

Truth in the Making: The Never-Ending Saga of Capa's FALLING SOLDIER

By Sebastiaan Faber

This past July, around the 73rd anniversary of the outbreak of the Civil War and 11 days after the opening of a large Robert Capa exhibit at the Catalan National Museum of Art, the Barcelona newspaper *El Periódico de Catalunya* published what was billed as a stunning revelation: Capa's legendary photograph of *The Falling Soldier* was a fake. New evidence, the paper claimed, proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that the image was not taken at Cerro Muriano near Córdoba, as had long been assumed, but some 50 kilometers south, near the town of Espejo, which Capa and Gerda Taro had visited previously. This meant that the militiaman depicted was definitively not Federico Borrell García, an anarchist known to have been killed at Cerro Muriano. In fact, because there is no record of any battle action in Espejo when Capa was there, the paper concluded that the photo must have been staged.

In the following weeks, pundits and columnists in Spain and elsewhere pondered this revelation. Was Capa a fraud? Should his whole work be re-examined? Did he intend to deceive the public or did the editors of *Vu* and *Life*, who first published the image and wrote the initial captions—with *Life* claiming Capa had captured “the moment of death”? An editorial

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in *El Periódico* forgivingly called Capa's trespass *un pecado de juventud*, or sin of youth (Capa was 22 at the time). Others went further. The president of Journalists without Borders questioned Capa's professional integrity. Some accused him of cheating for the sake of money and fame. But the photographer had defenders, too, some of whom, even while admitting the new evidence of the photo's location, still refused to accept that the image was necessarily false. As others, including Capa's biographer Richard Whalen, had done before, they maintained that the soldier may have posed for the camera, only to be unexpectedly hit by a live bullet, perhaps from a sniper.

As the controversy spread, it was hard to avoid the impression that there was something fishy about the affair. While *El Periódico's* coverage was picked up in the international press—in the English-language media, it was featured by the BBC, *Time*, and the *New York Times*—it was ignored by *El País*, Spain's largest national paper and leading online news portal for the Spanish-speaking world. Moreover, most of *El Periódico's* revelations were not really new. The data on the new location were largely based on a book by José Manuel Susperregui Etxebeste, a Professor of Audiovisual Communications at the University of Basque Country. This book, *Sombras de la fotografía. Los enigmas desvelados de Nicolasa Ugartemendia, Muerte de un miliciano, La aldea española y El Lute*, had come out months earlier and had been covered by Giles Tremlett in *The Guardian* (June 14), as well as by *El País* (July 6 and 7). Some years

before, moreover, two documentaries—*Los héroes nunca mueren* (2004) by Jan Arnold and *La sombra del Iceberg* (2007) by Hugo Doménech and Raúl Riebenbahuer—had revealed that the soldier could not have been Borrell. To be sure, *El Periódico* claimed to have found additional evidence confirming Susperregui's findings and to have located the exact place the photo was taken by analyzing the shape of the mountain range in the background of one of Capa's photos taken the same day. But the landscape case had been made a month before by a photography blogger, José Manuel Serrano Esparza (see elrectanguloenlamano.blogspot.com). The timing of the scoop was a bit suspicious. Was *El Periódico* trying to milk the anniversary of the war's outbreak and take advantage of the opportunity in a slow summer month?

The question is not so much where Capa's photo was actually taken or if it's “real” (whatever that may mean), but why so many people continue to feel so strongly about it. Different explanations suggest themselves. The debates about the “recovery of historical memory” have made clear that the war still matters to present-day Spaniards. There is a widespread sense that unpleasant truths remain to be revealed or, similarly, that some long-held certainties will be exposed for the lies they really are. Andalucía is currently in uproar over the grave of the poet Federico Garcia Lorca: It is clear that there are several bodies at

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Víznar, near Granada, which Lorca's biographer Ian Gibson long ago signaled as the poet's burying place. But conspiracy theories abound. Is one of those bodies really Lorca's? Was he secretly disinterred? The Lorca family initially objected to exhumation. Gibson insists that the issue transcends family considerations: All of Spain deserves to know whether the remains are Lorca's or not. The Lorca case also raises questions at the heart of the Capa controversy. Who owns the story of the Civil War, for example, and who can make claims to the historical truth?

During the Franco years—when historical research in Spain was severely hampered by the regime, while exiled Republican historians had no access to archives and often lacked institutional support—foreign academics, particularly from France, Britain and the United States, took the lead in shaping the narrative of 20th century Spanish history. The first standard studies were penned by Pierre Vilar, Raymond Carr, Gabriel Jackson, Hugh Thomas, Herbert Southworth, Stanley Payne and, later on, by Paul Preston, Helen Graham, and Carolyn Boyd. While Spanish intellectuals respected these hispanistas, they also felt that this hegemony of foreign scholars was anomalous and, in the end, embarrassing. The foreigners liked to claim that they were more objective because they were less involved in Spain's political rifts. Others argued that non-Spaniards were more prone to romanticize or misread Spanish reality—as had many of the foreigners who, like Capa, flocked to Spain after the outbreak of war, and not all of whom were driven by a pure, disinterested desire to help

(In 1969, the Nobel Prize-winning novelist Camilo José Cela expressly did not dedicate his Civil-War novel *San Camilo, 1936* to “the adventurers from abroad, Fascists and Marxists, who had their fill of killing Spaniards like rabbits and whom no one had invited to take part in our funeral.”)

Proving Capa's photo a fake, undermining its legendary status as an iconic image of the war and suggesting that the Hungarian was willing to compromise journalistic integrity for the sake of political propaganda or to help launch his career—all this is not just about getting to the truth. It marks one more step in the Spaniards' gradual reconquest of the right to shape and tell their history. (Interestingly, this summer's Capa coverage was an almost exclusively Catalan affair, led by the same newspaper that has given ample attention to the recent discovery of the archives of Agustí Centelles, one of the Republic's official photographers. Some of Centelles' most iconic images, including a photo of two *guardias de asalto* shooting rifles from behind a pile of dead horses, are, ironically, also known to have been posed.)

But this is not the only issue. The *recuperación de la memoria histórica*, spearheaded in 2000 by Emilio Silva when he founded the association of the same name, continues to be controversial. It has exposed or fueled tensions not just between Left and Right and between the Spanish central government and the autonomous regions, but also between established academic historians and non-academics who claim to tell stories about the past that are true and relevant—including aging victims of repression and their family members, citizen

activists, journalists and documentary makers, or amateur scholars. Those same tensions are at play in the debate around Capa's *Falling Soldier*, in which key contributions have been made not just by curators and scholars with access to the full archive, but also by journalists, amateur historians, and bloggers armed with little more than a ticket to an exhibit, a digital camera, and time to scout out locations. But now there is mutual distrust and suspicion; rather than a collective effort to get to the truth, the debate has become what the Spaniards call a *diálogo de sordos*, or deaf man's dialogue.

The book that located *The Falling Soldier* in Espejo is not just about Capa. It aims to reveal the truth behind four photographic images, or sets of images, that have achieved iconic status. Besides Capa's print, it has sections on a much-circulated shot of a forlorn family of Basque refugees (who happen to be the author's aunt, cousin, and great-grandmother), Eugene W. Smith's reportage of a Spanish village (published by *Life* in 1951), and photos registering the capture of the infamous criminal “El Lute.” The author, J.M. Susperregui, is driven by a philosophically naïve but useful principle: press photography, he maintains, is either true or false. It either registers actual events as they occurred in reality or it seeks to manipulate that reality, thus deceiving the audience. The only way to find out which is which is by carefully looking at the image while, at the same time, reconstructing the exact circumstances of its creation. This is precisely what he did for the Capa photo, beginning with

a detailed review of all the evidence and arguments presented so far, and then moving to his own analysis and conclusions. Although Susperregui's style is more essayistic than academic—he tends to be colloquial, chatty and a bit prolix, and the book is not edited very thoroughly—he presents his case with a good dose of common sense. His final position is clear: the militiaman depicted is not Federico Borrell; the picture was not taken at Cerro Muriano, but at Espejo, and before September 5; it was not taken with Capa's Leica, but with Taro's Rolleiflex, and likely from a tri-

pod; it was posed; and the soldier is only pretending to have been hit. the picture, or perhaps even a tripod, belying his later claim to have shot it by lifting his arm above a trench and without looking through the view finder. The fact that both photos published in *Vu* are of two different soldiers dying in exactly the same spot, and that both images are almost identically framed—as is a third photo from the series depicting a running militiaman—further supports the tripod hypothesis. How likely is it that two different men were killed on the same precise square meter in the rearguard, within moments of each other, with a photographer there to

capture both deaths with an amazingly steady hand? circumstantial data as definitive proof. The fact that a certain Federico Borrell was killed at Cerro Muriano, for instance, and that, when asked, some of his aging family members claimed to recognize him in Capa's photograph, was considered enough to declare the case closed. (It later turned out that the real Borrell did not much resemble the man in the photo and was shot while sheltered behind a tree.)

For those who have doubted the authenticity of *The Falling Soldier*, the status of Capa's photograph is directly linked to the photographer's integrity: If the picture was a fraud, then so was he. The biggest tactical mistake of Capa's biographer, Robert Whelan, was to accept this premise, in effect allowing Capa's reputation to rest on this one question. In 2002, when all evidence seemed to point in the direction of Borrell, Whelan concluded in an article in *Aperture*: "May the slanderous controversy that has plagued Robert Capa's reputation for more than twenty-five years now, at last come to an end with a verdict decisively in favor of Capa's integrity. It is time to let both Capa and Borrell rest in peace, and to acclaim *The Falling Soldier* once again as an unquestioned masterpiece of photojournalism and as perhaps the greatest war photograph ever made." Implicit here is the admission that reopening of the case will automatically draw Capa's integrity into question once again.

A whole photographic career, however, does not stand or fall by a single image. More important, Susperregui's driving principle, that a documentary photograph is either true or false, does

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pod; it was posed; and the soldier is only pretending to have been hit.

Regardless of whether Susperregui is right, he brings up a number of issues that have been glossed over by previous scholars—some surprisingly so, because they are photo-technical in nature. Susperregui notes, for instance, that the image in *Life* in July 1937 contains a much larger portion of sky than the first published version in *Vu* of late September 1936. The changed aspect ratio suggests that the photo may have been taken with Gerda Taro's Rolleiflex (which produces square negatives) rather than with Capa's Leica (whose negatives have a 3:2 ratio). This is not a crazy supposition: We know Capa and Taro were both there, and of the 40 prints that have been preserved, at least eight were taken with the Rolleiflex. Given that this was a heavier camera, however, it is likelier that Capa would have used both hands to take

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Susperregui is convinced that those defending the image's authenticity—particularly the International Center of Photography in New York and Magnum—are operating in bad faith, purposely ignoring evidence to protect their institutional interests. This charge is misplaced and unhelpful. In fact, the catalog and the exhibit allot ample space to the issue and present all the available documentation in an exemplary way, allowing everyone to draw their own conclusions. There are other reasons why it took so long to find out what we know now. We have to remember that Capa himself supplied very little information on the film. He sent it to Paris to be developed and later gave several mutually contradictory accounts of its creation. Still, reading Susperregui's analysis, one is surprised how quick previous investigators were to accept

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not hold up in practice. Documentary evidence is more complicated. The working conditions for journalists in Spain were extremely difficult, as Paul Preston has made clear in *We Saw Spain Die*. The majority of what we consider documentary material of the Spanish Civil War was doctored or manipulated in some way, if not by the writers and photographers, then by the Spanish censors or the editors at home. And even if objectivity or neutrality had been possible in the coverage of the war, few people thought it desirable. The political stakes were high—and so were the publishers' and the public's demand for sensational images of suffering and death.

It's time to ask the central question: What if *The Falling Soldier* were staged? Would the knowledge that the man depicted in this image did not

borrow Geoff Pingree's words.

We should remember that Capa's work was as much about illusion as about reality. His job as a photographer was to allow the readers of *Life*, *Vu*, and *Picture Post* to feel *as if* they were on the battlefield without leaving the safety and comfort of their homes. This illusion—made possible by new technologies as much as by the photographers' courage—was half of the excitement. It is no coincidence that in December 1938, *Picture Post* printed a full-page portrait of Capa, author of "the finest pictures of front-line action ever taken," while *Life* claimed that its camera (that is, Capa's) "gets closer to the Spanish war than any camera has ever got before." In the end, the magazines' infatuation with their sensational reporting is not unlike *El Periódico's* fascination with its coverage of the Capa affair this past summer.

Capa's photos mobilized the illusion of proximity, and his own rep-

mean that this dramatic image does not accurately represent the deaths of thousands like him. Fiction and non-fiction are not synonyms for falsity and truth. An undoctored photograph can be a lie, in the same way that a doctored one may well reveal the world as it really is. The fact that Capa's *Falling Soldier*—by all accounts a realist, representative image of the Spanish Civil War—almost immediately acquired the status of *symbol* representing the whole struggle of a people (or, alternatively, the horrors of war) made the question of whether the photo was or wasn't "authentic" even more irrelevant. In this sense, revealing that Capa's image was staged would be like revealing that there is no actual body in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

Susperregui's book makes a significant contribution to a long-standing debate. When it comes to establishing whether *The Falling Soldier* was staged or not, Susperregui certainly bolsters the doubters' case. But if he is right, the only thing lost is our certainty that the photographer *happened to be there* when one particular death occurred, while we know that hundreds of thousands died, with or without a photographer present. This may lessen our belief in serendipity, but it should not affect much else. ■

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die at the moment the photo was taken change the way we think about Spain, the Civil War, or 20th century history? The answer is that it wouldn't. Capa did not record a news event at Espejo. What made his image so powerful was not that it pictured a history-changing, unique incident—the moon landing or the murder of a president or the conquest of Teruel. We see an unknown man dying at an unknown location in Spain, and we know, as did Capa's first viewers, that hundreds of Spanish men and women were dying in this way every day.

Limiting the discussion to the true-or-false question does "not initiate the most useful lines of examination," to

utation, to tell truths about the world, in much the same way that good realist fiction does. That this man may not have been dying or dead when Capa pressed the shutter release does not

An Unexpected Gift

When the popular San Francisco vet Bill Bailey died eleven years ago, the Bay Area VALB Post and his many friends initiated a project to preserve his small cottage on public park land in his home city. Unfortunately, a lack of funds and public support has led to abandonment of the project. This year, the unused funds (around \$6,500) have been transferred to ALBA, acting as a non-profit educational corporation. After talking with some of Bill's friends and his son, we've marked the money for the maintenance fund of San Francisco's monument to all the Abraham Lincoln Brigade volunteers. Bill's memory lives on with the cause he supported.