

## Photojournalism and its heroes

In 1947, Cartier-Bresson, Robert Capa, David ‘Chim’ Seymour, William Vandivert and George Rodger formed a cooperative picture agency, “Magnum Photos”. Cartier-Bresson first defined the limits of 35-millimeter film, then created a body of work in it that would perhaps be equalled, but never surpassed.

Due to the **fickle** nature of history Chim and George Rodger have taken a back seat to their more celebrated colleagues and co-founders of Magnum Photos, Robert Capa and Henri Cartier-Bresson.

Capa, charismatic and brave, defined modern war photography. He was Ingrid Bergman’s lover and Hemingway’s and Picasso’s confidant.

On 19 July, 1936, the Civil War officially began when General Francisco Franco took control of the Spanish Army. Like many intellectuals in Europe and America, Capa, Seymour and Gerda Taro sided strongly with those who remained loyal to the Popular Front government of Spain – those known as “Republicans” or “Loyalists”. Capa and Taro decided to cover events in Spain as a team and were given the task of producing a special issue of “VU” magazine. Together they photographed the **disheartening** military progress of the Popular Front’s volunteer militia, in its attempt to stop the **takeover** by Franco. The Spanish Civil War was not only a **testing ground** for new equipment – **tanks** and planes from Germany, arms from Italy – it also served as the testing ground for a new piece of photographic equipment. The Leica, invented in the 1920’s,



*Robert Capa holding his 35mm Contax on a Japanese tank (April 1938)*

was first tried under battle conditions by photographers covering this war. Small and easy to carry, the Leica used **35 millimeter film** rather than **clumsy glass plates** and was perfect for the action and stress of wartime use. Chim – born Dawid Syzmin and later known as David Seymour – documented moments between the iconic and the commonplace, made vivid by their unexpected familiarity. Gerda Taro met Capa in the **fall** of 1934 and by the following summer they were very much in love. She soon began helping with his freelance assignments, **captioning** the photographs and acting as agent in selling them to various magazines. Meanwhile he taught her the **intricacies** of photography. Drawn to each other by a shared passion for photography, they created a **persona** (a non-existent American photographer) in order to sell their work – and so the legendary Capa was born.

Capa’s soon developed a reputation for taking photos **whatever the risk**, setting the tone for war reportage as we know it. Taro, too, was often seen running across the battle lines and visited several frontlines on her own. When she was fatally **injured**, according to the nurse who was **on duty**, her last words before dying were: “Is my camera safe?” These photographs of Republican soldiers during battle received **wide** coverage in the press and the new British magazine “Picture Post” consequently declared Capa “The Greatest War-Photographer in the World”. In January, Capa ended his coverage of the Spanish Civil War with photographs of refugees in Barcelona, Figueras, and near Tarragona, where they were attacked by **insurgent** planes. Barcelona, the last major Republican **stronghold**, fell to Franco’s troops in January 1939, and Capa returned to Paris. Chim, too, finished his Civil War coverage with the **plight** of the Spanish refugees. In February, he photographed civilians and Republican soldiers crossing into France and **adjusting to life** in French concentration camps. The war ended in March when Madrid was taken by Franco’s Insurgents. Chim returned to France and from there sailed on the S.S. Sinai in April,

photographing the voyage of hundreds of Spanish refugees **bound** for Mexico.

After founding the 'Magnum' they decided to **split** the world's areas to **cover** between them: Cartier-Bresson took India and China. He went off to India to cover Gandhi's funeral, the Chinese Civil War and the formation of Maoist China. He successfully covered many historical events and Magnum became a phenomenon in a very short time. It is still active today and one of the world's most productive photojournalism organisations.

Cartier-Bresson had worked during some of the most difficult periods of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century, he had been educated with some of the most mixed and volatile artistic elements in Europe and had suffered great personal **hardship** at the hands of the Germans. Therefore, his philosophical approach to photography did not fully emerge until 1952 when he published his first book, 'Images **à la sauvette**' (English edition titled 'The Decisive Moment'), in which the immediacy of the Surrealists and the composition and classical rules of art came together. His idea was that everything had a decisive moment – a moment when the composition, the meaning and the expression of the cameraman all came together in a fraction of a second. He summed it up in 1957:

“Photography is not like painting. There is a creative fraction of a second when you are taking a picture. Your eye must see a composition or an expression that life itself offers you and you must know with intuition when to click the camera. That is the moment the photographer is creative.”... “Oops! The

Moment! Once you miss it, it is gone forever.”  
Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Washington Post*, 1957.


Cartier-Bresson retired from active photography to return to painting in the late 1960s. He had spent more than thirty years **racing** between some of the greatest events and **upheavals** of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His reportage was superb, his photography extraordinary. Yet, he is probably best known for some simple moments. He is considered to be the father of photojournalism, because, in all those years of **holding** a camera at important instants in world history, his best photographs document something quite different. With the **wide-eyed wonder** of a child and the sophistication of a trained artist, he captured some of the tiny details of ordinary lives. These were images of people who were experiencing an infinite story in a finite moment. He was simultaneously the master of the moment and the artist of the event. As a professional photographer, he **hunted for** the one moment that made an impact and **thereby** documented a microcosm.



Henry Cartier-Bresson: La Brasserie – Paris

**to adjust to life:** *adattarsi alla vita*  
**à la sauvette (French):** *in fretta e furia e di nascosto*  
**bound:** *diretto, destinato*  
**to caption:** *scrivere la didascalia, il titolo (della foto)*  
**cover:** *seguire (un avvenimento), fare un servizio su*  
**clumsy:** *(qui) poco maneggevole*  
**disheartening:** *scoraggiante*  
**fall:** *autunno (AmE)*  
**fickle:** *mutevole*  
**glass plate:** *lastra di vetro*  
**hardship:** *sofferenze, maltrattamenti*  
**to hold (held-held):** *tenere*  
**testing ground:** *terreno di collaudo*  
**to hunt for:** *dare la caccia a*  
**injured:** *ferito*

**intricacy:** *complessità*  
**insurgent:** *ribelle*  
**on duty:** *di turno*  
**persona:** *personaggio*  
**plight:** *condizione*  
**to race:** *precipitarsi*  
**to split:** *dividere*  
**stronghold:** *roccaforte*  
**takeover:** *conquista*  
**thereby:** *quindi*  
**tank:** *carro armato*  
**upheaval:** *sconvolgimento*  
**wide-eyed wonder:** *stupore da fare restare di stucco*  
**whatever the risk:** *indipendentemente dal rischio*  
**wide:** *ampio*

**1a**  **Decide if the following sentences are true (T) or false (F).**

- |  | T                        | F                        |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| a. The 'Magnum' was founded by Robert Capa and Gerda Taro.                                     | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| b. Capa and Taro died in Spain.  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| c. Thanks to Leica's new small-format, photojournalism was brought closer to actual events.    | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| d. Cartier-Bresson is considered to be the father of photojournalism.                          | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| e. According to Cartier-Bresson, painting is like photography.                                 | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| f. David Seymour had a nickname.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| g. Capa and Taro's bravery was matched by their recklessness.                                  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| h. Capa, Seymour and Taro didn't believe in the power of a photograph to shape public opinion. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| i. Capa and Taro travelled to Italy to document the brutal turmoil of the Civil War.           | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| j. Cartier-Bresson's photos didn't pay attention to details.                                   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

**1b**  **Now correct the false sentences.**


**2**  **Ask the questions about Robert Capa's biography to match the answers.**

- a. ....? He was born in Budapest in 1913.
- b. ....? He was exiled from Hungary at the age of seventeen because of leftist student activities, so he fled to Berlin.
- c. ....? Because he had no money and no profession, he turned to the camera as a means of earning a living.
- d. ....? He gained an international reputation for his coverage of the Spanish Civil War.
- e. ....? Yes, he was. Robert Capa's bravery often led him to the front lines of battle.
- f. ....? Capa managed to document five of the major wars of last century, from the Republican struggle in Spain to the French Indochina War in 1954.
- g. ....? It is the agency he founded in 1947 with Henri Cartier-Bresson, David Seymour, William Vandivert, and George Rodger.
- h. ....? He stepped on a landmine in Indochina in 1954.

- 3**  In the following biography of Cartier-Bresson some facts are true, some are false and some are not mentioned in the passage "Photojournalism and its heroes". Correct the false data and underline what is not mentioned in the passage on p. 220-221.

Shaped by his family experience, he took up social documentary photography, catching the revealing gesture, or what was termed the "decisive moment". After marrying Gerda Taro, he stopped viewing photographs simply as transcriptions of the world. By chance, he was hired as a fashion photographer. In 1932, he discovered the Leica. He thought photography was just like painting and that a good photographer clicks the camera at random. He used to say, "To take a photograph is to align the head, the eye and the heart". Taken prisoner of war in 1940, he escaped and later joined an

organisation to assist prisoners and escapees. In 1945, he photographed the liberation of Paris with a group of professional journalists. In 1947, with Robert Capa, George Rodger, David 'Chim' Seymour and Gerda Taro, he founded Magnum Photos. After three years spent travelling in the East, in 1952 he returned to Europe, where he published his first book, written in English. With the curiosity of a child eager to know and the ingenuousness of an amateur, he captured some of the tiny details of wildlife. He was simultaneously the master of the moment and the artist of the event.

- 4**  With the help of your dictionary, read an imaginary interview with two famous photographers in love with two famous men and guess who they are and who their lovers were.

Our real names are Gerta Pohorylle and Henriette Theodora Markovitch. We changed our names.

**G.P.:** "He taught me how to take photos. My lover's pseudonym means shark in Hungarian."

**H.T.M.:** "Your lover took some photos of my lover, a very famous painter. I painted too and I divided my time between painting and photography. The rise of Fascism in Europe in those years was a great spur and cohesive force to the French Left."

**G.P.:** "So both of us are committed artists, I suppose!"

**H.T.M.:** "Yes, we have several things in common, but where did you fall in love with him?"

**G.P.:** "We fell in love in the South of France."

**H.T.M.:** "I fell for my future demon lover, as they used to call him, in France too, in late 1935."

**G.P.:** "So the two of you met in 1935 and we left Paris the following year to go to Spain to cover the Republican Resistance to Franco's fascist rebels."

**H.T.M.:** "I know. After the four of us died, both of you on the frontline, Susana Fortes in her book, *Waiting for Robert Capa*, said that the famous photo your man shot in Spain contained all the drama of Goya's *Third May 1808* painting and all the rage that *Guernica*, painted by mine, would later show. I painted some of the vertical strokes on the horse of *Guernica*. The four of us would agree on what my lover said about painting: «Painting is not done to decorate apartments. It is an instrument of war against brutality and darkness». Just to lower the level of this conversation: did you know that a film called *The Mexican suitcase* was made in 2011? Gwyneth Paltrow was me in the 2013 film *33 Días: the myth no doubt takes over*."

**G.P.:** "Paltrow conveyed the surrealist qualities of your famous lover's muse, that is, you?!?"

**H.T.M.:** "Yes, and Banderas was him: that's Hollywood, baby!"





