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Republican Soldier, Spanish Civil War, 1936

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As early as the US Civil War, photography's entry into the field of reportage inspired some invidious depictions of traditional illustrators as innocents diverted by toy soldiers while insulated from the heat of battle.¹ To get the real picture, such caricatures implied, one at a minimum had to be in view of the action.

Comparable charges have rarely been leveled at press photographers. Even after we have grown accustomed to occasional reports of news pictures restaged, we still assume that the photographer "was there," in the thick of it, or at least very close. While almost buried in a longer list of journalistic questions, the press image is expected to address—who, what, where, when?—the issue of location is essential to the basic credibility of the press photo, and it is this issue that recently has come to the fore in reconsiderations of Robert Capa's arguably most famous image.

Not only is Robert Capa's "Falling Soldier" (1936) the best-known photograph from the Spanish Civil War, but it is verily a storied picture, starting with the famous photojournalist who varied his own accounts of its making, thus raising doubts even among his friends and admirers. Decades since Capa's death in 1954 while covering the rout of the French from Vietnam, debates continue as to whether the felling of the partisan soldier was simulated or actual.

I was one of many participants in that debate. After sifting through myriad first- and second-hand accounts, I thought I had arrived at a judiciously nuanced interpretation: the photograph was neither patently true nor false: rather, the photographer when fooling around during a lull in battle had lured some partisans to pose, and that the two thus diverted were fatally surprised by snipers. This "lucky shot" of "death in the making" (the latter phrase Capa used to title his 1938 book on Spain) brought instant fame to the photographer soon after the photo's first publication. The celebrity resulting from such hapless circumstances must have left the photographer immensely guilty for the role he had played in what was conceived as a "time-killing" mock scenario that then turned deadly. Invoking Heisenberg's "Uncertainty Principle," I further speculated that this scenario should provoke us to rethink that favored trope of "photographer as witness," so that we consider more closely the extent that the "witness" unwittingly affects the conditions of the scene.²

But within a year, that interpretation, along with most others, lost its evidentiary foundations. The debate and its contours shifted as research about the war revived in Spain. Previously, all had accepted that the locale, repeatedly identified in published captions, was Cerro Muriano outside Córdoba, where fighting raged in early September 1936 when the photograph was made. Lately a Basque communications



Figure 1.13 *VU*, 23 September 1936, pp. 1106–7, including Robert Capa's *Falling Soldier* (top left), Córdoba front, Spain. Collection International Center of Photography.

scholar José Manuel Susperregui wondered if even that location should be taken at face value. Recognizing that any review of this most famous photo would elicit stock responses, Susperregui ingeniously cropped out all the recognizable action on the left, posting online only the right half of the picture while soliciting help from local teachers and librarians in identifying that particular configuration of bare hillside in foreground, valley plain below, and low mountains in the background. One student volunteered that the topography resembled that of Espejo, 35 miles from Cerro Muriano, as such quite far from any documented heated battle or snipers in early September of 1936. Questioning an early report of this novel finding, the regional press dispatched reporters and photographers who confirmed a solid match between that site and the background of Capa's two most dramatic photographs from "Cerro Muriano."³

This raises new questions, yet to be answered, as to what either Capa or the soldiers he was with were doing in the first days of September, gathered at Espejo a safe distance from the fighting. Since the annals of war are rarely complete, the finding doubtless will provoke further research. However, at least for now, the long-revered photograph is discredited as a battlefield record. Without clear claim to the pantheon of photojournalism, will it be reclassified as a bit of staged propaganda, as Philip Knightly rather early proposed in *The First Casualty*?⁴ Or will it enjoy renewed appreciation as theatrical art made rather close to but still removed from the "theater of war"? The future for this image is hard to predict,

depending as it does not only on continued findings, but also on the ever-changing criteria for, and boundaries between, photography, propaganda, and art. Still, the image in question will be hard to mothball; even lacking the bona fides of heroism by both partisan fighters and photographer, its semiotic instability proves unforgettable. For if we conventionally give it the moniker of “iconic,” there is something persistently indexical in its striking blow to all valiant preconceptions of martial sacrifice.

I can think of no better word than *arresting* to describe the way Capa’s *Falling Soldier* depicts the “decisive moment” and rebounds that shock directly and frontally to the viewer. The sheer awkwardness of both framing and figure may explain its persistent claims on us. Never has the phrase “stop-action” seemed so pertinent for this whiplash splaying of limbs. The body in its performative repertoire lacks the grotesque knowledge of what it may mean to be thrown in reverse. That the figure cannot recover either his grip on his rifle or his balance is already presaged by the shadow cast backward on the ground. But for this split second there is no stasis, only the horror of suspended animation in advance of the loss of all animation. Capa’s “Falling Soldier” is one of the first in a still rare genre in which the photograph intimates that moment where life and death appear to face off.⁵ No surprise that Capa’s famous photograph has provoked as much avowal as disavowal of the figure’s vital status. Yet for all the ambivalent reception, we may have missed fully recognizing the picture’s terrifying approximation of that terminus we would rather envision as both distant and predictable.

Notes

- 1 Jan Zita Grover, “The First Living-Room War: The Civil War in the Illustrated Press,” reproduces two such satirical sketches from 1861 and 1862 issues of *Vanity Fair*; *Afterimage*, February 1984, 9.
- 2 Sally Stein, “Close-ups from Afar: Contested Framings of the Spanish Civil War in U.S. Print Media, 1936,” in Jordana Mendelson, ed., *Magazines, Modernity and War* (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2008): 117–139. My 2008 article cites many conflicting accounts, including quite a few supplied by Capa in various contexts. For yet another discrepant account in the form of a recently rediscovered recording of Capa made in New York thirteen years after the photograph on 20 October 1947, see <http://www.icp.org/robert-capa-100>; in this radio interview, Capa asserts that the press photo is chiefly the work of editors, while personally denying any role as witness, since here he claims he made the exposure sight unseen by raising the camera above eye-level from the safety of a trench (although the fact that the exposure includes the valley below conflicts with this description of a worm’s eye or entrenched sightline).
- 3 José Manuel Susperregui, *Sombras de la fotografía: los enigmas desvelados de Nicolasa Ugartemendia, Muerte de un miliciano, La aldea española y El Lute* (Universidad del País Vasco, 2009); for a summary in English by Sussperregui, see, “Visual Resonance of Robert Capa’s Falling Soldier”: <https://www.academia.edu/3608024/>; see also, Larry Rohter, “New Doubts Raised Over Famous War Photo,” published in the *New York Times*, 17 August 2009.
- 4 Phillip Knightly, *The First Casualty: From Crimea to Vietnam: The War Correspondent as Hero, Propagandist and Mythmaker* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975): 209–12.
- 5 For an overview of such moments, including this one, and their importance to news culture, see Barbie Zelizer, *About to Die: How News Images Move the Public* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).