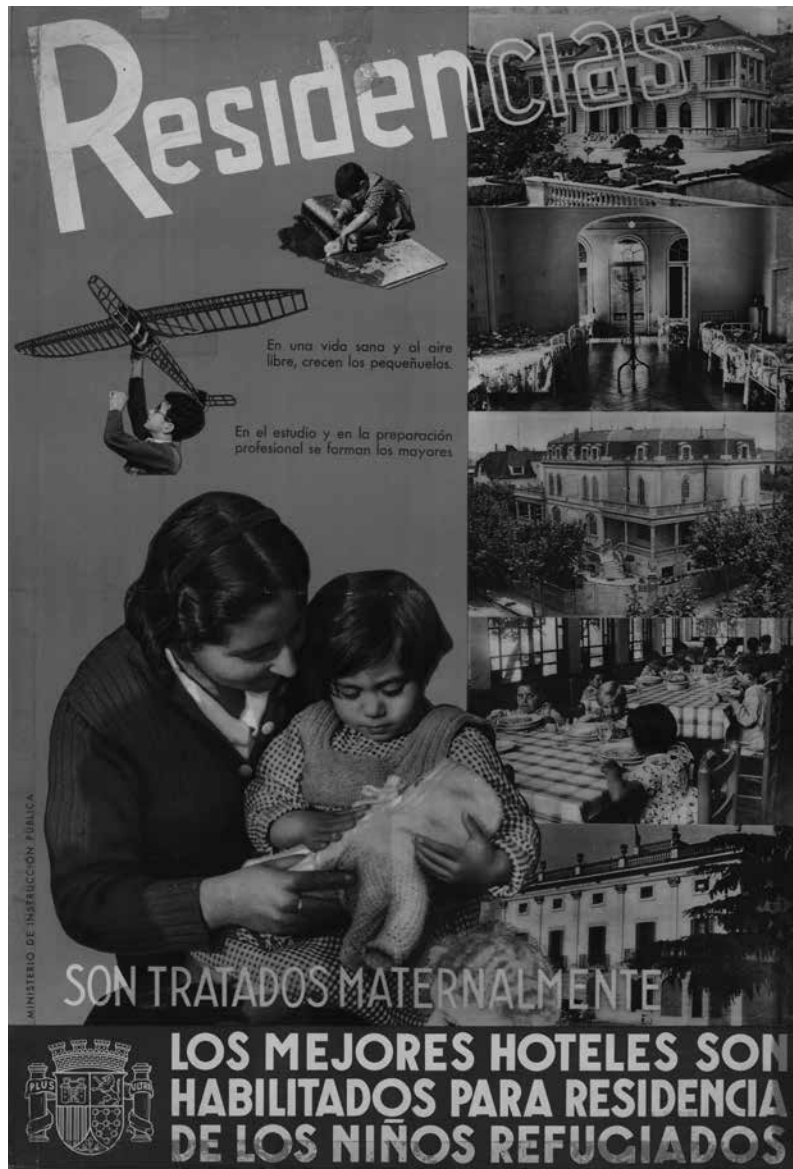


Figure 1.3. *Residencias*. Poster. Spain, Ministerio de Instrucción Pública. Dirección General de Bellas Artes, ca. 1937. International Institute for Social History, Amsterdam (BG E5/349).

opened; the museum promptly arranged a special corner in her memory.⁸) Although Besnyö and the other organizers had specifically agreed with the museum director that the exhibit was not going to be political, this was an impossible charge when it came to the Spanish Civil War section—which was also the most attention-grabbing.⁹ It included early images by Capa, Chim, and Taro that would later become iconic.¹⁰

“Foto ’37” helped cement the reputation of all three as fearless pioneers of



Figure 1.4. Chim's photograph from Extremadura in the special issue of *Prisma der Künsten* dedicated to Foto '37. [Old woman at a land reform meeting, near Badajoz, Extremadura, Spain], late April–early May 1936 © Estate of David “Chim” Seymour/Magnum Photos.

modern war photography. Although they were only in their twenties and practically unknown before 1936, their work on the Spanish Civil War established them as well-known war photographers in high demand and with a global reach. Taro, whose real name was Gerta Pohorylle, had fled Nazi Germany in 1934 for Paris, where she had fallen in love with a fellow Jewish refugee, Endre Friedmann, born in Hungary and three years younger than she. Friedmann taught her to use the camera. Hoping to improve their chances of getting their pictures published—and

to charge more for them—Gerta came up with the idea to sell them under the name of an invented American photographer. This is how Endre became Robert Capa—“Bob” to his friends. (Some time later, Gerta would start crediting her own pictures under the name Gerda Taro.) Taro and Capa formed a trio of sorts with a friend of Capa’s, Dawid Szymin, who was around their age. He had adopted the name David Seymour and had his pictures credited as Chim. Born into a Jewish family in Warsaw, Chim had come to Paris to study at the Sorbonne. He took up photography, and in 1933 he began publishing his work in the illustrated weekly *Regards*, which was associated with the French Communist Party. It was *Regards* that sent him on his first assignment to Spain in 1935. Capa, too, had been there that year for the same magazine to cover Holy Week in Seville.

As soon as the war broke out in mid-July 1936, Capa, Taro, and Chim arranged to travel back to Spain. They arrived in early August for the first of several trips. Over the next three years, they crisscrossed the country by themselves and in each other’s company, their cameras bearing witness to battles, bombing damage, political meetings, military parades, life in the rearguard, and the fate of civilian refugees. Their pictures were picked up by some fifty newspapers and magazines all across the world—although, curiously, they hardly circulated in Spain itself. Some months their pictures appeared in as many as twenty different publications, thanks in part to distribution by photo agencies. At the same time, they were featured on posters, in pamphlets and photo books, on postcards, in films, and in galleries (C. Young 2010a). Their images became icons; their work would become the cornerstone of the visual archive of the Spanish Civil War and of the world’s collective memory of the conflict.

This sudden and overwhelming success was no doubt due to the young photographers’ uncanny talent for fearless, dramatic shots of battle scenes and touching portraits of the individuals involved in the struggle, from anonymous soldiers and citizens to the country’s political and intellectual leadership. What really boosted their international fame, though, were four additional elements: the worldwide fascination with the war in Spain, which many at the time considered decisive for the course of world history; their use of portable cameras that allowed for nimble framing and multiple exposures; technological advances permitting wireless transmission and cheap, high-quality printing of photographs; and the rise of the illustrated magazine, in which news photography and photographers took central stage, and which created ~~a~~ an eager audience for a new kind of visual journalism. In fact, the popularity of the illustrated weekly is hard to overstate. *Life* magazine, which was founded in November of 1936, saw its print run balloon to three million by 1939. Its actual readership was several times that number, since a single issue would pass through many hands (Vials 2009; Kozol 1994). We’ll look at the consequences of this unprecedented level of circulation of photojournalistic images a bit later on.

But let’s first return for a moment to Peter Alma preparing the second exhibit in early 1938, and zoom in on his right hand—he is holding a pair of scissors. The detail is important. Documentary images were central to the way the story of the



Spanish Civil War was told, and continue to be so in the way it is remembered. After all, it was the first major armed conflict to be covered by the modern visual media. Photojournalists and filmmakers like Capa, Taro, Ivens, Henri Cartier-Bresson or the Catalan Agustí Centelles were equipped with newly portable cameras such as the Leica (invented in 1924), the Rolleiflex, and the Eyemo. They shot never-seen images of the frontline and rearguard, in the process revolutionizing the history of cinema, photography, and journalism. But telling this visual story was not just a matter of shooting movies and photographs; it was also, crucially, one of cutting and pasting. The Committee's decision to tell the Dutch public "The Truth about Spain" through photographs made sense: Photography was as close as anyone could get to an immediate reflection of reality.¹¹ But why the scissors and glue? Is there not a tension between the objective immediacy that we associate with documentary photography and the obvious element of manipulation inherent in montage? Indeed there is, and this tension is at the heart of the meaning and the memory of the Spanish Civil War. But for artists like Alma—as for photographers like Capa, Chim, and Taro, not to mention their editors and publishers—truth and manipulation did not work at cross purposes. They went together.

Today, photojournalists lose their jobs for doctoring their pictures at the same time that every other camera user electronically manipulates images as a matter of routine (Tooth 2014). In this context, it is easy to forget that photomontage was initially thought of as a truth-telling tool. The montage technique had spread rapidly since its birth in the wake of the First World War, jumping from avant-garde art circles to the worlds of design, advertising, and politics. In the years of the Spanish Civil War, the photomontage became a standard format not just for propaganda posters but in journalism as well. To show how, in this and the next chapter we'll go on an archeological journey through the vast visual archive of the war, tracing the adventurous life of a handful of iconic images. In the process, we may come to see some long-standing debates about the historical memory of the conflict in a new light.

A War of Words and Images

What Are You Doing to Prevent This? The text on the poster—one of the most iconic of the Spanish Civil War, and published in French, Spanish, and English—couldn't be more straightforward (fig. 1.5). The three-part photomontage is equally direct. It includes a bombed-out apartment building, six German Heinkels silhouetted against the sky overhead, and the desperate face of a mother clutching a baby boy in the foreground. Only one other word is added in red caps at the bottom—Madrid. What gives this poster its rhetorical force is not just its direct appeal to the viewer's conscience; it is the sheer simplicity of its narrative. International fascism is targeting innocent Spanish victims; this should concern us all. The print, which came out in November 1936, doesn't ask how we feel about the war in Spain, or whether we think something *should* be done about it. All that is assumed. The only question is *what* we are doing to make it stop.

From the first day of the conflict, the war in Spain was fought on at least three



Figure 1.5. Spanish Civil War poster. Ministerio de Propaganda. Private Collection.

levels: on the battlefield, through backdoor diplomacy, and as an ideological war of words and images in the Western public sphere. Both Republicans and Nationalists were well aware of the crucial impact that non-intervention would have on the war's outcome. The pact was carefully observed by Britain, the United States, and France, who chose not to stand by the democratically elected Republican government; but it was openly flaunted by Germany and Italy's massive military support for the Nationalists. Helped by powerful allies abroad, both camps went to great lengths to win over international public opinion. Propaganda machines everywhere went into overdrive. Between 1936 and 1939 a significant percentage of Western brainpower—writers, artists, politicians, religious leaders, journalists, photographers, filmmakers—was engaged in attempts to shape the narrative of the Spanish Civil War.

The task at hand was urgent but not particularly complicated. Propaganda, after all, shuns complexity, preferring the moral expediency of melodrama and allegory. Both factions used all means at their disposal and were quick to mobilize their constituencies' existing fears and stereotypes. The Nationalists were painted either as honorable defenders of the Catholic faith who aimed to save their country and its traditions, or as fascist mercenaries paving the way for Hitler's Nazi imperialism. The Republicans, in turn, appeared as bloodthirsty Reds bent on rooting out religion, or as upstanding citizens engaged in a desperate defense of a democratically elected government. The objective on both sides was clear-cut: to convince the international public that the Spanish war was not a mere political conflict, but nothing less than a desperate struggle against absolute evil. And since few things are more despicable than the killing of the pure and innocent, neither of the two camps hesitated to discredit their opponents through graphic depictions of defenseless victims. The Nationalists spread images of desecrated graves and murdered nuns; the Republicans distributed photos of mutilated children who had died in bombardments. ("The 'military' practice of the rebels," one well-known poster featuring one of these pictures states. "If you tolerate this, your children will be next.")

The selection and arrangement of documentary images was an essential task in this cut-throat propaganda battle (Brothers 1997: 2; García 2010: 30-102; Basilio 2014: 14, 94). The leadership on both sides was quick to create dedicated units charged with producing, selecting, and distributing photography and film. These outfits freely used existing press materials, including newsreels, but they also had their own people, and they regularly commissioned assignments from photographers and filmmakers. Graphic artists and editors, in turn, did their magic with typeface, paint, pencil, scissors, and glue.

To understand this process, consider the *What Are You Doing to Prevent This* poster (fig. 1.5). The composition consists of three separate elements: a woman and child, a ruined building, and the six bomber planes in silhouette (which may be based on a photograph or simply drawn in ink). Can we trace the origins of these images? The Heinkels are more straightforward than the apartment building. Its towering, top-heavy quality, underscored by the low camera angle, makes



Figure 1.6. *Nova Iberia*, no. 2, Feb. 1937, Comissariat de Propaganda de la Generalitat de Catalunya.

for a dramatic menace that at the same time seems disarmingly vulnerable. As if the building had been cross-sectioned by a giant axe, the living rooms of regular civilians, whose lives were cut short by an explosive charge dropped from the sky, are unusually exposed. A door from the hallway now opens into the void. A metal bed frame is teetering on the edge of the precipice.



Figure 1.7. Destroyed building in the Calle Ruda. Photo Luis Lladó. Archivo Rojo. Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte, Archivo General de la Administración, AGA,33,E,04038,53153,001.

Photo editors found the image irresistible. It appears in at least half a dozen other Spanish Civil War montages, and it is included in *Madrid, baluarte de nuestra guerra de independencia*, a photo book with text by the poet Antonio Machado from November 1937, where the sky behind the ruin appears dramatized and dotted with airplane silhouettes.¹² In the second issue of *Nova Iberia*, a high-quality, large-format magazine published by the Republic's propaganda office in Barcelona, the image shows up in a mixed-media piece by the Catalan illustrator Francesc Almuni Gol, who has combined a detailed, realistic pen-drawing of the building—against an expressionist background suggesting a thunderstorm or explosion—with a cutout photographic image of three women and a child (fig. 1.6).¹³

The search for the original photograph of the destroyed apartment building led

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Figure 1.8. The funeral of Durruti. Nov. 23, 1936, Barcelona. CNT Collection, International Institute for Social History, Amsterdam.

me first to a square crop in the Archivo Vaamonde, a collection of images documenting the damage done by bombings in downtown Madrid. I finally stumbled into the uncropped original among the more than six thousand prints that make up the photo morgue of the Republic's Delegation of Propaganda (fig. 1.7). The handwritten note on the back of the index card holding the photograph credits it



Figure 1.9. Cover of *Volks-Illustrierte*, Dec. 9, 1936. International Institute for Social History, Amsterdam.

to Luis Lladó and gives the location as the Calle de la Ruda, which is in the Barrio de la Latina in Madrid. No date appears, but the photograph cannot have been taken later than early November 1936.

The gripping image of the mother and son that makes up the centerpiece of the propaganda poster is more interesting still. In early 2011, I cropped it from the rest of the poster and submitted it to a reverse image search on the internet. To my surprise, it appeared to have been cut from an anonymous picture taken at the funeral of the legendary Anarchist leader Buenaventura Durruti in the streets of Barcelona, in November 1936 (fig. 1.8). Durruti had died on November 20, and three days later some 500,000 Spaniards and Catalans took to the street to pay their honors. Surviving footage and photographs show a funeral procession

wending through a sea of people who, at the moment the coffin passes, collectively raise their fists. As this picture makes clear, they included throngs of children. The only uncropped print of this scene I have been able to locate is in the archive of the Anarchist CNT. This cache of forty-three large wooden boxes was smuggled out of Spain in the wake of the Republic's defeat in 1939, spent World War II in England, and is now at the International Institute for Social History in Amsterdam.

Comparing the original with the montage, we notice that the poster artist has subtly tilted the image, cut away the back- and foreground, cropped the toddler's raised fist, and retouched the woman's eyebrows and hair—untying the bun, as it were. The touch-ups are minor, but against the new backdrop the change is dramatic. An image of combative, collective mourning becomes one of solitary, defenseless fear and innocent victimhood.

The poster montage struck a chord like no other. It quickly became iconic, inspiring countless leaflets, other posters, and book covers in the years and decades following. For example, it appeared on the British pamphlet *Bombs over Barcelona* or the cover of *De Sfinx van Spanje*, the Spanish Civil War account by the Dutch-Surinamese novelist Lou Lichtveld (a.k.a. Albert Helman). But the original photograph, too, pops up a couple of times in the visual archive. It appears, for example, in the French version of the *Boletín Internacional de la Federación Española de Trabajadores de la Enseñanza* and on the cover of the brochure *Spain and Ourselves*, published by the Mineworkers' Federation of Great Britain in 1938. Michel Lefebvre has located a cropped version, wrongly captioned as taken in Madrid, which may have been the one used for the cover of the December 9, 1936, issue of the *Volks-Illustrierte Zeitung* that also identified the woman as a mother from the Spanish capital (fig. 1.9) (2013, 146).

Now, what does tracing the originals of this montage tell us? As we saw, the destroyed apartment building is actually in the Spanish capital, justifying the poster's claim that this scene is taking place in Madrid. But the image of the mother and child was shot in Barcelona, and not during any bombing campaign. Does that mean we have caught the design artist in a lie? The question seems out of place. We instinctively understand that the truth claim of a poster like this one doesn't work that way. The primary value of an image in a montage is not documentary in a narrow sense. It is symbolic and political.

This particular poster, moreover, reinforces its political message by presenting the central issue as a straightforwardly humanitarian one. Here it's impossible not to detect the influence of Willi Münzenberg. It was Münzenberg who, in the 1920s, discovered the potential of humanitarianism for mass political mobilization and who managed to detach the Left from its long-time connection with violence and armed struggle, associating it instead with the desire for peace, the defense of culture and, particularly, the organization of relief efforts for victims of natural disasters, persecution, or war (Koestler 1969, 201). The backbone of Münzenberg's campaigns was a transnational infrastructure of organizations—leagues, associations, committees—in charge of fundraising and publicity campaigns. By

the time the war in Spain broke out, this network was well-established and could be mobilized literally overnight.¹⁴

The humanitarian strategy would quickly become central to the way the Republic presented itself visually (García 2007, 683–84). In fact, the *What Are You Doing* poster is a variation on the theme we saw on the panel behind Peter Alma at the beginning of this chapter. That image, too, uses montage to suggest that women from Extremadura are looking at bombing planes flying overhead. The same idea recurs on the front cover of the photo album *Madrid 1937* with Chim's nursing mother image from the same land reform meeting (fig. 1.10). The subtly-cropped square captures six faces, three of which look into the camera, while the other three look up. The immediate context of the montage turns the nursing mother's facial expression of squinting concentration at the speaker into one of fear—this time without any need for retouching.¹⁵ (The archive holds several other examples of montages that use one or both of these two photos. The montages proved so suggestive that their meaning attached itself to the original image [fig. 1.11], which for years was captioned wrongly as a woman looking up during an air raid.¹⁶)

Photomontages like these are rife in the visual archive of the Spanish Civil War, showing how important the medium had become for political communication. This was in large part thanks to the groundbreaking work done since 1921 by the editors of Münzenberg's *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* (Workers' Illustrated Magazine), which helped launch the work of the German montage artist John Heartfield (born as Helmut Herzfelde).¹⁷ Photomontage was a hybrid form. It bridged the gap between photojournalism as documentary realism—the simple, objective registration of reality through the mechanics of the camera and the chemistry of the film—and the subjectivist, interventionist, or interruptive aesthetics of modernism (Eysteinson 1990). If the result was surprisingly powerful, it was because montage managed to combine the referential and the symbolic; day-to-day reality and allegory; prose and poetry. It turned simple news images into visual statements with a strong political charge.

For example, Valencian artist Josep Renau's "You will not steal" (*No robarás*) from his 1934 Ten Commandments series for the journal *Estudios* (no. 132, Aug. 1934, tinyurl.com/hxchskl) presents a symmetrical composition, with two iconic workers—one holding a shovel, the other a jack hammer—laboring atop of a pile of silver coins. Two *guardias civiles* (~~federal~~ police), copied in mirror image on both sides in a red shade, stand by to keep them in check. Meanwhile three disembodied hands—labeled the Banking System, Taxes, and Clergy—enter the frame from below to grasp at the coins that flow from the workers' labor. The message is clearly ironic: Capitalism subverts Old-Testament morality.¹⁸

This irony is absent from John Heartfield's *Die Freiheit selbst kämpft in ihren Reihen* (Freedom itself fights among their ranks), published in the *Volks-Illustrierte* of November 4, 1936 (fig. 1.12). That montage combines two powerful images. The first is a cutout of a high-contrast print of Georg Reisner and Hans Namuth's iconic, photojournalistic shot of a crowd cheering on troops leaving for the front,

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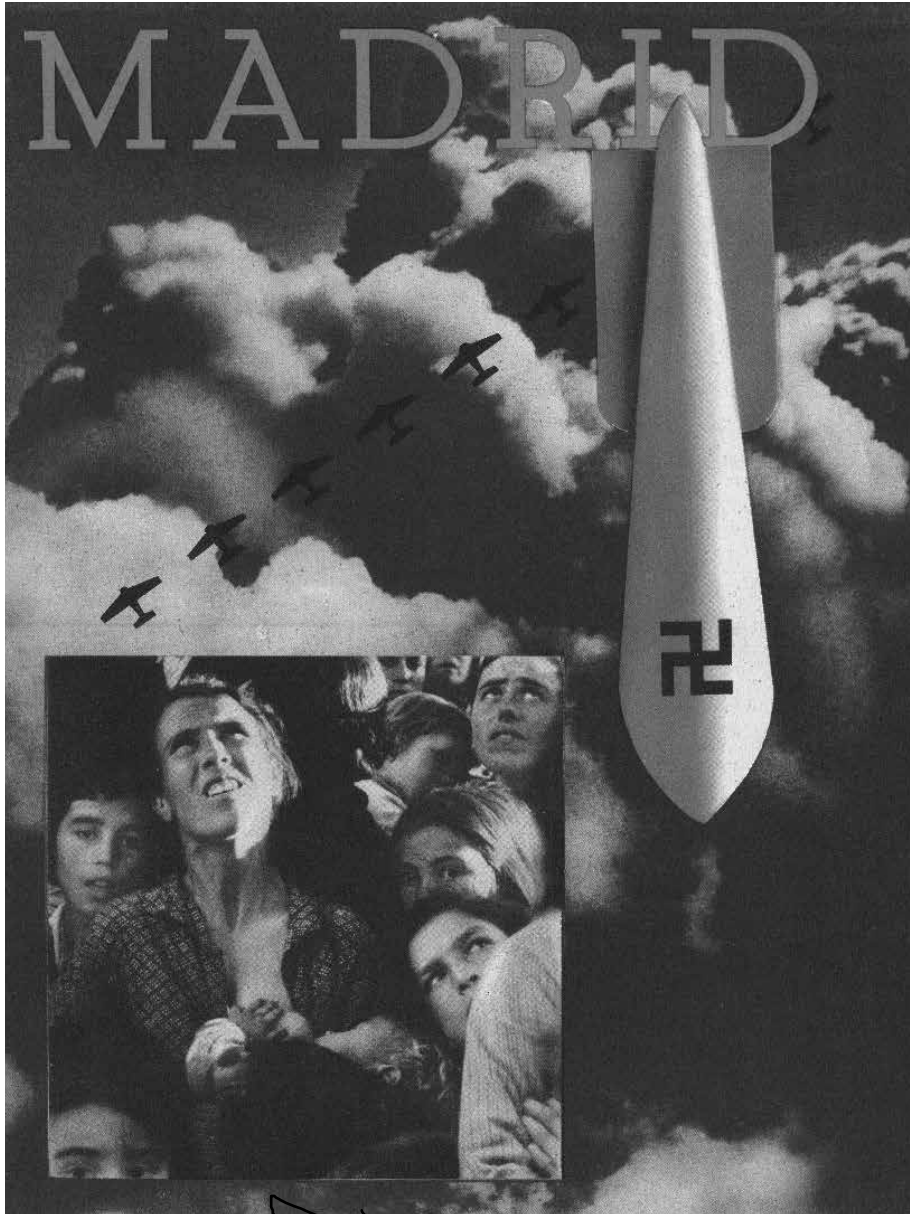


Figure 1.10. Cover of *Madrid, 1937*. International Institute for Social History, Amsterdam.

taken in July 1936. Heartfield superimposed a cutout of this shot on a muted grayscale reproduction of Eugène Delacroix's *La Liberté guidant le ~~people~~* (Freedom Guiding the People). (The soldiers' helmets in the foreground seem another superimposed cutout but actually belong to Reisner and Namuth's original frame.) The composition manages to enhance the power of the original photograph, already quite considerable, by calling attention to its iconographic echo with the Delacroix painting, which commemorates the 1830 July Revolution. The visual

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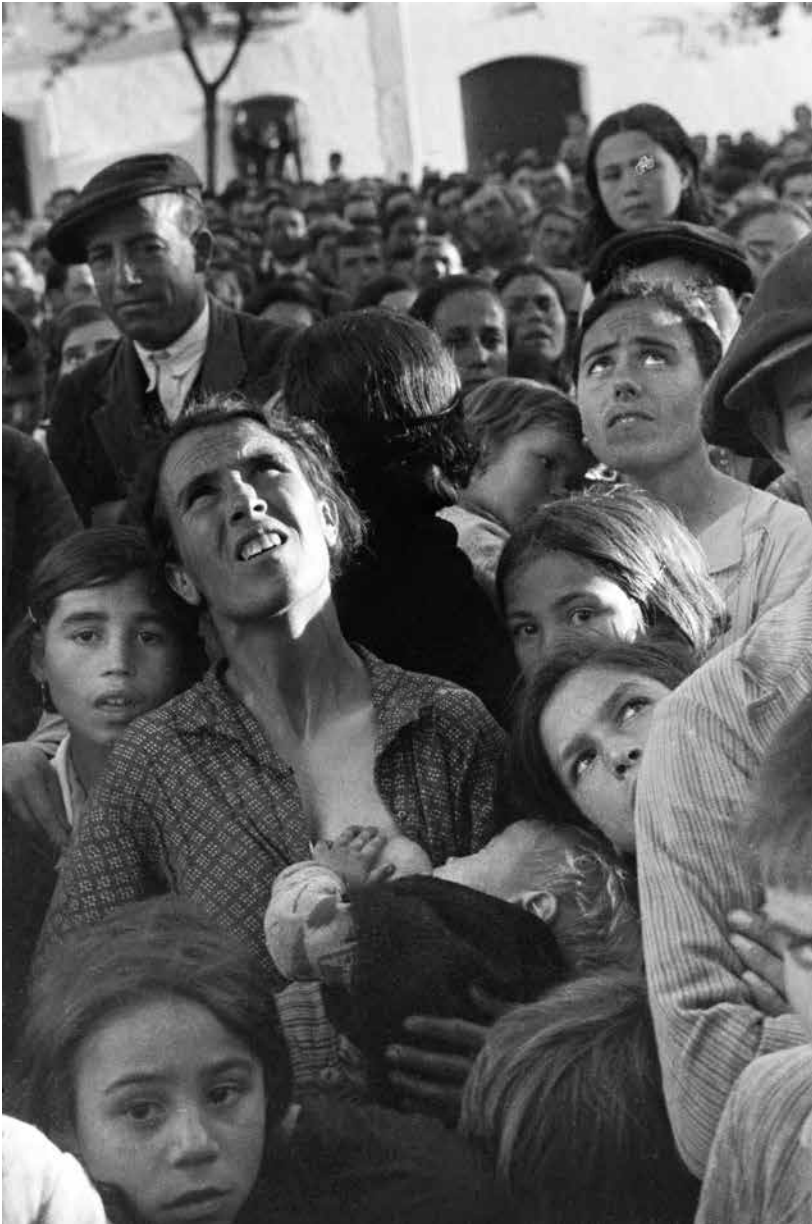


Figure 1.11. Chim, [Woman nursing a child at a land reform meeting, near Badajoz, Estremadura, Spain], late April–early May 1936. © Estate of David “Chim” Seymour/Magnum Photos.

rhyme is uncanny. In both images—one painted and almost allegorical, the other photographed and quite literal—the central figures arise from a crowd, with a bare upper body and a flag in their right hand, flanked by a secondary figure on their left. Letting the visual rhyme speak for itself, the montage suggests a deep political connection between the two historical moments.

From Avant-Garde to Commitment

Photomontage not only bridged art, commerce, and politics; it also provided a productive transition between the self-absorbed, formalist artistic movements of the early twentieth century and the newfound political commitment that shaped Western art and literature in the 1930s. Modernism and the avant-garde had ushered in radically new conceptions of artists' relationships with their work and the world. But the Great Depression and the political polarization that followed it, especially the rise of fascism, compelled writers and artists to rethink these relationships once again (Allred 2009, 27–57). The outbreak in July 1936 of the Spanish Civil War—emphatically a media war, a conflict of images and narratives—intensified this process and sharpened the tensions it generated (MacKay 2006, 730; Pingree 1996, 77).

Indeed, the urgency of the Spanish conflict confronted writers and artists with a series of difficult questions. Should they compromise on matters of artistic or literary form for the sake of political effectiveness? Should artists give up part of their individual autonomy and integrity for the sake of a collective cause or organization? Do writers and artists have a duty to represent the truth? If so, what truth? What is the relation between a particular medium—documentary film or photojournalism, for instance—and reality? How does artistic mediation relate to truth? What is the proper connection between writers or artists and their audiences? How do their texts and images generate collective subjects—such as a people's front—ready to undertake collective action? And, finally, how do writers and artists relate to the cultural market?

Questions like these were at the center of heated intellectual debates in Europe and the Americas throughout the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁹ Positions tended to be cast in terms of binary opposites: modernism vs. realism, truth vs. propaganda, objectivity vs. partisanship, elitist detachment vs. political commitment.²⁰ The heat of the disagreements and the height of the stakes, however, did not change the fact that the presumed opposites were often intertwined and co-dependent (Miller 2002). The same literary text—let's say Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*—can be read as both the epitome of realism and an example of modernist irony (Eysteinnsson 1990, 189–90). In the same way, political photomontage combines the production methods and aesthetic principles of modernist manipulation and experimentation with documentary photojournalism and an explicit political commitment. In the end, documentary photography and the avant-garde have more in common than they seem.

In fact, recent work on documentary photography from the 1930s—including the iconic legacy of Dorothea Lange, Margaret Bourke-White, and Walker Evans—has helped us understand that what was long upheld as the quintessence of documentary realism and objectivity was in fact the product of a whole slew of interventions and manipulations (Allred 2009). Similarly, the massive production and circulation of photojournalistic images by both sides in the Spanish Civil War did not actually involve less forethought and manipulation than Heartfield's brilliant montage work. I don't think the photographers, editors, and artists



Figure 1.12. John Heartfield, “Die Freiheit selbst kämpft in ihren Reihen.” *Volks-Illustrierte* 1, 1936. © 2016 Heartfield Community of Heirs. All Rights Reserved.

involved saw this fluidity as much of a problem. They were actively thinking and debating about the question of truth and representation—in Spain, these debates had been in full swing when the war broke out and were shaped by the vicissitudes of the conflict—and their attitude was often one of pragmatism and self-conscious skepticism (Mendelson 2005, 140–61; Allred 2009, 17–23; Bjerström 2016, 58–65, 140–47). Renau’s work is a good example. From the mid-1930s Renau, like Heartfield a Communist militant, had used ironic or satirical photomontages in journals like *Estudios* and *Nueva Cultura* to criticize the lack of progress made by the governments of the Second Republic. As Jordana Mendelson points out, the irony went beyond the content of the montages—it was inherent in the very medium. Renau’s work, she writes, “stood as a challenge to the Republic’s reliance of photography to prove the reality of their reforms, which in Renau’s mind were inadequate to meet the needs of the urban and rural masses” (Mendelson 2005,

149). The explicit manipulation of the photomontage, in other words, became a way to call out the implicit manipulation in a medium—documentary photography—that, put at the service of power, was much less objective and true than it claimed to be (Bjerström 2016, 64).²¹

Ironically, it has been later critics and cultural historians who have tended to frame the discussion about documentary form in the 1930s within narrow notions of truth and objectivity. This is the thrust, for example, of Phillip Knightley's attempts in *The First Casualty* (1975) to unmask the most famous picture to come out of the Spanish Civil War, Robert Capa's iconic *Falling Soldier*, as a fake, fueling a debate over the photo's authenticity that is ultimately beside the point (Faber 2009a). In reality, when it came to photographic coverage of war, staged and doctored images were the norm rather than the exception, even after the rise of portable movie and photo cameras that allowed for better coverage of battle action (Mraz 2003; Taylor 1998, 53–55). "I would call it a fantasy that we can create some photographic truth by not moving anything, not touching anything, not interacting with the scene that we're photographing in any way," says documentary filmmaker Errol Morris. "If you think you're going to create an un-posed photograph, think again. There is no such thing" (Raz 2011).

If journalistic objectivity is a problematic notion to begin with, it is even less useful in the context of the Spanish Civil War. As Paul Preston and others have shown, news reporters covering the conflict had a hard time remaining neutral or dispassionate (Preston 2009). And most of those involved in the production of visual media, too, ended up sympathizing with one side or the other—if they didn't already work for a pro-Loyalist or pro-Franco organization, that is—and went to great pains to produce, select, contextualize, and distribute those images they deemed most favorable to their cause (Brothers 1997, 2; García 2007). To the extent that all published photography and film on the war was carefully crafted—after passing through several layers of Spanish and domestic censorship—it can be argued that all media producers, whether they sympathized with the Republic or with Franco, resorted to manipulation and artifice.

To dismiss this phenomenon as "propaganda" is not particularly helpful. For one thing, the term propaganda implies a measure of duplicity; for another, it naively presumes the existence of more innocent or truthful forms of media production. In reality, of course, all mass forms of communication, particularly visual media, are products of careful deliberation, driven as they are by political, commercial, or cultural interests.²² If the visual coverage of the Spanish Civil War was different, that difference was a matter of scale, not category. Moreover, the convictions that drove photographers, filmmakers, and editors were intense, but they were largely genuine. Their sense of responsibility was the result of a double commitment, professional and political, both equally serious and not necessarily perceived to be in tension with each other. If there was any deception at play, it was in the fact that most everyone chose to hide the manipulative aspect of their work, presenting it as an unmediated, direct record of reality (Vials 2006, 80–81). Such a tactic was necessary, on the other hand, given that the images in question had to

be convincing—that is, authentic—enough to effectively shape public opinion. (This is what John Mraz calls “documentary credibility” [2003].) But as we will see later, the fact that a particular image is carefully crafted—selected, cropped, captioned, sometimes even staged—doesn’t necessarily make it less real, true, or historically accurate. If anything, studying the visual archive of the Spanish Civil War serves to dispel simplistic or empiricist notions of historical truth and falsity.²³

Indeed, that photographers and editors resorted to manipulation was not merely a function of need. Nor was it necessarily due to the limitations of their equipment. There were also intentional factors at play. I already mentioned the creative use of photojournalistic images by the workers’ crews of the groundbreaking *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* in the 1920s, which saw the birth of genres such as the journalistic photo essay. Recalling Mendelson’s reading of Renau’s photomontages, Andrés Mario Zervigón makes the convincing case that this creativity actually derived from a fundamental *distrust* of the apparent objective transparency of the photographic image.²⁴ Rooted as it was in “a simultaneous suspicion for and attraction to the medium’s documentary capacity,” Zervigón (2010, 152) writes, the workers’ embrace of photography as a medium for documenting and transforming the world was anything but naïve. This combination of suspicion and enthusiasm for the medium of photography—and the notion that images needed to be worked, processed to tell the real story—also moved the photographers and editors responsible for the most enduring images of the Spanish Civil War.

Seen in this light, the Spanish Civil War photography of future legends like Capa, Chim, and Taro is more than a new chapter in the history of professional photojournalism. The visual archive they left behind emerges as a vibrant hub at the intersection of politics, aesthetics, and cultural commerce. Their work straddles the realist commitment to the unadulterated truth of the objective lens and the modernist conviction that truth was only achieved through active manipulation and intervention. But their practice also combined a strong political commitment with a healthy dose of business intuition. We should not forget that Capa, Chim, and Taro were peripheral, exilic figures. Migrants or refugees from Hungary, Poland, and Nazi Germany, they were determined to make a name for themselves in the capitals of cultural prestige (London, Paris, New York). This was why, as we saw, the anonymous young refugee couple Endre Ernő Friedmann and Gerta Pohorylle reinvented themselves in the mid-1930s as the flashy photographic duo Robert Capa and Gerda Taro.

Photomontage, to be sure, takes the repurposing of photographic images to an extreme. But rather than seeing it as an isolated phenomenon, it is more productive to think of photomontage as the end point on a sliding scale. On the opposite end of that scale we would find the “pure,” captionless, uncropped shot, while the captioned photo essay—another key invention of the interwar period (Wallis 2010; Dell 2001)—would fall somewhere in the middle. Thinking on a sliding scale allows us to evaluate individual photomontages in terms of their relative documentary value—that is, to determine the relative distance between the original context of the images and the meaning that they are assigned in the

montage's final configuration. To what extent does the use of any particular photograph mobilize its metonymic character—documenting a specific reality bound to time, place, and identity—over its decontextualized potential as metaphor? This is basically the question we have been asking of the *What Are You Doing* poster.

The sliding-scale approach allows us to look at montage as a form of documentary photojournalism and, conversely, to look at documentary photojournalism as a form of montage. In the process, it draws our attention to the complicated, multistep process that gave rise to the visual archive of the Spanish Civil War. And it invites us to return well-known, iconic images by legendary photographers like Capa, Chim, Taro, and Centelles—multiplied in galleries, photo books, magazines, and the internet—to the complicated context of their birth: the circumstances, motivations, constrictions, and purpose of their production. The 2007 discovery of thousands of long-lost Civil War negatives made this a lot more exciting.