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Has War Changed, or Only War Photography?

In the decades between Robert Capa and Lynsey Addario, our image of battle lost its aura of nobility.



A photograph by Lynsey Addario at the SVA Chelsea Gallery shows Specialist Carl Vandeberge, center, and Sgt. Kevin Rice, behind, being helped to a helicopter for evacuation after they were both shot in the stomach during a Taliban ambush in Afghanistan in 2007. Lynsey Addario for The New York Times Magazine

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Lynsey Addario began taking war pictures when the United States invaded Afghanistan in 2001. Only two-thirds of a century had elapsed since Robert Capa documented the Spanish Civil War. But to go from the exhibition of Capa's Spain photos at the International Center of Photography to the Addario show at the SVA Chelsea Gallery is to traverse not just time and geography but a profound shift in sensibility. Capa's pictures express his belief in war as a conflict between good and evil. In our time, which is to say in Addario's, unwavering faith in the justice of one side has perished, a casualty of too many brutal, pointless, reciprocally corrupt wars.

Addario over the last two decades has taken her camera to some of the most dangerous places on earth. A MacArthur fellow, she is a freelance photographer who shared a Pulitzer Prize for international reporting awarded to The New York Times in 2009 for its coverage of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Like Capa, she calls herself a photojournalist, not an artist. She has said that she is dedicated to "using images to undo preconceptions and to show a reality often misunderstood or misrepresented." She has also named Capa as one of her main influences, even though many of the preconceptions she seeks to undermine are those he enshrined. Capa avoided the gut-wrenching images that prevail in contemporary war photography. His biographer, Richard Whelan, wrote that Capa's pictures of an American serviceman, Raymond J. Bowman, 21, lying dead from a German sniper's bullet through the forehead in Leipzig, in mid-April 1945, near the end of the war, were "the most gruesome photographs of Capa's entire career." In these photos, the young corporal lies supine, his legs splayed out on the balcony from which he had been firing a machine gun, his head and arm twisted on the

wooden floor of the apartment he has been knocked back into. An amoeba-shaped puddle of blood oozes beneath him.



Robert Capa's image of the death of a Spanish loyalist militiaman in September 1936, one of the most famous war photographs, at the International Center of Photography. International Center of Photography/Magnum Photos

Yet compared to the war photography that came afterward, this image is archaically dignified. “It was a very clean, somehow very beautiful death and I think that’s what I remember most from the war,” Capa said in a radio interview in 1947. When you look at his photograph, you see what he was seeing. With good reason, we don’t see it that way anymore.

Many Americans no longer regard war as a righteous undertaking — and war photography has played a part in changing our perspective. Pictures in Korea (notably those of David Douglas Duncan) and, even more, those in Vietnam (by Larry Burrows and Don McCullin in particular) stripped warfare of its glamour and romance, zeroing in instead on blood, mud, fatigue, injury and viciousness. Television footage amplified the horror.

With extraordinary fortitude and skill, Addario has shown us the face of war today. Many of her photographs portray its victims, especially women and children: survivors of rape in the Democratic Republic of Congo, a wounded child soldier in South Sudan, a 7-year-old boy struck by shrapnel in Afghanistan, a cargo plane filled with American soldiers on stretchers being evacuated from Iraq. She also depicts the aftermath of natural disasters, as in an extraordinary picture of a woman giving birth by the roadside near Tacloban, the Philippines, in the wake of a devastating typhoon.

There are precious few warm moments, and even those are tinged with irony. When young boys in Pakistan near the Afghan border beam with admiring gazes as a squad of Taliban fighters jump out of a truck, we can see the next generation of jihadists taking form. Another masterfully composed image of a pregnant young woman and her mother seeking medical assistance in Badakhshan Province, Afghanistan, in November 2009, depicts them in sky-blue burqas against a flawless blue sky. It is a beautiful photograph without a clear message.

Beautiful war photographs may seem like a moral oxymoron. Can something so ugly be depicted with beauty? The hideous content of Addario’s pictures is masterfully composed and lit. Some of the great war photographers of our time (such as James Nachtwey, another of Addario’s avowed influences) have been assailed for making pictures of horrific scenes that are

formally pretty. That seems like an odd objection if you believe, as I do, that the mission of art is to impose order and, through that, a kind of beauty on haphazard experience. But perhaps there are some subjects that don't lend themselves to art, because to organize them aesthetically is to be untrue to their senselessness. Adorno famously said that to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. Tellingly, Capa chose not to photograph the liberation of the concentration camps.



Lynsey Addario, photograph of injured soldiers sitting in a cargo plane before taking off to Germany from the United States Air Force base in Balad, Iraq, in 2004. The interior lights of the plane indicate an "alarm red" attack underway at the base. Lynsey Addario/Corbis



Addario's photo of a midwife, Norena Malate, delivering the baby of Analyn Pleado, 18, as Analyn's husband, Ryan Bacate, 21, looks on outside of Tacloban, the Philippines, on Jan. 11, 2014, after Typhoon Haiyan destroyed the couple's home. Lynsey Addario for Save the Children

It is because Addario unsparingly depicts the suffering of war that an incongruity arises between the content and the composition. For Capa, a classical format fit his intentions: to portray war's self-sacrifice, comradeship and other time-honored virtues. His pictures in Spain have acquired a canonical aura. The show at I.C.P. — an organization that Robert's younger brother, Cornell Capa, founded in 1974 and which holds his archive — explores the creation of a photo book, "Death in the Making," first published in 1938. By then, Capa had moved on to the fight in China against the Japanese, avoiding the impending defeat of a cause he championed, as well as his personal anguish after the death at the front in July 1937 of his lover, Gerda Taro, who had also been working in Spain as a photojournalist. The great majority of the pictures in "Death in the Making" are by Capa, although some are by Taro or by their friend David Seymour, known as Chim. (The I.C.P. show and an accompanying new edition of the book sort out authorship of the individual images.)

Capa's most famous picture — one of the most celebrated of all war photographs — depicts a Republican militiaman falling as he is shot. It was the cover image of the book. In recent years, its authenticity has been questioned, and much forensic analysis of the landscape, the soldier's identity, even the manner of his collapse has attempted, without conclusive results, to determine if it was staged.



Lynsey Addario, Pakistani Taliban fighters jump out of a truck in Bar Kambar Khei, July 2008, as children watch admiringly. Lynsey Addario for The New York Times



Addario photographed Noor Nisa, 18 (right), in labor and stranded with her mother in Badakhshan Province, Afghanistan, November 2009. It is on view at the SVA Chelsea Gallery. Lynsey Addario for The New York Times

Because of the gestural similarity of the outstretched arms, the photograph is sometimes compared to Goya's painting "The Third of May, 1808," of a Spanish partisan facing a Bonapartist firing squad. However, despite having been made over a century earlier, the painting, with its heap of mangled corpses and the expressions of horror on the faces of the men about to die, is much more modern. Capa's austere portrayal of a vanquished hero harkens back to Homer.



Robert Capa, Republican soldiers saluting through the windows of their departing train in Barcelona, August 1936. At the International Center of Photography. International Center of Photography/Magnum Photos



Robert Capa, soldiers playing chess behind the Republican lines, Madrid, 1936. International Center of Photography/Magnum Photos

Not that the Republican soldiers are presented as godlike. On the contrary, their tattered humanity is what most interested Capa. The book and show proceed with a classical sequence

familiar from the “Iliad” — leave-taking, combat, mourning — but the men and women in these pictures are emotionally open, touchingly individual and markedly of their time. Capa devoted most of his published images to the Republican soldiers (both men and women) off the battlefield: listening to speeches, playing chess, feeding a lamb, embracing. We never forget that we are looking at particular people, each with a life that may soon be truncated. In a poignant picture of grinning young men leaning out of a railroad car and raising clenched fists on their way to the Aragon front, the friezelike composition highlights the specific traits of each soldier.

Unlike the photographers of the fascist-supported Nationalists, who depicted their soldiers either as regimented faceless men or valiant standouts, Capa illustrated the Republican ethos that the militiamen should be informed participants in the war. They are seen listening, learning, conversing. The one anomalous photograph in “Death in the Making” was shot by Taro and appeared on the back cover: a handsome, clean-cut young soldier blowing a bugle, positioned against the sky. He seems to have migrated from the fascist ranks.



Gerda Taro, Capa's lover and a photojournalist, shot this image of a Republican soldier playing the bugle, Valencia, Spain, March 1937. International Center of Photography/Magnum Photos

How anachronistic Capa's faith in wartime nobility now feels. It is prelapsarian, imbued with an innocence that we have lost forever. Even in Ukraine, a defensive war against a powerful aggressor that Addario has covered, moral justifications cannot obscure the horror of the casualties on both sides. Some deaths in war are dirtier than others, but none of them are clean.