The Aura of the Cause: Photographs from the Spanish Civil War

Cary Nelson

One morning of a cold month,
of a dying month, stained with mire and smoke,
a kneeless month, a sad month of siege and misfortune
when through the wet windows of my house
the African jackals were to be heard
howling with rifles and their teeth dripping with blood, then,
when we didn't have any hope other than a gunpowder dream,
when already we believed
that the world was filled only with devouring monsters
and with rages,
then, breaking through the frost of that cold month in Madrid,
in the fog
of that dawn
I saw with these eyes I have, with this heart that observes,
I saw arriving those clear, those dominating combatants, of that thin and hard and mature and ardent brigade
of stone.

Pablo Neruda,
from "Arrival in Madrid of the International Brigade" (1937)

Let me begin with a poem and a pair of shoes. The poem, one of many written in Spain from 1936 to 1938 to honor the International Brigades, I discovered on a long forgotten piece of sixteen-millimeter film that lay untouched for decades in the New York office of the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, the organization formed to assist American veterans, honor their commitment, and continue the antifascist struggle. The film, in the process of being assembled in the spring of 1938, sought contributions from Americans to help fund the return travel of wounded volunteers in the Spanish Civil War, a war that was still under way at the time. Unfinished but structurally complete, the film opens with titles superimposed over photographs from some of the more famous battles in which the International Brigades took part. It concludes by reminding us that many volunteers, like tens of thousands of Spaniards, had already given their lives in this first great struggle between democracy and fascism, and asks those safe at home to help bring back those now too hurt to continue fighting. Along the way, we see numerous beautiful close-ups of American volunteers, and we see them as well taken up in the ordinary daily activities that even a titanic ideological struggle must include—lining up for chow, showering when water could be transported, writing letters home, listening to their leaders give public talks.

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activities of cleaning a rifle or loading a truck or practicing advancing under fire would be recast imaginatively and politically as events on a world historical stage. More so perhaps than many of the rest of the world's citizens, and more so certainly than the vast majority of them, these International Brigaders understood what was at stake in the first armed resistance against Hitler's Condor Legion, Mussolini's Black Shirts, and Franco's fascist cavalry. In a very real sense, then, these photographic emphemera are actually monumental in scale and meaning. And that is one reason to open this discussion with an image whose material monumentality cannot be in doubt.

The image in question dates from the fall of 1937. The city of Madrid was celebrating a year of service by international volunteers. Internationals had first marched through the city's streets in November of 1936 as Franco's columns were moving to encircle it and end the war in one dramatic battle. In contrast to all the headlines in newspapers across the world predicting the Spanish capital would soon fall to the fascists, here were volunteers from numerous countries standing with the Spanish people and confident of a people's victory. Some have claimed misleadingly that the Internationals saved Madrid, which exaggerates the case, but they certainly made a critical difference. They boosted the people's morale, they provided personnel at key points, and those among the internationals with World War I experience gave critical stability and seasoned advice to those young Spaniards who had never held a weapon before. So the city stood, and now Madrid was set to celebrate the anniversary.

There were repeated events through much of that fall in Madrid. On September 5th a celebration for the International Brigades was held in the city's Monumental Cinema. But as the anniversary approached the tempo increased. On Sunday October 31st a mass meeting honoring the International Brigades was held in Madrid's large and ornate Calderon theater. The week before had seen numerous forty-inch-high full color posters go up around the city. Exactly how many full-color posters were designed for the occasion we cannot say with certainty, but my list includes twelve posters specifically designed and printed for the week honoring the Internationals. Moreover, five thousand or more copies of each poster were printed and hung, so we know that the city was festooned with thousands of vibrant images of solidarity with the international volunteers.

There were speeches given, songs sung, dances staged, and all this was reported in newspapers and on the radio. There was also one largely forgotten public honor given to these antifascists from across the globe. A 60-line poem written in their honor was painted on a long cloth banner on a majestic scale and placed on a building in a public square. The display was sponsored by *Socorro Rojo de España*, the Spanish version of International Red Aid, a revolutionary organization that provided assistance to front line hospitals, distributed mail to international volunteers, and produced posters and other propaganda in support of the Republic. The poem, incredibly enough, stood six stories high, and one day, as ordinary Spaniards came by to read it silhouetted against the sky, their attentive mouthing of its lines was recorded on film.

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Some of the readers the cameraman photographed were obviously middle-aged and working class, not the college student audience one might imagine attending to such an event in the United States, say during the Vietnam war when public poetry readings drew large groups of people. Not, of course, that I recall any American poems being turned into virtual skyscrapers, though we have had monumental poetic ephemera on a different scale at frequent points in our own history. In any case, here in Madrid in 1937 it is the people who cross the public square in the course of their daily lives—out to do the day's shopping, on the way to work, off to a meeting—and who stop and look up and work their way carefully through the lines that march down from the clouds to the cobblestone street.

In the film footage that has survived, the poem itself is not legible, but we do not lack wartime poems about the International Brigades from Spain and other countries. Twelve poems, for example, are included in the wartime collection *Homenaje de despedida a las Brigadas Internacionales.* Others are in various books and journals of the period. So we have a sound grasp of the range of rhetoric these poems deployed; we know what the internationals did; and we know what the Spanish people felt about them. We know what meanings texts about the volunteers disseminated. Thus we know, in the larger sense, what people in that square in Madrid will have read and felt. And what they read of there, therefore, is at once their own gratitude and their solidarity with the worldwide popular front. They read of the gift of idealism, determination, and selfless courage that moved some 40,000 foreign nationals to risk their lives in the great cause of the 1930s. And they read of a moment in which their national history became a world stage, the heart of the world as one of their poets put it.

So every ordinary event in those two and a half years in Spain shimmers with implications, reverberates in a web of connotations, positions itself at once in daily life and at the fulcrum of world historical change. The connections take us from image to image in chain of associations that links lives and representations in an especially powerful series of explanations. Take, for example, the other image I promised to discuss at the outset, that pair of shoes.

They are not actually shoes but sandals, *alpargatas*, to use the Spanish designation. Traditional Spanish peasant sandals, they serve in representation and in historical process as figures for the people and their common aims, needs, and collective capacities. *Alpargatas* come in several variations; they generally have hemp soles, but the upper portion can either be a series of cotton straps to wrap around the lower leg or a webbed basket that only covers the ankle. In Catala Roca's famous photo montage poster in black and white, a foot clad in *alpargatas* is poised above a shattered swastika. Already crushed, the swastika's fate, the poster suggests, is guaranteed the moment the people turn their gaze on it. The swastika lies broken in the gutter, where it belongs, shattered atop cobblestones that have their own political connotations, people's weapons repeatedly pried loose from streets in revolution. In Arnold Kerin's Spanish Civil War archive at the University of Illinois, there survives a note authorizing

him to collect thirty pairs of *alpargatas* from the supply room and bring them back to his Lincoln battalion comrades. They were standard summer footwear for the International Brigades, and every time a volunteer put on a pair he stood in the people's shoes and took on their identity and their antifascist duty. So it is not surprising that Kerin, one of a number of Armenian-American volunteers, chose that note as one of the few souvenirs to bring home to the United States. In a certain symbolic sense, the decision to go to Spain, the commitment to risk one's life in the antifascist wager, is sufficiently embodied in the act of slipping one's feet into peasant footgear. The note commemorates it all, says everything in synecdoche.

In another archive at Illinois are a pair of *alpargatas* themselves, worn by American volunteer Frances Feingersh when he went into battle at Brunete in the summer of 1937. Feingersh was wounded at Brunete, shot in the leg, and his blood dripped onto those sandals until they were removed at the first aid station. He never put them on again, but he kept them with him. The following year he carried them across the Pyrenees mountains with him into France, along with a copy of the Catala Roca poster that effectively displays his *alpargatas* with their full symbolic freight. Sixty years later one can just barely discern a few faded purple spots on Feingersh's sandals, in the studious air of their new location in a Rare Book room. Along the bottom of their soles is a thin trace of dust. Faded American blood and a remnant of Spanish earth, meeting on peasant footwear. That again, in a way, speaks to the forces that came together in Spain.

In one of the photographs reproduced here for the first time, *alpargatas* figure again. It is a viscerally shocking image. An American volunteer lies dead in a pool of his own blood at Belchite, awaiting the burial detail. Above his body,

Frances Feingersh's *alpargatas.*
Photo by Cary Nelson

An international volunteer lies dead at Belchite, awaiting the burial detail, September 1937.

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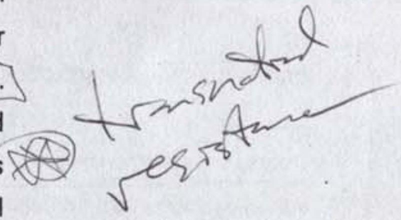
his *alpargatas*-clad comrades walk by; we see only their feet in the photograph, and their feet are a figure for their duty: the battle goes on and so must they. It is not the sort of photograph that would have been printed during the war itself, but it testifies unforgettably, beyond argument, to the sacrifice thousands of international volunteers made in Spain.

No image from this war fails to speak to these larger issues, for the volunteers were, if anything, more right than they knew. As their letters testify repeatedly, they believed fascism put the world in absolute peril; they believed that a world war would follow if Hitler and Mussolini were not stopped. We can hardly take issue with them. They knew that fascism was in some deep way in love with death, and that knowledge took on materiality in Spain as Franco's forces steadily slaughtered villagers on their march toward Madrid. Late in World War II of course we learned the dimensions of the holocaust and realized that the nightmare of Nazism was far worse than even the International Brigades could have feared. More recently, as Gerhard Weinberg points out, we have learned that Hitler planned mass exterminations to depopulate Eastern Europe and expected to murder all British male adults. Based on what we know now, it is not possible to overstate the danger we faced as fascism began to sweep across Europe. So hindsight should lead us to give special honor to the insight these men and women of the International Brigades possessed. Here are the photographs that show them going about the daily business of trying to save the world.

The portraits show them as they were—earnest, serious, hopeful, and often very young. They were as young in many cases as the American recruits who would take up arms in the Second World War but a few years later, but in another way they were very different from most of their countrymen. They were politically committed and endlessly interested in contemporary events. They were also less nationalists than world citizens. They could conceive of international responsibilities and global peril. Europe for many of them, children of immigrants or immigrants themselves, seemed relatively near, not some irrelevant elsewhere that could be safely put out of mind. In a way, they had become what many of us now, more than half a century later, can only yet aspire to—being members of a world community. And that is partly why a certain warranted wonder obtains when we watch them now reading a letter in the trenches or learning to throw a grenade.



The American volunteers were, on average, somewhat younger than many of their European counterparts but they were otherwise typical of the diverse group of international volunteers. The youngest Americans were three eighteen-year-olds, the oldest were fifty-nine and sixty. Over eighty of the volunteers were African Americans, and the International Brigades were entirely integrated. In fact, the Lincoln Battalion was commanded for a time by Oliver Law, an African-American volunteer from Chicago, until he died in battle. It was the first time in American history that an integrated military force was led by an African American officer. Most of the American volunteers were unmarried, although, as their letters in *Madrid 1937* reveal, many had relationships back home they tried to sustain by

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correspondence. Their median age was twenty-seven, their median birth date 1910. About eighteen percent came from New York and most of the rest came from other cities. Perhaps a third were Jews, not surprising in view of their antifascist motivation (Carroll, 15-18). That percentage is roughly accurate for some other national groups as well. Many of the German and Italian volunteers were Jews who saw the Spanish Civil War as the first opportunity to take up arms against fascism.

The American volunteers came from all over the country and from a wide variety of occupations. Larry Kleidman was a seaman, as were Sydney Kaufman and Cecil Cole. Martin Hourihan, Hyman Katz, and Paul Wendorf were teachers. Leo Eloesser was a physician, Ben Gardner a painter, Canute Frankson an auto worker, Joe Dallet a union organizer and steel worker, Ely Sack an accountant, Harold Smith a clerk, Fred Lutz an electrician, Dewitt Parker a statistician, Clifton Amsbury a social worker, Toby Jensky a nurse, Mildred Rackley an artist, Edwin Rolfe a poet and a journalist. Jack Friedman worked on his family's farm in Accord, New York. Many, including John Cookson, Carl Geiser, Don MacLeod, Hank Rubin, and Ted Veltford, were students. MacLeod was an undergraduate in school at Berkeley, Rubin at U.C.L.A. Cookson, born in 1913, was a graduate student in physics at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, just fifty miles east of his family's farm near the town of Cobb. Paul Sigel, twenty-one years old, took his final exams at New York University's School of Engineering just before leaving for Spain. Milton Wolff, who had dropped out of high school but continued to study art intermittently, found odd jobs when possible and socialized with other members of the Bensonhurst, Brooklyn YCL. He would start out as a machine gunner in Spain and end up being the Lincoln Battalion's last commander.

The commitment made by 40,000 international volunteers to defend the Spanish Republic has remained an enduring symbol of selflessness, courage, and idealism. In part that is because the Spanish Civil War amounts to the opening battle of World War II, perhaps the only time in living memory when the world confronted—in fascism and Nazism—something like unqualified evil. The men and women who understood this early on and who chose of their own free will to stand against fascism have thus earned a special status in history. They were not drafted; they volunteered, and they did so long before most of their countrymen realized the world was in danger.

The single most famous Spanish Civil War photograph is without question Robert Capa's September 1936 portrait of a Republican militiaman at the point of death. Hurled backward by the force of the bullet that has just struck his head, his body has not yet given up the gestural memory of his forward motion. Caught in mid-air, his hand still half clinging to his rifle, his leather cartridge boxes still ready at his waist, he seems at once to stride forward and collapse in death. He is eerily in between, at an impossible place of transition between life and death.

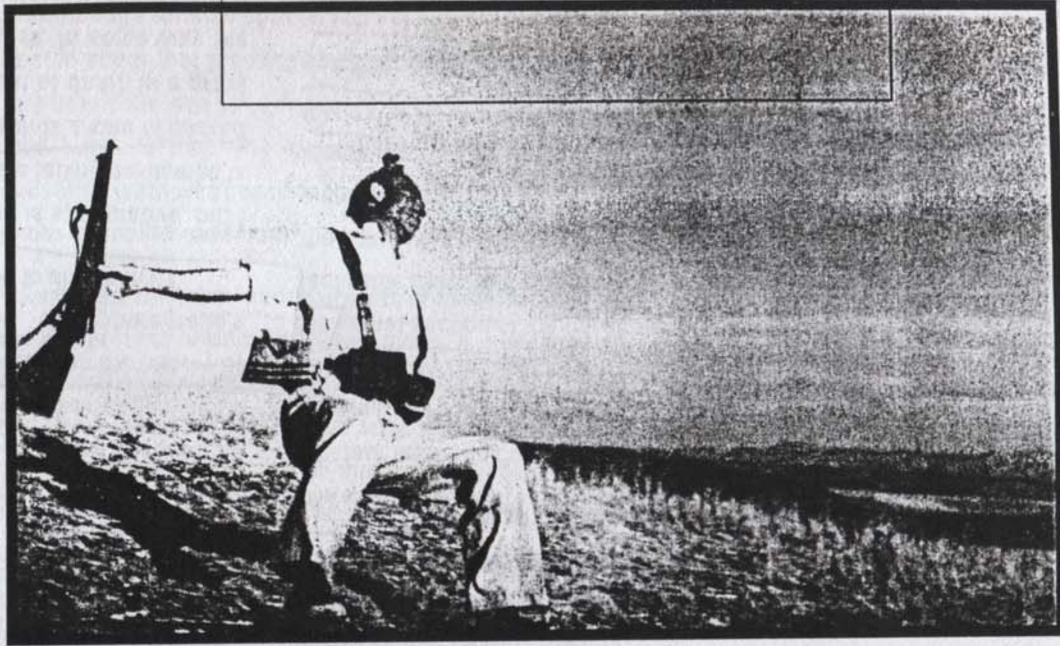
The camera has somehow caught a moment that would ordinarily pass too quickly for human perception. As Philip Knightley has argued, part of the photograph's

allure comes from the sense that the photographer himself had to be at the front to take it, that the photograph was taken from a vantage point of equivalent danger. Vicariously then, I would add, there is no safe place from which to view the photograph either; its in-between-ness gives us uncanny access to that place of danger and transition.

Published first in the French magazine *Vu* in 1936, the photograph was reprinted in *Life* magazine on July 12, 1937. *Life's* awesome circulation—already 1,600,000 only a year after the magazine's debut—guaranteed wide visibility for Capa's "Falling Militiaman." It became an icon for the war and remains one of the most widely known battlefield images in the history of photography. Yet it has also intermittently been a source of controversy, a victim of rumors spread that it is a hoax, a staged event.

No other photograph of Capa's has been questioned in this way, and Capa's own fearlessness, his willingness to risk his life to get a photograph, soon became legendary. Edwin Rolfe's memoir, published here for the first time, makes it clear that the volunteers thought Capa heedless of danger. Indeed it was partly Capa's reputation, as David Mellor points out, that made the Spanish Civil War the point in history where the status of the war photographer changed, becoming linked with risk and proximity to death. The "good" war picture became "the one marked by the making presence of the endangered body of the photographer."

Robert Capa's photograph of a falling militiaman, September 5, 1936.



The official battalion photographers of the International Brigades, whose work is most fully represented here, studiously refused that existential status. They did not needlessly risk their lives to get front-line action photographs, though even photography in the trenches and behind the lines entailed risk. Aerial and artillery bombing of reserve positions was a standard military tactic, since eliminating replacement troops and supplies was one good way to win a battle. The brigade photographers recorded men moving up to the front, and they were with the men in front-line trenches, though they did not typically go over the top and enter the field of direct fire. But there were other reasons not to focus on the heat of battle. Images of loved ones amidst exploding trench mortars would not have been a kindness for those at home. More importantly, the unifying force of antifascism, with its world-spanning

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solidarity, made every Spanish Civil War photograph in some ways miraculous, extraordinary, historically important. As an icon of the worldwide struggle between democracy and fascism, every Spanish Civil War photograph was a battlefield photo. The battalion photographers, who followed the men and often accompanied military leaders and dignitaries, had a broader focus than news photographers, who preferred battlefield shots or shots of bomb damage or civilian casualties in the recognizable cities of Madrid and Barcelona for mass circulation newspapers and photographic magazines like *Regard, Picture Post, Vu,* and *Life.* The battalion photographers were there to record the full story of the International Brigades, a story that electrified even ordinary images of daily life.

Yet the battalion photographs have one important point of connection with Capa's "Falling Militiaman," for Capa's photograph too records no historical or news event of obvious importance. It is neither a coronation nor an assassination; it does not show us a damn breaking under flood waters or German bombers attacking the Basque holy city of Guernica. It offers us time slowed as one anonymous soldier passes from life to death. Why then the history of politically motivated attacks on the photograph's authenticity? Why the determination to discredit it?

My own explanation for this history is speculative, but I offer it nonetheless. It is because the falling militiaman is a *Republican* soldier. The photograph is a kind of sacred relic, transporting us to the moment of death in a great struggle between light and darkness. In some way the photograph suggests that only a soldier of the Republic could be photographed in this way, that only the transcendent nature of the *cause* of antifascism makes possible the representation of this uncanny transitional moment. The aura of the cause glows in this image which incarnates the ultimate gift of self-sacrifice. Through the transit point of the militiaman's eternally suspended body pass all the dead of the Republic. Fascist soldiers die, certainly, but Republican soldiers apparently hover for a blinding moment like angels half in life and half in death. More than heroism or visceral brutality is on display here then; we see the power of virtue on one side of the conflict. Once it gathered renown, then, the image had to be attacked, for in some ways it showed us the sacrifice only a Loyalist soldier could make. No comparable transcendence was possible, say, for a German or Italian conscript plummeting to earth from his plane. Capa's photograph imaged the Republic itself in its archetypal soldier.

More recently, Mario Brotons, a Spanish veteran and amateur historian completed the research necessary to give Capa's falling militiaman a name. He turns out to be the only Republican soldier to die on September 5th in that section of the Cordoba front. There were in fact some clues in the photograph all along, including the somewhat odd design of his cartridge boxes; they were only made for a particular anarchist militia. His identity has now been established—Federico Borrell Garcîa, known to his friends as "Taino," a twenty-four year old anarchist mill worker from the town of Alcoy.

Borrell Garcîa was affiliated with the CNT, one of Spain's major left labor unions. He had joined the

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attack on the military barracks in Alcoy on August 3, 1936, and on August 8 headed for the front as part of a column of *milicianos* from Alcoy. He received his baptism under fire on August 20 on a mountain hilltop near Cordoba, when he and his comrades captured a machine-gun nest after hurling dynamite at it for two hours. On September 5, at the battle of Cerro Muriana, he was one of about six hundred fifty defenders of the Loyalist positions. As he stepped out of a trench he was immediately hit by machine gun fire. Capa was there and just had time to press his shutter release and take the photograph.

Of course the worldwide reputation the photograph acquired was only possible because the Spanish Civil War began at almost exactly the point when photo journalism became a mass phenomenon. War photography itself had its most successful founding acts in Matthew Brady's American Civil War work, but in Brady's time nothing like the 1930s infrastructure for disseminating images existed. New York's *Daily Herald* began publishing halftones in 1880, but it would still be decades before photographs became a primary narrative method for transmitting the news. That development arrived with Stefan Lorant's *Munich Illustrated News* in the Weimar Republic in 1930, but journalistic freedom in Germany ended a few years later when Hitler came to power. The next move was by Lucien Vogel in France, who published a photo essay on the Spanish Civil War in *Vu* in 1936. Partly inspired by Vu, Henry Luce founded *Life* in 1936 a few months after the start of the Spanish Civil War. Luce printed huge runs on special high-speed presses, using coated paper that produced large crisp images. As soon as a new issue was set, *Life's* printing presses ran twenty-four hours a day. The communicative power vastly exceeded what was possible on newsprint, and the age of photo journalism was born.

Meanwhile, technical improvements in cameras and film since the First World War had made a new sort of documentary photography possible. Film was more sensitive and much faster, shutter speeds substantially faster, and cameras much smaller; the 35-mm camera redefined the scope of war photography. The staged (or restaged) war photograph was no longer a technical necessity, though it was still sometimes politically, aesthetically, or historically desirable; action shots became a realistic option. All this combined to help make a new market for photojournalism available to photographers in Spain. It was not yet the diverse and extensive market it would become in the 1940s and 1950s, but it was enough to keep a number of photographers employed recording the war. As a result the Spanish Civil War became the first war to be known to the general public primarily by way of its photographic representation. From Capa's fallen militiaman to Agustí Centelles's image of Barcelona assault guards firing at the insurgents from behind a barrier of fallen horses to his raw, almost shattering portraits of women mourning bombing victims, there are photographs that seem wedded to our understanding of the war. As it happens, however, most of Europe's more famous photojournalists never made it to Spain; that may be due in part to the relative infancy of this new market. But the market provided an opportunity for a

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number of young photographers to become famous because of the work they did in the war.

It would propel to fame one Andre Friedmann, a Hungarian, born in 1913, who fled to Paris to escape the Nazis in 1933 and took the name Robert Capa. There he met the photographer Gerda Taro; they married and worked together in Spain. At the battle of Brunete she lost her life on the job, and the abstract notion of the war photographer at risk became very much a reality. Capa's delicate dedication of his book-length collection of their Spanish Civil War photographs *Death in the Making* reads: "For Gerda Taro, who spent one year at the Spanish front, and who stayed on."

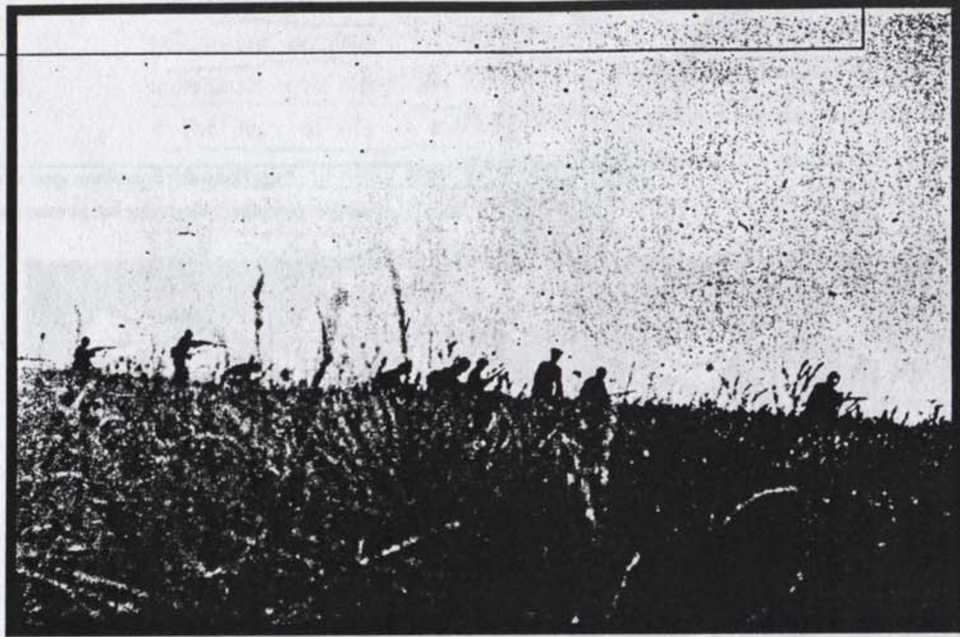
I include two Capa photographs here because of his special interest in and commitment to the International Brigades. In fact a number of Capa photographs of the internationals in action have never been reprinted since the war, and many received only the crudest newsprint reproduction at the time. Recovering all those images will have to wait for another project, but it should certainly be done.

Meanwhile, no discussion of Spanish Civil War photography should omit mention of the other major photojournalists who documented the war. Alfonso Sánchez Portela and Agustí Centelles, the first working primarily in Madrid and the second working in Barcelona and throughout Catalonia, are the two Spaniards with the most important body of work. Centelles, a young communist, fled to France when Spain fell, taking with him a trunk with an astonishing 4,000 wartime negatives. He could not at the time realize what an important historical archive he was carrying with him; his main motive was to save the people he photographed from fascist reprisals. As Jerald Green tells the story, within a few years Centelles was working with the French underground. When the Nazis began to close in on him, he returned to Spain secretly, leaving his photographs with a peasant couple in Carcassonne. In 1976, thirty-two years later, less than a year after Franco's death, he returned to France to see if his negatives had survived. The peasant couple had died, but their children handed him the same wood box he had left decades earlier, and his powerful photographs began to be exhibited in Spain.

Among the other notable photographers in Spain were two young progressive Germans, Hans Namuth and Georg Reisner, who were in Barcelona to cover the antifascist Olympics when the fascist generals staged their revolt. They stayed in Spain to photograph the war. Finally, one must mention David Seymour, a Polish-born photographer who came to Spain from France and eventually settled in the United States. Some of these photographers paid a price for the physical and political risks they took. Reisner took his own life as he was due to be sent to a concentration camp in 1940. Capa died when a land mine exploded in Indo-China in 1954, while Seymour was killed by a sniper in Suez in 1966. Namuth, however, went on to a long career, and Centelles lived to be widely honored in his homeland.

The Aura of the Cause, however, does not, with the partial exception of Capa, cover the work of these

American volunteer Oliver Law (third from the right, wearing a military cap) in action at Villanueva de la Cañada in July of 1937.
Photograph by Sam Walters. (CN)



The result was a few remarkable photographs, most notably two I reproduce here. In one of those photographs Oliver Law, a native of Chicago, leads a group of Lincolns across a wheat field before the town of Villanueva de la Cañada in July of 1937. Law, third from the right and in command, is the only one wearing an officer's cap. Several of the men are crouching and firing at the enemy, though Law himself stands tall and exposed. But they are all seen at a distance, from the other side of the field, almost but not quite reduced to tiny stick figures or silhouettes against the sky. The effect is almost painterly, as if quick brush strokes alone suggest the details of rifles, helmets, cartridge boxes, and the animation of battle. Like Capa's falling militiaman, these men too are transitional images, though in a different way, for they are halfway between real individuals and abstract icons of men at war. It is as if their bodies are in the process of being taken up into the narrative of the war, as if those who join this last good fight give up their individual names to become emblems of a larger struggle.

Perhaps that inexorable absorption into the grand narrative of the war helps explain the fondness the Internationals felt for group photographs, a number of which I reproduce here. There were no lack of individual portraits in Spain,

named photographers. This is mainly a book about the almost unknown photography of the International Brigades themselves. Most of the photographs cannot be assigned to any individual photographer. Among the few exceptions are the photographs by Sam Walters, an American volunteer. Ordinary soldiers were not actually supposed to have cameras; there was too much danger of militarily sensitive front-line photos falling into the hands of the enemy when men were captured or mail was intercepted. Walters, however, had carried a camera with him when he hiked across the Pyrenees, and when a border guard and an anarchist got in an argument over whether it should be confiscated, he managed to extricate the camera from them and hold onto it in Spain.

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especially of civilian and military leaders, but most portraits of individual volunteers were small snapshots used for military or political identity cards. For the most part the identity the internationals chose to insert themselves into and commemorate was a group identity. In effect, groups designated by ethnicity, nationality, or military unit became simulacra of the entire popular front. There was a practical use for such photos elsewhere, of course, namely publication in newspapers and brochures back home, where they publicized the maximum number of volunteers

Members of the Abraham Lincoln battalion pose with visitors in April of 1938.

and gave a reassuring sense that the social cohesion of the home country persisted amidst the radical difference of a foreign war. But the substantial number of both small and large group photos—there are dozens and dozens of them among the thousands of photographs in our major archive at Brandeis University—suggests something more than the usual fraternal wartime platoon grouping. These groups were *who these men became* by going to Spain, the material form of the worldwide alliance against fascism.

The wartime publication of group photos in brigade books and newspapers, their display on bulletin boards, and their distribution to individual volunteers, reinforced and foregrounded the collective nature of the Spanish experience. Nor were individuals positioned in only one group. A machine-gun crew would pose for a photo, and the leaders of several machine-gun crews would also commemorate their collectivity. But the individual members of the crew would also rearrange themselves as national or ethnic groups that cut across military units. And when a crew member joined a soccer team or found himself in the hospital those occasions would be recorded in group photographs as well. Visiting writers or political figures typically posed with multiple groups to celebrate and commemorate the occasion. And every unit of military organization—from the smallest units to the battalion and brigade level—regularly gathered its members together to record them on film. Thus individuals could well appear in several altogether different group photos, suggesting not a fixed organizational identity but rather a multiple and somewhat fluid collectivity. Indeed people regularly changed jobs in the course of a year, sometimes several times, so that few military groups had any long term stability.

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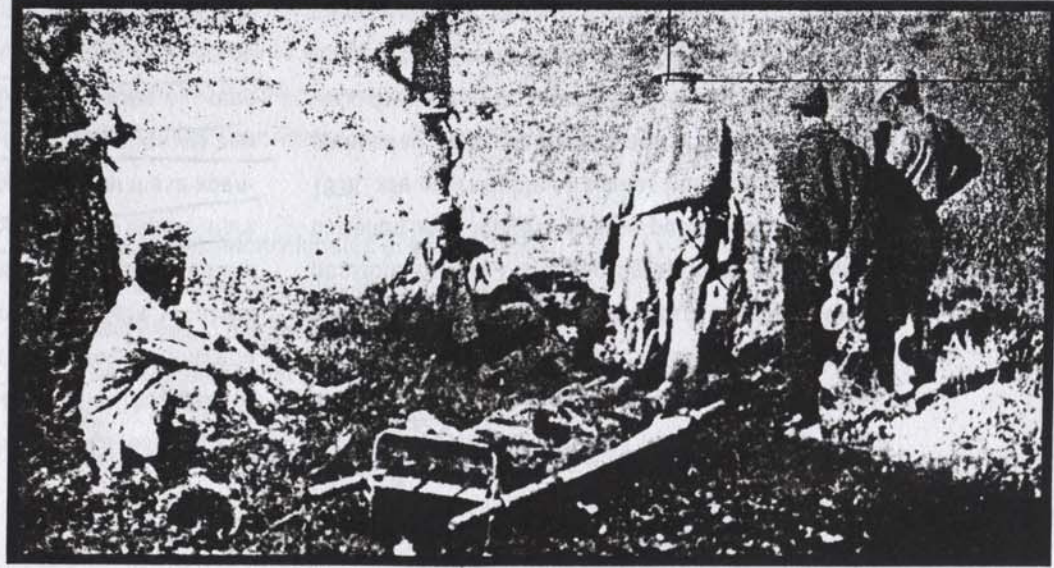
A dead volunteer, photographed by Vladimir Stefanovich at the time of the Brunete offensive, July 1937.

The one place the volunteers become individuals again is in death, as if the loss of life is most tragically the loss of a special collective agency. Sam Walters took one photograph of a dead volunteer, and the official battalion photographers took a number of them. Those were, as one might expect, among the photographs not published during the war; indeed, except for Walters's image of Jack Shirai's burial detail and occasional photos of dead fascists, I have never seen portraits of the dead in the private collections of international volunteers. But battalion photographers did take them from time to time, and they were taken with a care and clarity that makes them unforgettable. These are among the photographs here, now at Brandeis, that have been in a sealed archive since the end of the war. They are only now available to students, faculty, and other researchers, and they have never been exhibited anywhere, neither during the war nor since.

In Walters's photograph of Jack Shirai's burial the surrounding men seem slumped over and subdued. Shirai, a Japanese-American, had been especially popular, and his cook's job could hardly have been more important, particularly in Spain where heavy reliance on olive oil made it difficult for some of the men to digest the food. But Shirai wanted a combat assignment and lost his life as a machine-gunner. In the photograph, Shirai's body lies face down on the stretcher, an almost intolerable confirmation of his reduction to insensible flesh. A heavy shadow covers half the image and seems almost to be still in motion, spreading across the rest of the men. Walters kept that roll of film for decades without developing it, so the photograph remained unknown and unpublished.

Some of the other images of dead volunteers, inevitably, are of bodies



July 11, 1937, burial of Jack Shirai, popular Japanese-American cook for the Lincolns, who requested a combat assignment and became a machine gunner.
Photograph by Sam Walters. (CN)

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ravaged beyond recognition, but in some cases the dead remain intact, open-eyed, and recognizable. They gaze at us across the gulf opened by their absolute personal and historical commitment. They ask us who we are, what we have done, where we stand. Over and over again members of the 1930s generation who did not go to Spain report years of doubt, guilt, and self-recrimination. Whether these open-eyed dead address us with pleas or accusations we can only say by asking ourselves and interrogating our own politics. It is left to us to give a name to the gaze they cast on us. They can say nothing on their own, so the challenge is to discover what these images enable us to say to ourselves.

There is of course one other reason to publish some of these photographs here—to remind us of the brutal reality the volunteers faced, especially on days when casualties were high, and thereby to counteract the more gratifying romanticization of the war that so many of the survivors reject. Yet I could not bring myself to publish the photographs of the more visibly disfigured dead. Thus I did not print a photograph of a field scattered with broken bodies, or the photo of the headless, eviscerated torso that ALBA owns. Nor could I publish the closeup of Canadian volunteer Jim Wolf as he lay dead or dying in the church at Belchite, half his jaw and part of his neck blown away by a grenade. As Victor Hoar tells Wolf's story, just before the photo was taken, he gave his cigarettes to a comrade, observing that he was no longer able to smoke (137).

In fact the overwhelming majority of battalion photographs never saw publication during the war. The various language versions of the brigade newspapers, *Volunteer for Liberty* and its parallel publications in other languages, did regularly issue official battalion photographs, but wartime publishing conditions often limited them to tiny smudged prints of almost the worst possible quality. The photographs in the several battalion book-length memoirs, published in Madrid in 1938, are regrettably of similar bad quality. We are pleased to have acquired several of these images and published them in accurate versions. But far more photographs were taken by International Brigades photographers than were ever used during the war. Had the war taken a different course, no doubt many of these photographs would have been published over the years. But in the chaos of Spain's defeat and the long cold war that absorbed so many of the ensuing decades, these photographs, numbering in the thousands, remained inaccessible and unknown. ALBA publishes a selection of them here for the first time.

The sheer number of photographs, along with the variety of subjects they take up, reinforce the already evident conclusion that the International Brigades were supremely conscious of both the immediate importance of their work and its potential long-term historical significance. By the spring of 1937 the IB was already involved in tracking and telling its own history in multiple ways. The base level of ongoing historiography occurred in the letters home the individual volunteers wrote; in notices and comments placed on wall newspapers in the fields, towns, and hospitals; and in all the ephemeral and less than ephemeral mimeographed newsletters and printed

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pamphlets and newspapers issued by various services and battalions. Photographs were included in all these forms of communication; they were stuffed in letters and pinned up on wall newspapers and printed in all IB publications. They served to activize the home audience and reinforce the morale and collective identity of the volunteers. The telling and retelling of the ongoing story of the International Brigades occurred at all levels of organization. The medical services and transport divisions told their stories with texts and images, as did the various national groups organized in battalions. Formal historical commissions were organized in 1937, and they began to plan the series of ambitious books that appeared later that year and in 1938, beginning with *Un ano de las brigadas internacionales* in 1937, which was largely a photo album, and continuing with such important brigade histories as *The Book of the XV Brigade* and *Le Livre de la 15th Brigade Internationale sur le Front d'Espagne*, published in 1938, which included both photographs and essays. Had the war not begun to go badly that year, we would have seen still more of these books be published.

The rapid appearance of illustrated histories of the various international battalions is partly explained by the special requirements of creating and sustaining this unique army. Thousands of volunteers from some fifty countries had gathered together in Spain to defend an ideal. They thought of themselves not merely as an army but also as a kind of community, almost an alternative social order. The job of the brigade photographers was to record the whole culture of the internationals—not only for posterity but also for the men and women themselves. Imaging that culture was an integral part of the continuing process of *inventing* it. Moreover, when the men returned from battle they needed to be reminded of the collective morale they had built in training, of the villagers they had come to love, of their solidarity with an international movement. The brigade photographs simultaneously helped reinforce the experience in Spain and establish its history for future generations.

Harry Randall became chief photographer in charge of the fifteenth International Brigade's photographic department after he arrived in Spain in June of 1937. He supervised a mobile photographic lab that followed the moving fronts and kept one or two photographers with the units at all times. That often spread photographers rather thinly, leaving most of the action uncovered. Meanwhile, operating a mobile lab meant not only securing paper and film, which was always very difficult during the war, but also maintaining access to electricity and running water, a major challenge in the field. In an article published at the end of 1938 Randall describes some of the challenges he faced:

> We are frequently located in a town some distance from any other Brigade unit. Where and what to eat then becomes a problem. It has happened that every day one or another of us would have to hitchhike to the *intendencia* for rations. Which meant that much less time for working in the lab . . . . Of the two photographers

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who take pictures for the brigade, at least one is always with the Brigade itself, and whenever possible both are at the front when we are in action. The finest set of action pictures we have ever had were taken by Tony Drossel when we captured Quinto and Belchite.

But unfortunately, the best part of these negatives were lost by a comrade who "borrowed" them to have copies made in Valencia. Ever since this tragic experience. we have guarded our negatives like a treasure trove.

We have a fine set of photographs of the Brigade at Teruel and its surrounding regions. Our best camera, and all the photos taken at Belchite, Albalate, and Hijar during the retreat in March were lost at Alcauiz when the fascists took that town. During the rest of the retreat, Comrade Katine and I were without film, and were, naturally, cut off from our base of supplies. We found ourselves, accordingly, acting as runners, ammunition carriers, guards, observers—anything that was needed during those chaotic days. Comrades [William] Oderaka and Drossel managed to save our most important laboratory equipment, and they brought all our files and records through to safety . . . . Then the moment came when we prepared to attack. Ben Katine took a fine set of pictures of our comrades crossing the river in boats and rafts.

Despite these near impossible conditions and the loss of many hundreds of photographs, thousands of Brigade photographs survived the war. ALBA owns, for example, over four hundred photographs taken by a Yugoslavian volunteer, Major Vladimir Stefanovich. He followed the Fifteenth International Brigade while it prepared for the Brunete offensive and also took snapshots of peasant life in the small towns where the volunteers lived. His photographs are sometimes rather formally composed, as when he captures an image of large pottery jugs shattered by enemy bombing, or when he records activities at a village's central water trough. Even in the midst of the dislocation and violence of the war, Stefanovich's eye is drawn to images that confirm the beauty of these country communities.

His photographs thus bear witness to the affection the internationals felt for their Spanish comrades and for the ordinary people they struggled to protect. Moreover, they show that the internationals, while preparing for war, could also catch glimpses of what life in these villages was like when they were at peace. The photographs display a stark contrast between community and devastation. There are no images to mediate between these alternatives of life and death. Between these absolute alternatives, seeking to bar the transformation from one category to the other, stood the people's army and the internationals themselves. Like the recurrent real world visions they depict, these images helped structure the dichotomous value system by which the volunteers—and their sympathizers across the globe—lived

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through and understood this period. The village communities, sharing field and water well, testify to what democracy can sustain and foster; the ruined buildings and the bodies of children are the consequences of fascism.

Part of what Stefanovich's photographs show us reinforces the familiar terms of popular front discourses, but in their evocation of the material life of the countryside they also display some of what we could not learn from any other source. For that reason I have not attempted in *The Aura of the Cause* to assemble a narrative history of the war, moving from battle to battle from 1936 through the opening months of 1939. That kind of account is available elsewhere, and the photographs that would constitute its visual equivalent are not necessarily the most interesting and informative images from the war. The approaches to Villanueva de la Cañada or Brunete, both towns where North Americans fought, are not in fact dramatically different from one another. Nor, with the exceptions of University City or Jarama, where some remarkable deep and arched trenches were eventually carved out of earth or stone, is one sandbagged trench particularly different from another. On the other hand, one stunning photograph of a trench vigil shows a North American volunteer, rifle in hand, standing guard while two of his comrades read books in the sheltered space he oversees. One man stands guard to protect the right two others have to read in peace. It is uncannily a figure for many of the values the Republic sought to sustain and that drew some 40,000 international volunteers to its defense, from its literacy campaigns to freedom of the press.

Similarly, there are many training photographs I could have published to establish the full routine of the International Brigades' version of boot camp. But here and there an image tells us something more than we expect. Thus a beautiful shot of a calisthenics class for new volunteers, each man holding his rifle aloft, shows us young bodies physically unharmed and perfect in their innocent enthusiasm, more perfect, alas, than the weapons they hold. The brutal military engagements, with their sometimes appalling casualty rates, are yet to come; it is the moment before the fall into mud and death and heroism and exhaustion. Nothing, on the other hand, could speak more incontrovertibly to the frequent poverty of International Brigade weapons and supplies than the photograph of a gritty IB armory in the field just before the Ebro offensive in 1938; the armory is repairing and assembling weapons few of us would be eager to count on for our survival. At a brigade-level observation post, on the other hand, we see binoculars of a size and quality rarely available in Spain. Certainly equipment of this sort did not make it down to battalion level. But even at Brigade level, as we see from the photograph, keeping warm did not mean climbing into a crisp new parka; it meant finding a blanket and wrapping it around your shoulders.

Most of the photographs are grouped into broad topics that offer combinatory metanarratives of the war. Thus village and metropolitan images from different times and places are assembled to take us through one typical journey from peace to war, a journey repeated hundreds of times from 1936 to 1939 in Spain and then over and over again for the rest of Europe for the next half decade. "In Training and at Rest: Daily Life in the International Brigades" assembles

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many of the activities necessary in camp and in the field before battle began—from calisthenics to building grass huts for shelter, from loading mortars to constructing tank traps. It also shows the internationals at play, in a boxing match and at a high jump contest; after some battles, this kind of recreation was vital in rebuilding morale. A section of individual portraits, "From Fifty-two Countries: The Face of the International Volunteer," focuses primarily on individual portraits; I emphasize volunteers from North America and Great Britain because that is where the strength of our archive lies. Then "Group Portraits: Commemorating Collective Identities" gathers representative group photographs from among the hundreds taken during the war; these group photographs, paradoxically, preserve part of what was distinctive about the Spanish experience. Finally, "Toward Combat: Brunete's Summer Cauldron and Teruel's Frigid Winter," collects images from various military campaigns to create one synthetic story of the war. The opening photograph shows us that IB armory preparing weapons for battle. Then we move toward the front in photographs from different campaigns: the internationals march toward the front and board trains in 1937; they cross the Ebro river in rowboats in the summer of 1938; and they hike across frozen fields toward Teruel in the winter of 1937-38. They dig trenches rapidly, as they did everywhere they went, and then they go over the top across the field of battle. Some are wounded, some killed, but enemy troops are also captured, and sometimes whole towns and cities end up in government hands for a time. The images in this wartime collage sequence end by foretelling victory, not because the war ended that way, as it certainly did not, but because the Spanish people, decades later, finally obtained their democracy after Franco's death in 1975.

Many of the photographs along the way give formal expression to elements of the war we have mostly forgotten or never known. We see North American and British volunteers at athletic contests during a spring 1938 fiesta. We see three Chinese volunteers gathered together for a formal portrait at an IB hospital. We see a group of internationals looking up in joy to see their own planes overhead, meaning that death will not rain down on them that day. Slightly out of focus, the group's features blur into an essential archetype of personal and political ecstasy. We also see moments of humor: an African American volunteer pretends to read a Yiddish newspaper; volunteers mount slogans on rafts and float them down to fascist positions; a practice assault on a tank decorated with a swastika is conducted not with a molotov cocktail but merely with an empty wine bottle. And here and there circumstances produce an unpredictable but memorable excess of effects, as when a distinctly utilitarian roadside truck depot is aestheticized by its reflection in a pool of water. Some of these images will surprise even those well informed about the war.

Except for knowledge gleaned from the photographs themselves, sometimes aided by a magnifying glass, the factual information in the captions was recorded during the war. My sources are multiple, and sometimes a single caption, brief as it may be, draws on more than

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one resource. The first source is captioned photographs in wartime books and newspapers, including *Volunteer for Liberty*, which was edited by Edwin Rolfe and others at IB headquarters in Madrid and Barcelona. But special mention must be made of the International Brigades archive at Moscow's Center for the Preservation and Documentation of Recent History. They have the photographs and documents assembled by the IB historical commission through much of the war and organized into an archive by international volunteers just before Spain fell to Franco. The existence of this archive, denied for years, was acknowledged after the fall of the Soviet Union, and scholars have now been given access to it. In some cases unidentified photographs in ALBA's possession for many years were duplicated in Moscow but with wartime captions present. That has made meaningful publication of these images possible for the first time.

Among the images now captioned for us are a number of photographs of individual volunteers. As recently as the late 1980s I was able to get a good deal of help from survivors identifying people in photographs, but that is now increasingly difficult. Where I have relied on sixty-year-old memories, I have followed the practice of only accepting an identification when it is offered independently by three different people. For it is often extraordinarily hard to recognize individuals and identification errors are quite frequent. A volunteer returning from two weeks in battle will often look very different from what he looked like beforehand, to say nothing of what he looked like as a new recruit. But the names recorded during the war and preserved in Moscow seem consistently accurate; that has enabled me to present a selection of portraits that include not only well known leaders but also a number of less famous volunteers. To a small degree, then, *The Aura of the Cause* continues the work begun in Spain.

The majority of photographs in ALBA's collection were brought back or mailed home by the volunteers themselves. Over the years both veterans and their family members donated photographs to the archives, sometimes annotated and sometimes not. Often the photographs the veterans had were tiny contact prints, and one of the unpredictable things about working with these small images is to discover which ones will and will not still look good after being rephotographed and enlarged. What aura these images have does indeed survive mechanical reproduction, in large measure because of the connotative force of the historical context they evoke.

That helps explain why often the subject matter of International Brigade photographs is at least superficially at odds with the impact the image seems to have. Consider the photograph opposite the opening page of my essay. It is May Day 1938, and the Lincolns, far from recovered from the devastating losses of the Great Retreats of March, are in the midst of festivities to rebuild morale. They are also working hard to integrate a number of young Spanish soldiers into the battalion. A delegation of Spanish union members visits them in the field; in doing so connections are made, obvious to all, with all previous May Day

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celebrations, between labor's long history of struggle and the present struggle against fascism. The Lincolns line up on a piece of farm land become parade field; the delegates are in the foreground, the Lincolns tiny figures pressed almost against the tree line at the back of the image. The accidents of light, shadow, composition, and exposure then set about disseminating other possible meanings and connections. In the background, in the far left, survive bits and pieces of those terraced fields that alone make the Ebro hills farmable. On the right, a steep hillside, underexposed, spills down toward the darkly shadowed trees, its whitened face as much resembling clouds as earth. The contrasts of light and dark, slope and level, horizontal and angular line, the massing forms of nature versus the tiny human figures, all these combine to evoke the dichotomies of the perilous conflict these men had taken up. Everything it might (or might not) mean to be human was at stake in the struggle against fascism, nothing less. These tiny figures were the men and women who realized that first. And the image itself seems to open up onto terrains of nature and history wider than any technology could hope to capture. Indeed, the photograph I am looking at as I write my essay is but a two-inch contact print. I shall see it larger when the book is printed.

When veterans did have enlargements, in fact, they also tended to be small, perhaps two by three inches. Relatively few negatives made it back from the war, though there are exceptions. Sam Walters brought back one role of film that had several images on it he had no eagerness to face, including the image of Jack Shirai's burial published here. So he put aside the film and put off printing it; fifty-some years later he decided it was time to see what he had photographed, and so he did. Edwin Rolfe brought back about two hundred small prints and an equal number of contact prints, some of them captioned; American volunteer John Tisa brought back about 90 negatives he had taken himself, though unfortunately he never labelled them. Both Rolfe and Tisa worked on *Volunteer for Liberty*, which gave them access to images at International Brigades headquarters, and Tisa worked with the historical commission to assemble records at the end of the war. Some of the prints actually used in the *Volunteer* clearly ended up in the Moscow archive, as evidenced by one irregularly cropped image that Rolfe published in the *Volunteer* and that is now at the Center for the Preservation and Documentation of Recent History. Rolfe and Tisa also had regular access to the mails in Madrid and Barcelona and a place to live where they could collect images in quantity. Men in the field were lucky to hold onto what could fit in a shirt pocket. Rolfe himself retained no photographs from the Ebro campaign, when he was in the field, though he was able to save a small pocket-sized diary. But a volunteer who swam the Ebro river naked in the Great Retreats was not likely to have a photo album with him on the other side. It is in short remarkable that we have as many images as we do; in publishing them we are doing what the IB themselves would have done had not history overwhelmed them.

I have tried throughout to achieve the best quality and most accurate reproductions possible. During the war

itself that was sometimes impossible and at other times not the intention. When Capa published *Death in the Making* in 1938, with his fallen militiaman on its jacket, he used uncoated paper and aimed for a gritty, news photograph realism that involved leaving dust spots and other imperfections of the printing process intact. On the other hand, when the press department of the Spanish Embassy in London issued *The Spanish People's Fight for Liberty* in 1937, probably the Republic's most famous book of photographs, they adopted a distinctive form of retouching—inking in outlines and facial features to increase the drama of the photographs and make for a more compelling meeting of the gaze of the viewer and the person photographed. I find the results in the latter case more than a little disturbing, but their aim after all was to save their country by any means available. My aim is different—to make this period live again and to make the authenticity of these images as persuasive as possible. So I have limited retouching to eliminating dust spots and blemishes from three photographs. But many of these photographs had no public presence during the war. Many were never published during the war and have not been published since; they were no doubt seen by brigade historians just before the end of the war, but except for that the events portrayed were often witnessed by more people than saw the photographic record of them. Again, had the war continued or the war been won by the Republic, however, no doubt some of these images would have been published in 1939 or thereafter.

The battalion and brigade photographs published here are thus part of that massive and still unfinished activist and historical project. They give us the first intimate pictorial access to daily life in the volunteer army that made history in the great struggle of the 1930s. They still have vital lessons to teach us, lessons about collective responsibility, lessons about commitment to the social good, lessons about selflessness and courage, lessons about politics and identity. The story of the International Brigades is not only a story about the past but also a lesson about who we can be and what we can become now. The Abraham Lincoln Brigade archives is proud to help preserve that story and to disseminate its lessons to present and future generations.

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