

# Robert Capa's "Falling Soldier" (1936)

First published in the Sept. 23, 1936 issue of the French magazine *Vu*, and later reproduced in *Life* magazine in July 1937, Robert Capa's shot of a Republican militiaman is the most well-known photographic image of the Spanish Civil War. It has also long been the subject of speculation. Does it really capture the "moment of death," as Capa claimed, or was it staged?

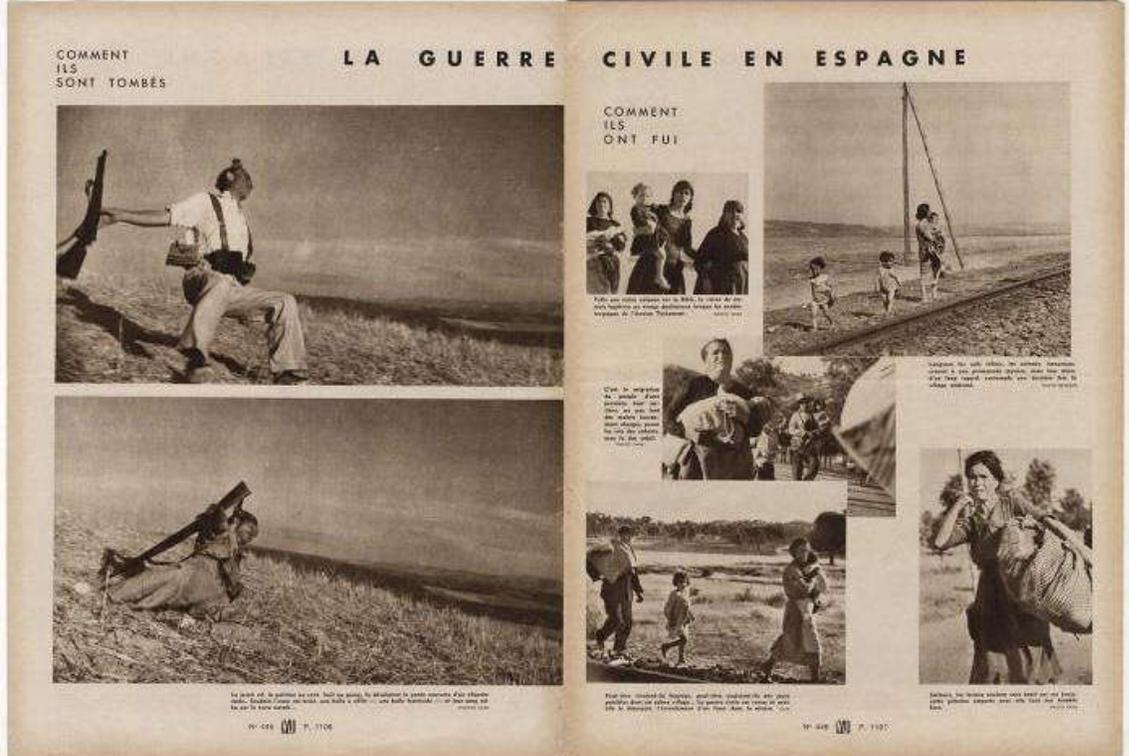
Studying the image and the controversy surrounding it allows students to become aware of the difficulty of establishing under what precise circumstances a photograph is taken; the way in which cropping, captioning, and context determine the "meaning" of any image; and the way in which particular iconic images end up leading a life on their own as they are reproduced and re-signified over time.

Questions for students to consider:

- What do you see?
- Which of the claims made in the caption are fully supported by the image?
- Which of the claims made in the caption are difficult to prove from the image?
- Which of the claims made in the caption are in tension with the image?
- Why do you think this photograph proved so powerful as an image of the Spanish Civil War? What kind of narrative of the war in Spain does this image suggest?

For more on this photograph, see "Truth in the Making: The Never-Ending Saga of Capa's Falling Soldier," *The Volunteer* (Dec. 2009), <http://www.albavolunteer.org/2010/03/truth-in-the-making-the-never-ending-saga-of-capas-falling-soldier/>

Caption (translated from the French): *Legs tense, chest to the wind, rifles in hand, they ran down the stubble-covered slope. Suddenly their momentum breaks, a bullet whistles - a fratricidal bullet - and their blood is drunk by their native soil ...*



Capa's "Falling Soldier" as first published in *Vu* (23 Sept. 1936). Note that the original captions suggest that the top and bottom image are of the same soldier, first hit, then dying. Close inspection makes pretty clear they are two different men—but how likely is it that two people would die on what looks like almost the same exact spot?



ROBERT CAPA'S CAMERA CATCHES A SPANISH SOLDIER THE INSTANT HE IS DROPPED BY A BULLET THROUGH THE HEAD IN FRONT OF CORDOBA

## DEATH IN SPAIN: THE CIVIL WAR HAS TAKEN 500,000 LIVES IN ONE YEAR

On July 17 the Spanish Civil War will be one year old. In that time it has brought Death to 500,000 Spaniards, has shattered such ancient cities as Madrid, Toledo, Bilbao, Irun and Durango, has kept Europe in a state of jitters.

When the war started, most U. S. citizens looked on the Loyalists as a half-crazy, irresponsible, murderous scum that had turned on its honorable betters. A year of war has taught the U. S. more of Spain.

The ruling classes of Spain were probably the world's worst bosses—irresponsible, arrogant, vain, ignorant, shiftless and incompetent. Some 20,000 landlords owned 50% of the land. They did not give their field hands modern machinery or their land modern irrigation. They refused to rent unused land to landless peasants for fear of giving the peasants dangerous ideas of ownership. The land was only about 25% efficient and much of it was idle. And Spain's mineral resources, among the greatest in Europe, lay almost entirely unexploited. The aristocracy of Spain was still living on the interest on wealth brought home from the Americas by the gold fleets in the 16th Century.

To the 20,000 landlords, add 21,000 Army officers, more than twice the total of British Army officers. There was one officer for every six privates, one general for every 150 men. For every \$3 spent on soldiers' pay, food, barracks, ammunition, officers got \$10 in pay—25% of the national budget. The national law made officers semisacred. Just for pushing a policeman of the swank Civil Guard, six Americans got six months in jail in 1935.

Add to the 41,000 landlords and officers, 100,000 clergy, the most top-heavy Church hierarchy in the world, next to Tibet. These also were paid by the State. The Church, with its enormous wealth, naturally took a capitalist's position. It was up to its neck in politics. Peasants were told that to vote against the Conservatives was usually a mortal sin. The Church was in charge of Spanish education. Result: the Spanish people were 45% illiterate. The reason for the civil war was simply that the people of Spain had fired their bosses for flagrant incompetence and the bosses had refused to be fired.

For a new movie of the Spanish war from the Government side, turn page 62

## Firing squad aiming at the Monument of the Sacred Heart August 1936 - Spain - Madrid - Associated Press of Great Britain Ltd.



[cleaned image]

### Collection

- [Spanish Civil War News Photos](#)

### Creation Date

- August 1936

### Description

This picture, taken by a Paramount News-reel representative and received by air from Madrid yesterday, illustrates an outrage which has no parallel in the photographs published by "The Daily Mail" of the Spanish Reds' war on religion. It shows a Communist firing squad aiming at the colossal Monument of the Sacred Heart on the Cerro de los Angeles, a hill a few miles south of Madrid which is regarded as the exact centre of Spain.

UC San Diego Library | Digital Collections

<https://library.ucsd.edu/dc/object/bb7099857q>



En estos días, han en-  
lertat per a castigar la bar-  
barie fascista. El poble  
segueix amb entusiasme les  
fases del combat favorable.

Los aviones aliados, se han  
elevado para castigar la  
barbarie fascista. El poble  
sigue con entusiasmo  
las fases del combate fa-  
vorable.

Loyal planes have soared  
to punish fascist barbarism  
men. People follow with  
enthusiasm the favourable  
phases of the engagement.

**Loyal planes have soared  
to punish fascist barbarons  
ness. People follow with  
enthusiasm the favourable  
phases of the engagement.**



Here is a well-known image by Capa of a Republican pilot who, from the streets of Madrid, excitedly observes his fellow fighters engaging with enemy planes. The image was shot in November or December of 1936 and it appeared in several different publications: *Life* magazine published it (in mirror image) in its Dec. 28, 1936 issue (p. 59); it also appeared in *No pasarán*, while related shots showed up in *Madrid* (1937), the *Volks-Illustrierte*, and *El pueblo español lucha* (fig. 21). In 1938, however, the very same cut-out featured in *No pasarán* appeared on the cover of *La barbarie roja*, a photo album published by the Nationalists in 1938, meant to document and denounce atrocities committed by the Republicans

# Lincoln Brigade: Group Shots

“The volunteers emerged from the bosom of America. They came from virtually every state in the Union (only Delaware and Wyoming were not represented ) and seemingly from every walk of life. Some, like the first battalion commander in action, Robert Merriman, held postgraduate degrees; more, including the last commander, Milton Wolff, had failed to complete high school. A few were children of the well-born, among them David McKelvey White, the son of an Ohio governor, and Henry Eaton, the son of a Los Angeles mayor. Some earned their livings as artists and writers; more common occupations were longshoreman or sailor, schoolteacher or student, or ‘unemployed.’ Group

photographs from Spain illustrate the self-conscious racial mix that included blacks and whites, several full-blooded American Indians, and Jack Shirai, the single Japanese American. These were deliberate images of the great American melting pot. Propagandists on the home front used those portraits to increase the base of political and financial support for the Republic. But they also reflected an authentic commitment to racial equality, a visible repudiation of fascist appeals to a master race.”

Peter N. Carroll, *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade: Americans in the Spanish Civil War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 15.



# Women Fighting Fascism: *Las Milicianas*

In the first months of the Civil War, the armed popular resistance against the military coup took the form of popular militias, often organized around labor unions. In these battles, women (*milicianas*) fought alongside men. As Mary Nash explains in *Defying Male Civilization* (1995), “[i]n the early weeks of the war, the *miliciana* was represented in the press, in speeches, and in war rhetoric as the ‘heroine of the fatherland’” (109). Soon, however, the presence of women soldiers in the trenches was denounced as a dangerous phenomenon, among other things because it was claimed that the *milicianas* were prostitutes and spreaders of venereal disease. This change of attitude towards female participation in the war effort was, on the one hand, a manifestation of the general “perseverance of traditional parameters of

gendered division of labor and norms of social conduct” (Nash 139). On the other hand, it was part of a larger project in which the Republican authorities, specifically the Communists, sought to contain the spontaneous revolutionary impulse of the first months after the military uprising. In 1937 the Communists proposed the substitution of the non-hierarchical popular militias by a conventional, disciplined and tightly organized Republican army. “The militia women,” Nash explains, “did not fit within the disciplinary structure of the regular army. With the disappearance of the militia, the option of armed resistance for women became untenable” (116).



Left: Pilar Pérez Llopis, sergeant in the Battalion “Pablo Iglesias” in Valencia. Cover of Barcelona newspaper *La Vanguardia*, 20 Sept. 1936. Photo F. Roldán May. Right: Recruitment poster in Catalan: “The militias need you all!” by Cristobal Arteché, 1936.



*Top:* Marina Ginestà on the rooftop of Hotel Colón, Barcelona, 1936, photo Juan Guzmán. *Left:* milicianas, date / photographer unknown. *Bottom left:* Milicianas, photo Agustí Centelles. *Bottom right:* Miliciana, photo Hans Namuth/Georg Reisner.

