

Under the shadow of Robert Capa: local photojournalists in the Spanish Civil War (Teresa Panisello)

Abstract

Photojournalism played such a decisive role during the Spanish Civil War that it has gone down in the history of communication as the "birth of a new form of visual communication" (Colombo, 1997). According to Colombo, a new relationship emerged between photographer, camera and tragedy:

The human point of view appears (participation, passion, compassion), which connects the author with the event, and the technical point of view (which also includes the *aesthetic vision*), which connects the author with his instrument and which is expressed in the frame, in the contrast, in the choice of the *perfect* moment and in the *beauty* of the opportunity (1997, p.140).

For the first time, new technical developments (e.g. small cameras, 24x36mm negative, flash, photogravure printing) and the transformation of photography as a language that had developed during the 1920s came together in a conflict. As Brothers summarises: "Coinciding with the establishment of the great picture magazines of the thirties, it was the first war to be extensively and freely photographed for a mass audience and marks the establishment of modern war photography as we know". (1997, p. 2).

Of the dozens of photojournalists who covered this war, only one became well known: Andrei Friedman (1913-1954), known internationally as Robert Capa. Towards the end of 1938, the English magazine *Picture Post* proclaimed him "the world's best war photographer" for his report on the Battle of the Segre, which followed other reports on events in Spain since September 1936. (Whelan, 2007). He was 25 years old, and this was his first war.

Thus, the myth of the war photographer was modernized through a media that was in a constant state of technological development and a public that was fascinated by images reproduced technically in mass society. Eighty years later, the omnipresence of "the Capa myth" on the collective imagination has eclipsed all other foreign correspondents and, especially, local photojournalists. (Ferré, 2018).

The key date for the incipient modernisation of Spanish photojournalism was 1909, when professionals of Madrid covered the war in Melilla and those in Barcelona the revolution known as Tragic Week. From then on, in the Catalan capital, two generations of reporters forged and made photojournalism evolve until it reached the splendour of the Second Republic.

This research focuses in the most important ones. From the most veteran, Josep Brangulí, Alessandro Merletti and Josep Badosa, who already published their work in the press during the Tragic Week, to Carlos Pérez de Rozas, Josep Maria Sagarra and Pablo Luis Torrents, who reached professional their maturity with the Universal Exhibition of 1929, to Agustí Centelles, the youngest. Centelles is the most widely recognised for this work during the civil war, to the point to being called "the Spanish Robert Capa" since the Transition to democracy.

The aim is to show their contribution to the iconography of the conflict, the Spanish and international media in which they were published, and their relationship with the Republican propaganda organisations that also disseminated their images.

Bio

Teresa Ferré Panisello (1974) is a lecturer in History of Journalism and History of Communication at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB). Her field of research is photojournalism, especially in the interwar period, and Iberian anarchism from a graphic perspective. Her doctoral thesis focuses on the figure of the photographer Agustí Centelles Ossó. She is also a cultural journalist, exhibition curator and independent researcher at the Observatori de la Vida Quotidiana (OVQ), where she is part of the team that has been promoting the project www.reportersgrafics.net since 2014, which aims to vindicate the pioneers of photojournalism in Barcelona.