The 20th century was the century of the refugee. In 1999, the UN reported that one in 214 people on the planet—30 million in total—had been forced to flee violence and persecution. The massive displacement of 500,000 Spanish Republicans in 1939, spanning years’ worth of intense relief work by Lincoln vets and other Republican sympathizers, was the first major refugee crisis in the world to be widely covered by the visual media.

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Most importantly, the hundreds of thousands of Spanish refugees needed help, and urgently so. The images and reports coming from southern France were alarming. French authorities had only reluctantly opened the border to the fleeing Spaniards. Upon entering France, refugees were treated like criminals. Possessions were confiscated, families separated. Most men, women, and children—weak, wounded, sick, demoralized—ended up in improvised camps where living conditions were dismal. In the first months some 15,000 died.

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The birth of the modern refugee

As Susan Sontag wrote in Regarding the Pain of Others, the Spanish Civil War was the first “media war,” the first armed conflict “to be witnessed (‘covered’) in the modern sense: by a corps of professional photographers at the lines of military engagement and in the towns under bombardment, whose work was immediately seen in newspapers and magazines in Spain and abroad.” The Spanish conflict was also the first time that the human consequences of war—a new kind of war, moreover, with city bombardments and large-scale civilian casualties—became the subject of extensive visual press coverage. Capa, Chim, and others shot more than just battle scenes: from the very beginning, they felt the need to register the conflict’s many civilian victims. And few images proved as heart-wrenching as those of the thousands of Spanish men, women, and children who were forced to flee their homes, beginning with the Nationalist advances in Andalucia in the first months of the war (among Capa’s and Taro’s first photos from Spain are their portraits of refugees from Málaga, published in September 1936), leading up to the mass exodus into France of early 1939. Scenes that would later become sadly familiar to news readers around the globe—long columns of displaced people carrying their belongings; emaciated but combative men being herded into makeshift camps; anonymous victims looking into the camera from behind a barbed-wire fence—were widely distributed for the first time in 1936-39 by photographers covering Spain. If the 20th century saw the emergence of the modern refugee, the Spanish Civil War marks his visual birth. 

“We saw Spain Die” by Almudena Grandes, 2006

Mr. Adamson: “As I understand you, your organization has nothing to do with politics; is that right?”

Rev. Brooks: “Sure. That is sort of a trick question. Politics is something that pervades the whole of life, as we think religion pervades the whole of life. It impinges on you here and there and you cannot escape it. If you mean political activity, we do not have any political activity.”

—Testimony of Rev. Howard L. Brooks, acting Executive Director of the Unitarian Service Committee before the House Un-American Activities Committee, Oct. 21, 1946.

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“It’s difficult to work under such a gaze.”

As Paul Preston explained in his recent book, We Saw Spain Die, Continued on page 8
suffering that others must endure.” Capa—a displaced leftist Jew himself, after all—has a hard time accepting his passive role; but it is also clear that he hopes his images will sway someone else to take action. If the girl’s gaze made him uncomfortable, he knew that a photograph of that gaze could move thousands of viewers. Given their sympathy for the Republican cause, it is not surprising that photographers and filmmakers were quite willing to let relief organizations use their images of refugees to raise awareness and relief funds among the public. In the framework of a leaflet or ad campaign, the moral dimension of the images, often left fuzzy in the press coverage, was suddenly crystal clear: right next to them was a direct appeal to viewers’ conscience and a clear recipe for action. “80,000 children look to us,” says an early leaflet from the Social Workers Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, entitled “Children in Concentration Camps.” The text leaves little room for ambiguity: “What do you do today makes their world tomorrow?” “They have suffered too much,” “Send your check, your money, or money-order today.”

“Since she does not play with the other children, she does not stir. But her eye tells features some of the Hungarian’s exhausted on a couple of sacks at a refugee transit center in Barcelona.” “She must be very tired,” he notes, “a half-hour documentary on the French border. On the 15th, his camera frames a young girl laying her head against her mother’s knee; her hand is stuck in the sleeve of her mother’s trousers on their ankles in an endless, feaces-covered expanse of beach.”

The Committee’s efforts paid off: on April 16, the New York Times printed three of Capa’s images in its Sunday photo section on a full page dedicated to Spain, mentioning the campaign. In May, the New Masses did a full-page photo spread on the Spanish “heroes”: “These refugees, tempered in the blast furnace of fascism, are 400,000 living witnesses to the crimes of Franco. They are the most important refugees in the world.” The large cache of negatives from Capa, Taro, and Seymour that were recently recovered includes 10 rolls covering the French camps. A selection will be shown at the symposium on May 1.
"Old Movie with the Sound Turned Off"

By Robert Hass

The hatchet girl wears a gown that glows;
The cigarette girl in the black fishnet stockings
And a skirt of black, gauzy,unched-up tulle
That bobs above the pert muffin of her bottom—
She must be twenty-two—would look like a dancer
In Degas except for the tray of cigarettes that rests
Against her—tummy might have been the decade’s word
And the thin black strap which binds it to her neck
And makes the whiteness of her skin seem swan’s-down.

White. Some quality in the film stock that they used
Made everything so shiny that the films could not
Not make the whole world look like lingerie, like
Phosphorescent milk with winking shadows in it.

All over the world the working poor put down their coins,
Poured into theaters on Friday nights. The manager raffled—
“Raffled off,” we used to say in San Rafael in my postwar
Childhood into which the custom had persisted—
Sets of dishes in the intermission of the double feature—
Of the kind they called Fiestaeware. And now
The gangster has come in, surrounded by an entourage
Of prize fighters and character actors, all in tuxedos
And black overcoats—except for him. His coat is camel
Made from the material superior dish towels are made of
Now, and they’ll all drive up to Malibu for drinks.

All the dead actors were pretty in their day. Why
Am I watching this movie? you may ask. Well, my beloved,
Down the hall, is probably laboring over a poem
And is not to be disturbed. And look! I have rediscovered
The sweetness and the immortality of art. The actress
Wrote under a pseudonym, died, I think, of cancer of the lungs.
So many of them did. Far better for me to be doing this
(A last lurid patch of fog out of which the phrase “The End”
Comes swimming; the music I can’t hear surging now
Like fate) than reading with actual attention my field guides
Which inform me that the flower of the incense cedar
I saw this morning by the creek is “unisexual, solitary, and terminal.”

Reprinted from Time and Materials (New York: Harpers, 2007) with the permission of Robert Hass. He is a MacArthur Fellow and former Poet Laureate of the United States.

the Modern Refugee

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than anything else was money: massive funds for food, supplies, legal fees, and travel. More than ever, the relief organizations realized that they should make the broadest possible appeal among the general population. Everyone knew that explicit political affiliations would scare off large sections of the public, particularly the gift-prone church communities. But who wouldn’t donate money for purely humanitarian work devoid of politics, especially if their gift was tax-deductible? Similarly, de-politicization was necessary to qualify for the increasing amounts of government funds for overseas refugee relief made available by the United States and other countries through the National War Fund (1943–47) and the War Refugee Board (1944–45). In the face of these realities, several pro-Republican organizations changed their identity, while others merged into new entities. But even organizations that did not change their names shifted their priorities in an attempt to lower their political profiles and increase their fundraising appeal. The VAEB, which from 1939 on concentrated on helping the refugees, decrying their treatment by French and Spanish authorities and putting political pressure on Washington to isolate Franco internationally, was conscious in the extreme about its need to avoid negative publicity.

Refugee aid organizations divided

Still, as the years following the Spanish war saw the emergence of a dizzying variety of refugee relief organizations, cooperative, and even in the United States alone, there were the Spanish Refugee Relief Campaign, the International Relief Association and the Emergency Rescue Committee, which later fused into the International Rescue Committee; the Joint Antifascist Refugee Committee; the American Friends Service Committee; the Unitarian Service Committee; and dozens of smaller organizations. While all

Unsurprisingly, the main chapters in this story were the Spanish Civil War, the period of the Hitler-Stalin pact (August 1939–June 1941), the years of the anti-Axis alliance (1941–1945), and the Cold War that followed. The first years read like a leftist soap opera. The Spanish Refugee Relief Campaign began as an initiative from Herman Reissig’s North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy and the Medical Bureau, led by Edward Barsky, a prominent New York surgeon and Spanish Civil War veteran. Like most Popular Front organizations, the SRRC did not survive the fall out from the Hitler-Stalin pact. In March 1940, a conflict between Communists and non-Communists caused a split; Barsky and several prominent Lincoln vets broke away to form a rival organization. The mortally weakened remains of the SRRC eventually joined with the Emergency Rescue Committee, which was run from France by Varian Fyen.

Continuing conflicts and governmental barriers thwarted an ambitious plan by Barsky and others to charter a ship that would bring Spanish refugees to Latin America. In early 1942, the United American Spanish Aid Committee, the Rescue Ship Mission, and the American Committee to Save Refugees merged into the Joint Antifascist Refugee Committee (JAFRC), led by Barsky. Because the JAFRC had no license to expend funds in Europe, it channeled its fundraising to the Unitarian Service Committee (USC), with specific conditions on use of the funds. Ominous Cold-War clouds had been gathering throughout World War II, and the Axis powers had barely

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capitulated when the first drops started to fall. From the beginning, sympathizers of Republican Spain were singled out for anti-Communist investigations. In mid-1945, accusations arose that the JAFRC and the LSC were not only dominated by Communist Party members and sympathizers, but they were using funds to help Communists over other refugees. The House Un-American Activities Committee asked the JAFRC to hand over its records; the refusal of Barsky and his board to do so led to a long legal battle that ended in prison sentences for 11 board members. The USC, meanwhile, had hurriedly purged the radicals from its ranks in an attempt to save its reputation. In the early 1950s, the belief that the CP-dominated organizations had long neglected the fate of non-Communist refugees spurred Nancy and Dwight MacDonald, both Trotskyites, to found the Spanish Refugee Aid (SRA), whose incorporation papers explicitly excluded Communists as beneficiaries. (Several years ago, ALBA helped negotiate the transfer of the extensive SRA archive to NYU’s Tamiment library.) As Peter Carroll has shown in The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, the ripples of the JAFRC court battle soon extended to the VALB, which had been harassed by the FBI and HUAC since the late 1940s and which, like the JAFRC, had been interested in Operation Mincemeat. As Payne has now turned his attention to Spanish soil of the millions of displaced peoples—from Palestine to Cuba to Vietnam to southern Africa to the former Yugoslavia—whose collective suffering and politicized treatment and representation cast a dark shadow over the second half of the 20th century, and whose unresolved injustices continue to be a source of conflict and collective memories of what happened in the global war, when most states lined up alongside either the Allied or the Axis camp, Franco pursued the most ambivalent position of any neutral power. Franco declared Spain a “non-belligerent ally” of Germany, though this was disingenuous. As Payne demonstrates with impressive detail, Franco’s assistance to the Nazi cause was wide-ranging and included extensive maritime support; regular delivery of vital minerals, raw materials and foodstuffs; unprecedented political favors, such as the reception onto Spanish soil of several thousand Nazi agents; and the belated dispatch of the Blue Division, whose doomed volunteers fought alongside the Germans until the fall of Berlin. The Allies sued but also exploited Franco’s loyalty to Hitler, as evidenced in Operation Mincemeat, when fake invasion plans planted on a corpse were translated and sent to the Germans. According to Payne, the deception convinced the Axis of an imminent strike in the Aegean and thus “greatly facilitated the [Allied] invasion of Sicily,” though he offers but thin support for that thesis.

That Franco never contributed more directly to the Nazi war effort was less a consequence of the Caudillo’s savvy diplomacy than of Hitler’s refusal to accept Spain’s conditions for abandoning neutrality. If this book contains a bombshell, it is that Madrid strongly favored entering the war, but Berlin continually balked at the concessions the Spaniards demanded up-front. As negotiations dragged on, the Axis position across Europe steadily weakened. By the end of 1942, a better deal for Franco was taking shape with the surging Allies, who quickly forgave the dictator his bloody excesses and earlier fascist associations.

Some readers will be especially interested in what Payne says about Franco and the Holocaust. For many years, the Nationalist regime’s official historians made much of Spain’s supposed magnanimity towards Jewish refugees, and the heroic and risky efforts of Francoist agents in France, Greece and Hungary have often been cited as evidence of philo-Semitism. It is true that at least 30,000 Jews successfully crossed into Spain by 1942, but Spanish attempts at rescue once the Final Solution was implemented were tardy, half-hearted and ineffective. Payne concludes that, overall, Hitler’s