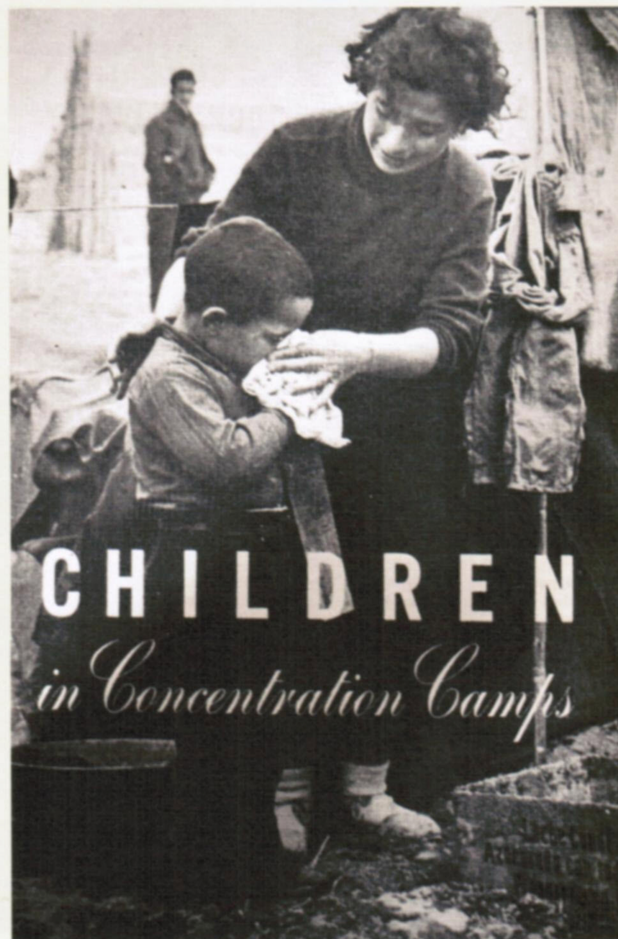
ENTING DISPLACEMENT:

ro, Chim, and the Visual Birth of the Modern Refugee

an Faber



(left) *What are you doing to prevent this?*, November 1936 – May 1937. Madrid Ministry of Propaganda.
(right) Cover of a 1939 aid appeal brochure produced by the Spanish Refugee Relief Campaign.

What are you doing to prevent this?

THE TEXT on the poster — one of the most iconic of the Spanish Civil War — couldn't be more straightforward. The three-part photo montage is equally direct: a bombed-out apartment building, six German Heinkels silhouetted against the sky overhead, and in the foreground the desperate face of a mother clutching a baby boy. Only one other word is added in red caps at the bottom — Madrid. What gives this poster its rhetorical force is not merely its direct appeal to the viewer's conscience. It is the sheer simplicity of its narrative: international fascism is targeting innocent Spanish victims; this should concern us all.

From the first day of the conflict, the war in Spain was fought on at least three fronts: on the battlefield, through backdoor diplomacy, and as a "war of words" in the Western public sphere. Both Republicans and Nationalists were well aware of the crucial impact on the war's outcome of nonintervention — carefully observed by Britain, the United States, and France, who chose not to stand by the democratically elected Republican government; and openly flaunted by Germany and Italy's support for the Nationalists. Assisted by powerful allies abroad, both camps went to great lengths to win over international public opinion. Propaganda machines everywhere went into overdrive. Between 1936 and 1939, a significant percentage of Western brainpower — writers, artists, politicians, religious leaders, journalists, photographers, filmmakers — was engaged in attempts to shape the narrative of the Spanish Civil War.

The task at hand was urgent, but not particularly complicated. Propaganda, after all, shuns complexity, preferring the moral expediency of melodrama and allegory. The objective on both sides was clear-cut: to convince the international public that the Spanish war was not merely a political conflict, but nothing less than an existential struggle against absolute evil. And since few things are more despicable in the Judeo-Christian moral universe than the killing of the pure and innocent, neither of the two camps hesitated to discredit their opponents through graphic depictions of defenseless victims. The Nationalists spread images of desecrated graves and murdered nuns; the Republicans distributed photographs of mutilated children killed in bombardments. ("The 'military' practice of the rebels," one poster states with deadpan sarcasm. "If you tolerate this, your children will be next.")

This was propaganda, yes; but the images of innocent victims were real. In fact, the documentary legacy of the Spanish Civil War is an extensive catalogue of human suffering. It could hardly have been otherwise: this was not only the first military conflict to be thoroughly documented by the visual media — photojournalists

DOSSIER

and filmmakers outfitted with newly portable equipment — but also one of the first in which the civilian population served as an explicit and consistent target of armed violence. World War I left millions dead, to be sure; but most of the casualties had been soldiers. The Spanish victims looked very different indeed. Most shocking and therefore newsworthy among them were not the brave volunteers who enlisted in the militias — although they made for romantically epic icons, epitomized in Capa's *Falling Soldier* — but the thousands of women, children, and elderly who died in the urban bombing campaigns (Guernica, Barcelona, Madrid), and the hundreds of thousands of Spaniards who were driven from their homes — and eventually their country — by the advance of Franco's forces.

Dramatic images of displacement: the Mexican Suitcase contains hundreds of them, and not just of the massive Republican exodus during the last months of the war. Clearly, there was something about refugees that attracted Capa, Chim, and Taro from the outset. Among the most compelling of the photographs that Capa and Taro took during their fall 1936 trip to Andalusia are the displaced peasants: determined mothers hurrying down the road carrying children and bundles of belongings. In November 1936, Chim does a reportage for *Regards* on the refugee colonies in Barcelona: we see peasant mothers organizing their lives on the bleachers of the Montjuich stadium, and cheerful children eating at long wooden tables.[1] Taro's February 1937 image of refugees from Málaga — a pensively distressed woman with three ragged children — makes the front cover of *Die Volks-Illustrierte;* an image from that same refugee series, of a sleeping toddler with her pants halfway down, is among the most touching of her entire oeuvre. The battle for Teruel, in the harsh winter of 1938, produces a new wave of refugees; Capa is there.[2] In January 1939, as the Nationalist noose tightens around Catalonia, Chim and Capa follow the hundreds of thousands of fleeing soldiers and civilians from Tarragona to Barcelona and from there to the French border. In February, *Life* publishes a small but dramatic sample: seven hunched-over Spanish women crossing a mountain pass in the Pyrenees, trudging through the snow, dragging their possessions behind them; a cold, slushy road with a column of refugees walking next to horse- and oxen-drawn carts; an old woman on the road to Barcelona, where refugees are being strafed and shelled by the Nationalists, walking in a daze around her half-destroyed cart, which has become useless because her horse, mule, dog, and donkey have just been machine-gunned to death by Italian bombers. Finally, in mid-March, on the eve of the Republic's defeat, Capa visits the internment camps in the south of France, which at that point hold more than 200,000 refugees — demoralized, underfed, ridden with lice and disease, and desperately hoping for some way out. Capa fills ten rolls of film.

Why this abiding interest in refugees? For one, as exiled Jews themselves, Capa, Chim, and Taro were intimately familiar with displacement and its hardships. Further, the three friends aimed not merely to register historical reality, but to move their viewing public. As Paul Preston has shown in *We Saw Spain Die*, reporting on the Spanish Civil War was a job fraught with emotional and political tensions, in which the boundaries between reporting and advocacy were quickly and easily blurred. This was as true for reporters such as Jay Allen and Herbert Matthews as it was for "concerned photographers" like Chim and Capa. The Republican exodus fills Capa with a sense of impending doom. "I am afraid that hundreds of thousands more, who in other countries perhaps are still living comfortable lives, may soon find themselves enduring the same fate." When, on January 15, 1939, his Leica frames a young, exhausted girl lying on a couple of sacks at a refugee transit center in Barcelona, he notes: "She must be very tired, since she does not play with the other children; she does not stir. But her eye follows me, one large dark eye follows my every movement. It is difficult to work under such a gaze. It is not easy to be in such a place and not be able to do anything except record the suffering that others must endure."[3] Although the photographer has a hard time accepting his own passivity, he clearly hopes his images will sway someone else to take action. Here, too, in other words, the image implicitly interpellates the viewer: What are you doing to prevent this? If the girl's gaze makes Capa uncomfortable, he knows that a widely distributed photograph of that gaze will be equally moving to thousands of viewers.

The images of Spanish refugees proved extraordinarily shocking indeed to the editors and readers of *Life, Regards, Vu, Ce Soir,* and *Picture Post.* Hard to imagine though it is, scenes that by now have become familiar to the point of cliché — long columns of civilians carrying as much as they humanly can; emaciated but combative men herded into makeshift camps; anonymous victims looking into the camera from behind a barbed wire fence — in the late 1930s were disturbingly new. The first analogies that came to mind were biblical. In February 1939, the editors of the *Picture Post,* at a loss for words, compare the images of this "greatest mass flight in modern history" to the Old Testament or a "painting by one of the old masters."[4] *Life* magazine's headlines talk about "the greatest mass exodus of modern times," a "heroically tragic epic": "Rarely have so much despair and physical misery been seen in one place in the history of the world."[5] To be sure, this was not the first large-scale refugee crisis of the twentieth century — the aftermath of World War I had also seen mass displacements. But it was the first to be widely covered by the visual media. If ours is the age of the modern refugee, the Spanish Civil War marks his visual birth. Capa, Chim, and Taro played a key role in establishing the iconography of twentieth-century displacement.

This iconography has not been unproblematic. Refugee crises have been among the toughest challenges facing international law and politics over the past seventy years, and their

DOSSIER

visual representation, starting with the images of Spanish Republicans, manifests the same tensions that have marked the world's varied attempts to deal with political displacement. While the numbers of refugees have not stopped increasing — from postwar Europe to Palestine, to Bosnia and Kosovo, to Iraq, Somalia, and the Congo — central questions have remained unresolved: Should refugees be seen primarily as victims of forces beyond their control or as social actors? Is displacement a humanitarian or a political problem? And does it require a political or a humanitarian solution? Hannah Arendt forcefully argued in 1951 that refugees' statelessness is a modern *political* phenomenon, a perverse byproduct of the doctrine of state sovereignty, and a maddeningly efficient tool for states to dispense with unwanted elements by making them someone else's problem.[6] Some fifty years later, Roger Rosenblatt echoed her position in relation to the Kosovo war: "The popular idea that the world refugee problem is somehow independent of politics is certainly touching. But it is also stupid and dangerous. The confusion works to the great advantage of the world's more malevolent leaders . . . because the preoccupation with suffering, any suffering, diverts attention from what produced that suffering in the first place."[7] The Spanish refugee crisis gave rise to the same treacherous dynamic. For all their dramatism, the refugee images in the Mexican Suitcase are profoundly ambivalent. How should we view these people? Are they valiant antifascist heroes or innocent victims of random political violence? And how was the public to respond to these images? With pity or solidarity? With political action — including military intervention — or charitable gifts?

In the Spanish context, this ambivalence was not entirely new. Throughout the war, the pro-Republican representations of the Loyalists had oscillated between the two poles of hagiography and victimization. While the image of the Republicans as antifascist heroes prevailed among the left, the limitations imposed by neutrality and nonintervention legislation — with fundraising campaigns strictly limited to humanitarian aid — privileged the notion of the Spaniards as sacrificial lambs. Franco's victory and the urgency of the ensuing refugee crisis marked a decisive shift toward the discourse of victimhood. At the same time, the elimination of the "red" Republic as a serious political threat allowed Loyalist sympathizers in the United States, Great Britain, and elsewhere to cast a wider fundraising net than ever before. Even Catholic congregations, which until then had rallied to Franco's support, could not help but be moved to compassion by the images of the starving and forlorn Spanish men, women, and children driven from their homeland. In practical terms, then, the ambivalence of the refugee photographs had its advantages: it made them useful for different purposes, from news reporting to political mobilization and charitable collections.

Among the most compelling of the Mexican Suitcase cache are the more than 300 images from Capa's March 1939 trip to the French concentration camps. This time none of his shocking photographs — shocking not only because of the physical state of the refugees and their appalling living conditions, but because this was occurring in the very heart of European civilization — made it into *Life, Vu,* or *Regards.* Only the *Picture Post* published twenty-four of them across an eight-page spread in its April 15 issue. Although the *Post*'s pro-Loyalist editorial staff was fully aware of the ideological forces at play, the accompanying text emphatically portrays the refugees as apolitical, innocent victims: "Only a small percentage of the civilian refugees were involved in politics. The rest were demoralized by the bombing, terrified of the Moors and the Falangists, or unwilling to live under totalitarian rule."[8]

While the press distribution of Capa's camp images was relatively minimal, however, many were immediately incorporated into international relief campaigns. The photographs printed in the *Picture Post,* for instance, were reproduced as postcards in Britain by the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief.[9] Other prints from the series, such as the image of a woman blowing a little boy's nose, were widely distributed in fundraising leaflets from the Spanish Refugee Relief Campaign (SRRC) — the "nonpolitical relief organization" that in 1939 replaced the pro-Loyalist North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy.[10]

In the end, the blanket depoliticization of Spanish Republican refugees proved as temporary as the European peace of 1939. As soon as World War II broke out, the Spaniards — taking on a leading role in the French Resistance — became antifascist heroes all over again; and five years later, with the Cold War looming, they and their sympathizers had once more turned into dangerous "reds." The House Un-American Activities Committee opened hearings against U.S. refugee relief organizations in 1945, accusing them of engaging in more than mere humanitarianism. By 1950, the leaders of the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee, one of the most successful relief organizations working on behalf the Spanish Republicans — the people, that is, who actually were *doing something to prevent this* — were imprisoned for refusing to cooperate with anticommunist congressional investigations.

1 Chim, "Stade de Montjuich," *Regards,* November 26, 1936.
2 "The World's Two Wars: Teruel Falls and Tsingtao Burns," *Life,* January 24, 1938, pp. 9–15.
3 Richard Whelan, *This Is War! Robert Capa at Work* (New York and Göttingen: ICP/Steidl, 2007), p. 197.
4 "Tragedy of Spain," *Picture Post,* February 4, 1939, pp. 13–19.
5 "The Spanish Flight into France Ends in Bitterness and Squalor," *Life,* April 3, 1939, p. 28.
6 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1973), pp. 271–90.
7 Roger Rosenblatt, "Misplace Tears: The Danger of Sympathy," *The Ne Republic,* May 10, 1999, pp. 18–19.
8 "The Forgotten Army," *Pictur Post,* April 15, 1939, pp. 13–20.
9 Some of these are available the International Institute of Social History i Amsterdam, www.iish.org.
10 "Questions and Answers on th Spanish Refugees: A Supplement to the Pil Manual," Spanish Refugee Relief Archive Columbia University, New York.