THE MYTHICAL APPEAL OF THE FALLING SOLDIER (ROBERT CAPA, 1936)

War is propagated by myth and mythmakers, and photography is an element of this myth. The Falling Soldier is an iconic black-and-white photograph by the Hungarian-American photographer Robert Capa during the Spanish Civil War while he was embedded with the Republican-aligned Marxist Militia MOUM. The image depicts a Republican soldier at the moment of his death from a gunshot to his head. In this essay, I argue that The Falling Soldier is a powerful photograph that constructs and reinforces the myth of war.

Hedges writes about the press as active participants in war, serving actively to glorify and construct a tale around it, in War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning. As he explains, “The rush of battle is a potent and often lethal addiction, for war is a drug…It is peddled by mythmakers…war correspondents.” Hedges terms war a drug manufactured and marketed by the press, focusing on the “rush of battle”. The rush of battle is the thick of action that Hedges talks about. Unfortunately, it is also the time when people die. It is a metaphor for the feeling of intoxication that people supposedly feel in battle. Hedges blames the press as an institution, as well as individual correspondents, for their role in mythmaking. Capa, a war photographer, was one such mythmaker. He “made no pretense of journalistic detachment during the war — they were Communist partisans of the loyalist cause.” Capa, by his own admission, was a photographer who propagated the myth of the rush of war, once saying

2 See Image 3 in Appendix for focused view.
about the Spanish Civil War that “the war was kind of romantic.”

His political agenda influenced the way he used the camera to depict war.

Part of the myth surrounding this photograph, for viewers of Capa’s photos in the 1930s, was due to the enigma surrounding him. Gerda Taro, Capa’s professional partner and girlfriend, was responsible for the persona that was created for Robert Capa. Born Endre Friedmann, he moved to Paris to escape the anti-Semitism of the Nazis in 1933, where “penniless Hungarian photographers were hardly a rarity.” Friedmann was finding it hard to find clients for his work, so Taro and him crafted a mythical personality of the “rich, famous, fictitious American” Robert Capa. Capa was as good a photographer as he was a marketing genius, for he and Taro managed to create a personality that became the definitive war photographer of the period. It has been said that “observers were fascinated by the connection or contradiction between the self-creation of his personality and the stubborn realism of his photos.” This aura that he created resulted in a significantly improved reception of his work by audiences in the 1930s, which was when this photograph was taken. The myth of a second personality adds to the excitement about the war, and was a calculated move by Capa to leverage modern cameras and his view to craft a myth.

Capa crafts imagery of death to create a particularly impactful image. Hedge’s postulation that “war finds its meaning in death” expands on the iconography of war that Capa taps into to create The Falling Soldier. Portrayals of death are part of this iconography that helps weave a myth that can be used to wage war and justify it. A photograph of the exact moment of death, like The Falling Soldier,
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shows a moment of vulnerability. *The Falling Soldier* shows a soldier running with a rifle, but getting shot down. Capa uses this moment of death and vulnerability to craft the myth of bravery and heroism, and the rush of war, into the mythical photograph he creates. Capa refers to the notion of an honorable death during war, by immortalizing the supreme sacrifice of the person for the Republican cause in *The Falling Soldier*, feeding into the rush that war brings for the viewer.

*The Falling Soldier* was a revolutionary photograph for it exploited advancements in technology that were not possible before the Spanish Civil War. During the Crimean War, Roger Fenton was dispatched to the Crimean Peninsula by the British to document the war. The primitive technology that Fenton used consisted of wet plates that needed to be developed very quickly, and entailed him travelling with a horse-drawn darkroom, severely hampering mobility. Exposure times were many seconds long, which resulted in photographs being posed for, and hence showing unreal depictions of camp life and no depiction of war itself. By 1936, developments in camera technology had liberated the camera from the tripod, and made the film cameras that Capa used portable and compact\(^1\), akin to today’s cameras. They used 35mm film that did not need to be developed instantly, so Capa could stay embedded on the frontlines with troops for longer periods of time without having to develop his film. Exposure times were now in fractions of seconds. All this contributed to the agility that was the hallmark of Capa, who leveraged this new-found technological innovation to his advantage. The Spanish Civil War was the first major conflict to be covered through the lens of the modern 35mm film camera. Capa’s *The Falling Soldier* was one of the earliest photographs to depict the exact moment of death in action, and was certainly the first widely published photograph of such kind of imagery. The point in time at which the photograph was published was crucial to the construction of the myth, for it was the first time where action in war reached the eyes of viewers. The initial creation of the

myth of the rush of war came from the lack of photographs depicting action and severe damage in previous years, as viewers were not numbed by a constant barrage of photographs depicting suffering and death.

Capa’s myth, in part, stems from the depiction of the man in the image. The Republican soldier being depicted is not dressed in a uniform and does not have any insignia on him that would suggest a formal association with the Republicans. The attire of the soldier in this photograph helps transform it and makes it into a symbol. The man is wearing a pair of trousers and a white shirt with rolled up sleeves. This characterized the man as the man who could be one’s next door neighbor, and in a way, brings the war home. The man was symbolic of the common man. This projects an even deeper myth into the photograph, one that spins the war not just that of armies fighting against each other, but of ordinary people taking up arms to fight fascism. The spinning of the narrative of war into that of the war of, by and for the ordinary person was not entirely true, but it served as an effective myth and a call to action.

Capa not only carefully crafted a myth about himself, but also the subject of the photograph through his photographic technique. The entire right half of the photograph is empty space which the soldier dying looks into. The body of the dying soldier is where the action takes place, in the left half of the frame. His gaze gives meaning to the empty space to the right of the photograph. It seems like the moment of death has been frozen forever, a terrifying prospect. The empty space adds to the aura of the image, and the myth behind it. Capa also manages to effectively divide the photograph into thirds, effectively exploiting a compositional rule called the rule of thirds. As seen in Image 2 of the Appendix, Capa places crucial parts of the photograph on an equally spaced grid that ensures that

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12 See Image 3 of Appendix.
13 See Image 4 of Appendix.
14 See Image 2 of Appendix.
the image, while off-center, is a very strong image that is capable of giving the viewer insight into the surrounding environment of the soldier and allows space for interaction.

The composition of the photograph interacts with the moment in time at which the photograph was taken by Capa to add to the myth of the rush of war. In Image 3 of the Appendix, the bullet shot is in focus. The headshot is particularly fascinating for the photograph manages to capture the impact of the entry of the bullet into the head, ruffling his otherwise well-made hair. This creates a contrast with the image, and is also the highest point of the soldier. By using the headshot, Capa signifies that death in war is clean and quick. Hedges writes that “The myth of war entices us with the allure of heroism.”\textsuperscript{15} Hedges’ position is that war is justified and fueled by a desire to create heroes of mortals. War gives normal people a chance to lead a second life of adventure and heroism. Capa’s depiction of the man falling is also graceful. It shows no sign of pain and discomfort, and the soldier’s fall is almost dance-like, giving the fall and the image an ethereal quality.\textsuperscript{16} The background of the mountains and green pastures enhances this ethereal quality of his death. The grace of the death and the lack of depiction of pain feeds the myth of the rush of war, making it seem more like a game.

The viewers are one of the most integral parts of the mythmaking process. Capa says while specifically talking about \textit{The Falling Soldier} that “the prized picture is born in the imagination of public…who see it.”\textsuperscript{17} The image was not formally titled \textit{The Falling Soldier}- it is titled as “SPAIN. Córdoba front. Early September, 1936. Death of a loyalist militiaman.”\textsuperscript{18} It is integral to highlight the role of the viewer in the mythmaking process, for it plays an essential part that is overlooked by Hedges. The viewers commonly refer to the image at \textit{The Falling Soldier}, resulting in the name being

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\textsuperscript{16} See Image 5 of Appendix.
\end{footnotesize}
appropriated. They propagate the myth by creating dramatic titles and sharing images. The changing of the title manages to decontextualize the photograph, giving it a timeless character. The official title is just a formal description of the photograph with the approximate time during the year when it was taken and where, but the title given to it by viewers is *The Falling Soldier*, which removes any mention of the time, place and context that surrounded the taking of the photograph. This makes the image of a soldier being shot and falling to his death, a common theme across conflict. De-contextualization of the image also helps craft the potency of the myth of the rush of war, for the person could be anyone, from any time, running and being shot down. This creates endless possibilities for appropriation of this icon.

*The Falling Soldier* is one of the most enduring and iconic photographs of death and action during war. Through this image, Capa pushes the viewer to find meaning in the moment of death of a person. Capa’s style and skill mark this as a groundbreaking image that pushed the boundaries of the photographic medium when it was taken, and continues to have a strong appeal four score years later. Its effectiveness at the time of publishing was remarkable, for it managed to “crystallize support for the Republican cause”\(^\text{19}\). *The Falling Soldier*’s myth laid the groundwork for some of the most important war photography since then, serving as a grand reference point, while the decontextualisation of the image gave it a timeless quality, allowing it to resonate with generations of viewers.

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**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


APPENDIX: DIFFERENT VIEWS OF *THE FALLING SOLDIER*

**Note:** All images below are created with the use of the file in Image 1 and Adobe Photoshop CS6.

IMAGE 1: ORIGINAL
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IMAGE 2: GRIDS OF THIRDS

IMAGE 3: BULLET SHOT TO HEAD AND HAND BEHIND THIGH IN FOCUS
IMAGE 4: QUADRANTS

IMAGE 5: FACIAL EXPRESSION