

2.17

Never Alone: Photo Editing and Collaboration

Nadya Bair

On 3 December 1938, Gerda Taro's portrait of Robert Capa appeared on the cover of *Picture Post* with the caption: "The Greatest War Photographer in the World" (Fig. 2.17a). This widely reproduced image focuses on the journalist, whose pose suggests near total absorption in the act of reportage on the front of the Spanish Civil War. The magazine's coverage of Capa in the field solidified his fame as a major war photographer of the period. But this page was a calculated editorial choice made to promote *Picture Post* itself.¹ As the illustrated press proliferated in the 1920s and 1930s, editors knew that one way to grow their readership was to turn photographers into celebrities, making their names and faces known to the public who would follow their exclusively published work in the pages of the magazine.² Photographers were invested in making their names known because this increased their earning potential and their chances for getting more assignments.

This clever business strategy did more than sell magazines and bring photographers fame; it also shaped how histories of photography would subsequently be written. On the one hand, monographic studies dedicated to individual artist-photographers have proliferated, associating Capa with war photography; Eugene Smith with the photo essay; Henri Cartier-Bresson with street photography. A substantial and enlightening body of work about how illustrated publications—especially *Picture Post*, *VU* and *LIFE*—represented and therefore shaped our understanding of iconic moments in history has drawn as much attention to the history of the press as to photographers.³ What these two predominant approaches underemphasize, however, is the centrality of editorial collaboration in the fabrication of news pictures. Away from the news front, story production—the planning before a photo shoot, its editing and subsequent layout as a picture story—was as important as taking pictures. To understand the history of the photographic press requires that we look beyond the singular image and celebrated names that appeared in print, to consider instead the stages of collective thinking and decision-making that produced each issue, and each page, of a news publication. Shifting attention towards collaboration also means writing pivotal but forgotten figures—such as the photo editors who shaped the content and form of photojournalism—back into the history of news production.

Compared to the iconic cover of *Picture Post*, a page from the January 1953 issue of *Holiday* magazine offers a less memorable and more complicated representation of the collective practice of photojournalism (Fig. 2.17b).

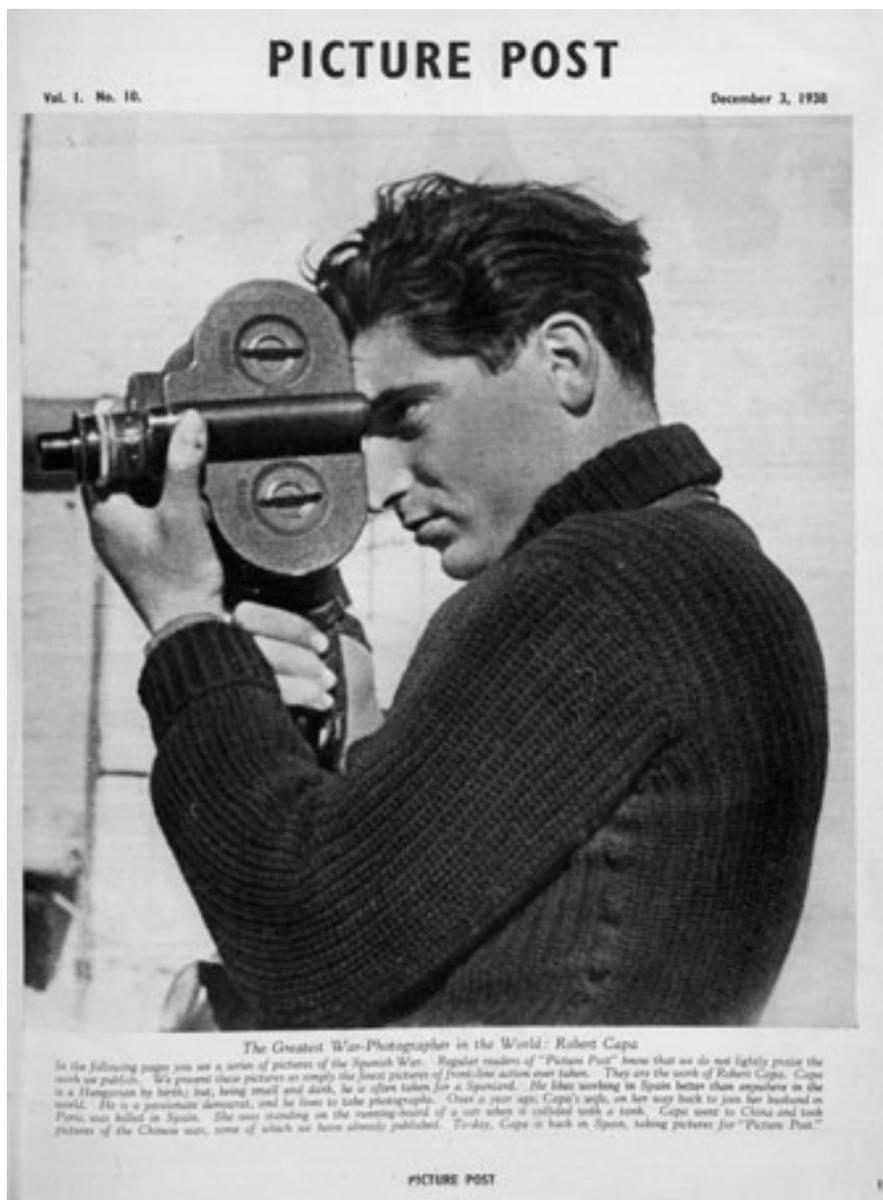


Figure 2.17a *Picture Post*, 3 December 1938, p. 13. Collection International Center of Photography.

Capa appears once again, now gazing not into a camera but seemingly into the magazine's own editing room. The walls are covered in mock-ups and its leading editors are huddled around an image, deliberating where it should go. At this moment, Capa had already founded *Magnum Photos*, the cooperative that provided *Holiday* magazine with an exclusive, three-part photo story called *Youth and*

HOLIDAY—*who and where*

People and places the world over produce a new kind of travel story

23 Kids and Us

• Stop talk is rarer of much interest, even to the man in the next seat on the connecting train, but this time we think you'll forgive us. Because it is probably a fact that there has never been a single magazine story with such a breadth of subject matter, such a diversity of backgrounds, such a wealth of interesting and important personal details as our three-part report on *Toussaint and the World*, which begins this month on Page 30. We think you'd like to know some of the history, the hard work and headaches behind a story which covers 23 individuals in 14 countries and five continents.

Toussaint and the World was born in the summer of 1949, when *Life* magazine, along with several million other people, had a half-century-mach was almost upon us. We all talked about it a lot here. We considered some kind of survey of the whole world in 1950—a sort of historical survey of the past 50 years (not of those standard old photo-collecting jobs, beginning with Queen Victoria and ending with Hindenburg). And then, bit by bit, as ideas emerged. No one, it occurred to us, is so interested in the past 50 years as he is in the next 50. Why not do a survey of the second 50 years of the 20th Century?

Enter, at this point, Bob Capa. Mr. Capa, the celebrated Hungarian-born photographer-writer, was one of many regular *Life* magazine contributors to whom we talked about the year 1950 and the years 1950-2000. Now, Bob Capa is the director of an extraordinary group of photographers known as Magnum Photos, which includes a half dozen of the very best picture men in the world today. Capa, realizing his group was accustomed to covering a world beat, took his problem to his resident geniuses, and in consultation with *Life*'s editors—by cable and air mail, and through talks in Paris, Philadelphia and New York—worked out the answer. Let's, they agreed, do a story about the people who are just coming of age around 1950, and who will make most of the history of the next 50 years. They will be 50 years old in the year 2000, and if we can

look at them now, find out what they think, what their hopes and fears are, we will have the best possible start on the next half century. It will be a new thing: history seen forward instead of backward.

Capa did the first story—the sample take. He picked Germany, the country most torn by the crises of the recent past, and he went there with some magazines, looking for a German boy. "I spent my twentieth year in Germany in 1933," Capa says, "when the twenty-year-old Germans were marching in shining boots and fighting in the streets under swastikas. The next time I saw young Germans was at the surrender of the Afrika Korps in Tunisia, and their boots were worn and dusty and their faces sullen. I didn't look forward with any pleasure to my third meeting, but my curiosity was greater than my dislike." The results of

graphs and all the details, telling questionnaires which their subjects filled out about themselves—began to pour in to the *Life* magazine offices, our own problems grew. It was mostly a problem of too many fine pictures and too much vital information that just had to be printed. *Toussaint and the World* went up, by stages, from a one-part to a two-part and then to a three-part story. It was the biggest job *Life* ever had ever found.

In the end, some 130 photos out of 1500 were chosen by Graphics Editor Sybil Zachary, Art Editor Steve Rego and Photo Editor Lou Marvick. More than 5000 photographs of the pictures were ordered for use in sample layouts. Zachary and his two assistants estimate 730 hours, mostly late ones, spent on the story. Associate Editor Roger Angell, who wrote the text, sat in

Photo Editor Marvick, Graphics Editor Zachary, Associate Editor Angell often, weighed and argued for 730 rugged hours.

Bob Capa showed the field work.

That third meeting, the story of a young German minor, will be included in *Toussaint and the World* next month.

After that first story, Magnum photographers, including Hans-Curtin-Brossner, Ernst Haas, Werner Bischof, David Seymour and Herbert Lub, began fanning out—to Syria, England, Yugoslavia, Norway, the Orient, Africa and South America. And as their results—hundreds of remarkable photo-

on the layout work, too, usually to show things like: "You can't cut that Yugoslavian girl to 300 words! I want to write a book about her!"

"Now that the job is done, all of us here feel we have gained something we didn't have before: we have gained the knowledge of 23 young people from all over the world, and we feel that we know them, not as subjects of a story, but as real people, as friends. We hope you'll feel the same way.

1950 4204

A FOREIGN LAND OF ENCHANTMENT AND CONTENTMENT

CUBA

• Come to colorful, colorful Cuba. Taste the magical blend of modern luxury and old-world charm. Enjoy Continental Havana—the sports, hotels, night-clubs, gaming, the cosmopolitan cities, famed spas, and beaches, Varadero Beach, the Isle of Pines. This fascinating foreign land is only 90 miles from the U. S.—no passport necessary for U. S. citizens.



Photographers like you, other interested people, together make our story live.



All parts of the nation abound in Cuba's fine scenes.



Lighten the pressure of the road by our new popular service.

Information from your Travel Agent or

CUBAN TOURIST COMMISSION
 NEW YORK: 112 E. 42nd Street
 MIAMI: 130 E. Flagler Street
 HAVANA: P. O. Box 1000

Figure 2.17b *Holiday*, January 1953, p. 25. Collection International Center of Photography.

the World. If, in 1938, Capa was shown in the midst of filming battle, in 1953 no camera is in sight. Instead, he trains his gaze toward the production of a story that required the coordinated efforts of over a dozer Magnum photographers in fourteen countries around the world.⁴ The editors acknowledged their partnership with Capa, but what they really wanted readers to consider was the 720 hours of writing, layout, and editing that its staff had invested in the project—"the biggest job *Holiday*

had ever faced.”⁵ Indeed, this impressive statistic could never have been gleaned from looking at the published photographs, whose neat arrangement was meant to engross the reader in the content, rather than the construction, of the picture essay.⁶ By revealing the process of photo editing, *Holiday* demonstrated that its expertise and commitment to delivering the most thoughtful and visually captivating coverage of the world depended on a team of editors rather than one star photographer.

The rise of photographic magazines required the coordinated efforts of many kinds of professionals in addition to the photographer, who played a limited role in both story conception and in its final presentation. By the interwar period, picture supply rested on a three-way relationship between photographers, publications, and photo agencies. Photo agencies such as Dephot (founded in 1928), Rapho (1933), Alliance Photo (1934), and Black Star (1935) sold images to magazines and kept 35–50 percent of the profit, with the rest going to the photographers.⁷ Photographers not only allowed agencies to negotiate prices; they also ceded control both over their negatives and over the final layout, which remained the property of the magazine.⁸ In return, agency photographers had the freedom to take on a range of assignments and story angles—unlike staff photographers, who always worked for the same editors and shot stories for a single publication.

As photographers professionalized and agencies proliferated, magazines became inundated with solicited and unsolicited photographs, of which only a small fraction could be published. Picture editing, therefore, became as important as picture supply to the development of pictorial reporting. The images that magazines received—or commissioned—were editorially divided into two kinds of picture stories. Feature stories examined relevant issues but could take weeks or months to produce, while news stories examined time-sensitive materials. At editorial meetings, staff selected feature stories. There, writers and researchers presented their ideas to the managing editors who oversaw multiple magazine departments and were responsible for the magazine’s editorial content.⁹ News stories were allotted blank pages in the magazine dummy and were the last to be submitted before the magazine was sent to the printer. As news stories increasingly became a priority, their dramatic content could frequently overshadow the pre-assigned features that had taken months to prepare. *Photo Technique*, a magazine that advised amateur photographers on how to break into publishing, warned: “One of the oldest and most established . . . prerogatives of editors is to change their minds and decisions. What may seem to the editors an excellent picture story today, may by next week have lost all interest for them.”¹⁰

Just as planning each magazine issue required the collaboration of many professionals, story execution also depended on balancing multiple priorities beyond the photographer’s vision. Once the managing editors finalized the contents, a photo editor assigned photographers to stories, taking into account the skills and personal interests of the photographers with whom he worked.¹¹ Photo editors had to communicate the magazine’s vision for an article, explain the reasoning behind a shooting script if there was one, and assist the photographer with making the necessary connections in the field. Magazines could request that photographers use specific camera equipment and frequently indicated the preferred percentage of color versus black and white images. To please editors, photographers also needed to overshoot their assignments, making many more exposures than could ever be used in order to give editors—and writers—an exhaustive pictorial account of the story, from which a small number of images would be chosen.¹²

When photographers completed shooting an assigned story, a range of personnel handled the photographs. Darkroom staff initiated the editing process, printing contact sheets from the negatives and

identifying the better images for enlargement which would be shown to the editors. Depending on the publication's workflow, personalities, and deadlines, managing editors could be involved in weeding out the best images from a large sample of photographs and putting them into a rough mock-up, often with the input of the writers, researchers, reporters and, in rarer cases, photographers.¹³ A magazine's art director, responsible for the overall design of each issue including typography choices, illustrations, and the placement of pictures, could also be involved in the process of picture selection and would finalize the layout of the picture story, leaving room for text, headlines, captions, and advertisements.

The extent to which a photographer was involved in laying out a picture story varied from publication to publication. *LIFE* photo editor Wilson Hicks believed that photographers were too emotionally attached to their work to make sound editorial decisions and he limited most photographers' involvement in the editing process. *Holiday's* art director and managing editor Frank Zachary argued for the "dominant editor," responsible for shaping each magazine issue to his personal vision. *Look*, on the other hand, encouraged close collaboration between the photographer, editor, writer, and art director.¹⁴ Nevertheless, photographers could rarely prescribe how their images would be seen in print. Henri Cartier-Bresson admitted that magazines gave photographers the opportunity to reach a wide audience but regretted that it was only within the magazine's confines: "The words are the words of the photographer," he wrote in 1955, "but the phrasing is that of the magazine."¹⁵ The few photographers who attempted to control a magazine's editing process—as Eugene Smith did while working as a staff photographer at *LIFE*—were eventually fired or quit. Some photographers had more luck in controlling image layout and presentation by authoring photo books, but even in these cases, the role of the book publisher (and project financier) could trump the photographer's vision.¹⁶ Capa's heroic portrait in *Picture Post* and the image of photojournalism that it promotes, we can now see, occludes far more than it reveals.

For photojournalists, submitting one's work to the collective editing and layout of magazine staff—especially one with a strong editorial direction such as *LIFE*—was a routine aspect of the profession, but was often seen as a sacrifice that stultified their individual creativity and expression. In 1947, four successful and independently spirited photographers—Robert Capa, Henri Cartier-Bresson, George Rodger, and David Seymour—challenged the business standards of photojournalism by founding a cooperative organization called Magnum Photos, which would be owned by the photographers and which would coordinate the sale and distribution of picture stories to magazines around the world.¹⁷ Studying Magnum as a supplier of press pictures underscores the collective process by which photographs ended up on the printed page—even in an organization that was set up to represent and defend the interests of individual photographers.

Magnum transformed the industry of photojournalism by establishing the photographic copyright, enabling Magnum photographers to retain the rights to their negatives, to choose where to publish them, and to charge magazines, books, or other publications for reprints. But what is equally important and unique about the organization is that Magnum wanted to escape the control of magazine photo editors who determined which images would be seen and in what context.¹⁸ To further their individual careers, Magnum photographers had to learn to work collaboratively, to critique and edit each other's work and, as an organization, to anticipate the demands and interests of magazine editors. Looking at Magnum's early operations allows us to see how its members challenged themselves to succeed in the business of photojournalism not just by being better photographers, but also by thinking like photo editors: documenting stories rather than producing singular, iconic images; learning to let others into the

process of editing; and knowing when to stop shooting and begin the equally important stage of post-production.

Robert Capa was not just “the greatest war photographer,” as history has it; he was also, as president of Magnum, acutely aware of the importance of producing picture stories for the magazine market. After World War II and until his death while on assignment for *LIFE* in Indochina in 1954, Capa regularly generated story ideas for his colleagues and invested much time into courting magazine editors. Addressing the photographers in an annual stockholder report five years after the organization’s founding, Capa criticized the other Magnum photographers’ weak sense of journalism and their preference to shoot pretty pictures rather than document stories.¹⁹ Capa recognized that Magnum’s lagging sales were the result of the product that Magnum offered, rather than their sales strategy. His proposition was unequivocal: “What Magnum and the Magnumites need most is not a business man, but an editor.”²⁰ The commitment to editing and distributing high-quality material, rather than just selling more photographs, was what in Capa’s mind distinguished Magnum from an agency such as Black Star, which had represented him in the 1930s and whose photographers regularly complained that they felt exploited by Black Star agents willing to sell their work cheaply for the sake of maintaining good relations with *LIFE*.²¹

To further emphasize the role of editors, Magnum hired John Godfrey Morris in 1953. Morris was responsible for generating story ideas and helping photographers execute them, as well as for selling those stories to publications for the highest possible price. First as an assistant to Wilson Hicks at *LIFE* and then as the photo editor of *Ladies’ Home Journal*, Morris had gained ample experience in producing picture stories and working closely with photographers.²² Critiquing the work of photographers would become an integral part of Morris’ activities, as he helped them better understand what it took to succeed as photojournalists. It was not uncommon for photo editors to accompany photographers into the field, and Morris did this on a number of occasions when working on stories that he considered particularly challenging or innovative, and which he predicted would be difficult to sell if shot incorrectly.²³ Morris wanted the photographers to understand that, while the market for “great pictures” was limited, the market for “great stories” was infinite, and that to turn the former into the latter, thinking about a final layout needed to be enforced when shooting a story.²⁴ In his weekly correspondence with photographers, Morris constantly shared his impressions of their contact sheets and their published work. In the introduction to *The Decisive Moment*, Cartier-Bresson—who frequently clashed over picture editing decisions with magazine editors as well as with Morris himself—acknowledged, “. . . it was only in the process of working for [magazines] that I eventually learned—bit by bit—how to make reportage with a camera, how to make a picture-story.”²⁵

Magnum’s collective structure also created an environment in which photographers saw each other’s work, edited pictures jointly, and gave each other feedback on the craft of photography itself. Thus while Magnum photographer Werner Bischof worked in India in 1951, Robert Capa and the photographer Ernst Haas jointly edited his work for distribution. It was Capa who encouraged Bischof to keep traveling to other countries, observing that Bischof had exhausted the possibilities of photographing in India for that year, and that he needed to generate new stories.²⁶ Bischof listened to Capa’s advice, but complained regularly about the pace at which he had to work: “I must rush onward under the pressure of editors,” he wrote in 1952, referring not only to the magazines but also to the pressure of his own colleagues to see him produce timely material.²⁷

The Magnum documentation reveals more than a series of exchanges about picture quality and story content; it also shows an organization-wide struggle to make time for editing. From the beginning of its operations, the New York and Paris headquarters were inundated with images, the majority of which never entered into circulation because of the photographers’ pace of work. In the 1955 annual report,

Morris asked Magnum photographers to recognize that there was no quick, standard formula for editing a picture story, just as there was no single way to shoot it: “A story which has taken days or weeks to shoot is often edited in a few hours . . . we must recognize that picture editing is just as creative a task as photography, and that a person may be a good editor for one story but not for another.”²⁸ Magnum pioneered an unprecedented system of distribution that placed collaborative work at the center of their enterprise, which allowed Magnum photographers to circumvent the collective editing process at magazines. The cooperative’s “distros,” as they were called, consisted of approximately thirty images selected with the consent of the photographer, as well as captions and a general story text written either by the photographer or a member of the staff. Circulated to potential magazine clients on a regular basis, these distros diminished a magazine’s influence over picture editing by presenting it with a pre-selected set of pictures. They also obliged magazines to write a story that adhered to the spirit of the Magnum text, and to caption the pictures similarly, if not verbatim. While photography curator and historian Alison Nordstrom notes that Magnum’s distribution system “constituted a major shift in establishing the creative authority of the photographer,” that innovation was also the product of collaboration and collective learning about picture editing that happened behind the scenes at Magnum, and which has heretofore been absent from histories of the agency and its members.²⁹

To understand the production of news pictures, it is essential to look beyond the photographer and his or her picture taking. A more comprehensive understanding of photojournalism takes into account that no single individual can be credited for the great moments of photographic history. In a 1960 letter to his colleagues at Magnum, Henri Cartier-Bresson acknowledged that while he frequently edited his own pictures, “it is most helpful for me to have a confrontation with the Magnum editor next to me, or another photographer.”³⁰ His statement beckons us to look at those moments of confrontation and at the range of people—from photo editors and art directors to writers—who shaped the work of photographers, and to acknowledge the integral stage of photo editing in the making of news pictures. When we affirm that photojournalists were never alone, we can begin to ask new questions about the group efforts of press photography.

Notes

- 1 Michael Hallett, *Stefan Lorant: Godfather of Photojournalism* (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2006).
- 2 Earlier precedents include the war photographers Jimmy Hare and Roger Fenton, who became famous for their images of the Crimean War and the Russo-Japanese War. See Thierry Gervais, “Witness to War: The Uses of Photography in the Illustrated Press, 1855–1904,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 9 (3), (2010): 1–15. Before the proliferation of illustrated journalism, the adventures of reporters such as Henry Morton Stanley occupied the reading public’s imagination. See Tim Jeal, *Stanley: The Impossible Life of Africa’s Greatest Explorer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).
- 3 Michel Frizot, *VU: The Story of a Magazine* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2009); Wendy Kozol, *Life’s America: Family and Nation in Postwar Photojournalism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994); Erika Doss, ed., *Looking at LIFE Magazine* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001); and Carolyn Quirke, *Eyes on Labor: News Photography and America’s Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).
- 4 “Youth and the World” published in *Holiday* magazine in January, February, and March 1953.
- 5 “Holiday: who and where,” *Holiday* (January 1953): 25.
- 6 Stanley E. Kalish and Clifton C. Edom, *Picture Editing* (New York: Rinehart and Company, 1951): 135.

- 7 Patricia Vettel-Becker, *Shooting from the Hip: Photography, Masculinity, and Postwar America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005): 6.
- 8 Peter Galassi, "Old Worlds, Modern Times," in *Henri Cartier-Bresson: The Modern Century* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2009): note 158.
- 9 Wilson Hicks, *Words and Pictures* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952), especially chapters 1–2.
- 10 Dawson Powell, "The Facts of LIFE," *Photo Technique* (April 1941): 31, 66.
- 11 Photo editors were also charged with looking through the hundreds of unsolicited photographs. See "Speaking of Pictures . . . These Show *LIFE* in Process," *Rockefeller Center Magazine* (April 1938): 18–19.
- 12 *Holiday's* editors informed their readers that they had selected 150 out of 1500 photographs for the "Youth and the World" series.
- 13 Glenn G. Willumson, *W. Eugene Smith and the Photographic Essay* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992): 13–20.
- 14 R. Smith Schuneman, ed., *Photographic Communication: Principles, Problems, and Challenges of Photojournalism* (New York: Hastings House, 1972): 91.
- 15 Henri Cartier-Bresson's text for his one-man exhibit at the Louvre in 1955, in the archive of the Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson.
- 16 Michael Jennings, "Agriculture, Industry and the Birth of the Photo Essay in the Late Weimar Republic," *October* 93 (Summer, 2000): 23–56 and Joshua Chuang, "When the Medium is the Message: The Making of Walker Evans' 'American Photographs' and Robert Frank's 'The Americans,'" *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin* (2006): 108–23.
- 17 On the origins and history of Magnum, see Jean Lacouture, "The Founders" and Fred Ritchin, "What is Magnum?" in William Manchester, American Federation of Arts, Eastman Kodak Company, Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Jean Lacouture, and Fred Ritchin, *In Our Time: The World As Seen by Magnum Photographers* (New York: The American Federation of Arts in association with WW Norton & Co, 1989): 47–61 and 417–44.
- 18 Rudolf Janssens and Gertjan Kalf, "Time Incorporated Stink Club: The Influence of *Life* on the Founding of Magnum Photos," in Mick Gidley, ed., *American Photographs in Europe* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1995): 223–6.
- 19 Magnum Stockholder Report, 15 February 1952, in the archive of John Godfrey Morris (henceforth AJGM).
- 20 Letter from Robert Capa to John Godfrey Morris, 23 July 1951, AJGM.
- 21 Hendrik Neubauer, *Black Star: 60 Years of Photojournalism* (Köln: Könemann, 1998): 19–21.
- 22 John Morris, *Get the Picture: A Personal History of Photojournalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998): 11–112.
- 23 Morris went to Idaho with Robert Capa to shoot the first set of pictures for the Magnum series "People are People the World Over" for *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1947. Morris: 113–22.
- 24 "Magnum and Its Markets," 21 June 1954, AJGM.
- 25 Henri Cartier-Bresson, *The Decisive Moment* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1952).
- 26 Robert Capa to Werner Bischof, 7 May 1951, in the archive of Werner Bischof (henceforth AWB).
- 27 Bischof diary entry, July 1952, AWB.
- 28 Report on the State of Magnum, 1 July 1955, AJGM.
- 29 Alison Nordstrom, "On Becoming an Archive," in Steven Hoelscher, ed., *Reading Magnum: A Visual Archive of the Modern World* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013): 21.
- 30 Henri Cartier-Bresson, "Magnum in General," 13 January 1960, AJGM.