
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Narrative Rhetoric of the Spanish Civil War: Examples from the Works of Three Left-wing Artists During the War

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| ABSTRACT

The Spanish Civil War, which broke out on July 17, 1936, has great significance throughout history. This civil war was a rehearsal for the Second World War that broke out later. Different national forces and different ideologies clashed and collided fiercely in Spain. This article will start with three left-wing artists who participated in the Spanish Civil War in different ways, Pablo Picasso, Ernest Hemingway, and Robert Capa, and analyze how these artists' works spread the special narrative of the Spanish Civil War. This article will use a documentary analysis approach to analyze the connotations that these three artists want to express through their different works. This article will also analyze how these artists played an important role in consolidating anti-fascist and anti-war consensus through their unique media.

| KEYWORDS

Spanish Civil War, Pablo Picasso, Ernest Hemingway, Robert Capa, Narrative Rhetoric.

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1. Introduction

On July 17, 1936, due to serious ideological differences, economic crisis, and the rise of regional nationalism, the Spanish Civil War between the Republicans and the Nationalists broke out. This three-year civil war was undoubtedly a landmark turbulent stage in history. In the civil war, different political ideologies clashed, and different opinions resonated throughout Europe. The serious Political and ideological divisions led to the intervention of forces from different countries in the Spanish Civil War. The former US Ambassador to Spain Bowers (2018) thought that the Spanish Civil War was the dress rehearsal for World War II. In addition to soldiers and volunteers who directly participated in the conflicts during the civil war, many artists also made unique contributions during the war. Just like left-wing artists Pablo Picasso, Ernest Hemingway, and Robert Capa they all participated in this war in different ways. The identity of the artists determined that their participation in the Spanish Civil War would differ from that of ordinary volunteers. The artists would attempt to capture the essence of this conflict and use different media to record and spread important events that occurred during the Spanish Civil War. Due to the involvement of the artists in the war and their creations during the war, they shaped narratives about the Spanish Civil War in the field of art from aspects such as war and humanity. As Susan Sontag (2002) explained in an article in *The New Yorker*, "The Spanish Civil War was the first war to be witnessed ('covered') in the modern sense: by a corps of professional photographers at the lines of military engagement and in the towns under bombardment, whose works were immediately seen in newspapers and magazines in Spain and abroad." In fact, not only photographers but also painters and writers shaped and spread the special narrative of the Spanish Civil War to people around the world through their unique media. By understanding the works of these left-wing artists such as Pablo Picasso, Ernest Hemingway, and Robert Capa, we can gain insight into the impact of the roles played by these artists on the historical narrative of the Spanish Civil War. These artists not only captured the essence of conflict in their creations but also helped the readers better understand the Spanish Civil War through powerful media. These artists played an important role in consolidating consensus on anti-fascist and anti-war, becoming the key contributors to the historical narrative of the Spanish Civil War.

2. War in Painting: The Spanish Civil War as depicted by Picasso

As an iconic Spanish painter and sculptor, Pablo Picasso used one of his most famous works, *Guernica*, to depict the terror of the Spanish Civil War and shape people's understanding of it.

2.1 Picasso and Guernica

This great work constituted a narrative of the Spanish Civil War, shocking the world. On 26 April 1937, warplanes of the Nazi Germany Condor Legion bombed the Basque town of Guernica, which resulted in the death of tens of thousands of civilians. The bombing almost razed Guernica. At that time, Picasso was working for the Second Spanish Republic government. After he received the information about the bombing, he painted *Guernica* at his home in Paris in response to the bombing of Guernica. In this massive oil painting, Picasso depicted the miserable scene of the town of Guernica bombed by the fascist army. At the center of the composition, an injured horse and a bull convulse in pain, while a large number of twisted and painful figures are depicted around them, their bodies contorted and fragmented (Picasso, 1937). It is evident from this painting that the characters are in extreme pain, and the painting is predominantly gray, black, and white, intensifying emotional impact and highlighting the cruel consequences of war. *Guernica's* content strongly proved the terror of war and the indiscriminate suffering it causes to civilians. Picasso's superb skills also created a heartfelt and emotional experience for the audience. This provided the audience with a direct understanding of the destruction and brutality caused by the Spanish Civil War. As Herschel Browning Chipp pointed out, Picasso's final creation of *Guernica* was vastly different from the theme of the works he originally intended to create, and this change was precisely caused by the atrocities committed by the fascist army during the Spanish Civil War (Chipp & Tusell, 1988). In the process of *Guernica's* creation, the key elements of painting and the alteration of drawing objects made *Guernica* a symbol, as well as a very personalized declaration. As Picasso said, "A picture is not thought out and settled beforehand. While it is being done, it changes as one's thoughts change." The atrocities that occurred during the Spanish Civil War led Picasso to change his ideas and resolve to showcase his views through his own artistic works (Chipp & Tusell, 1988).

2.2 Guernica: Narrative about the Spanish Civil War

Essentially, artwork is a medium used by artists to express the world from a unique perspective. Picasso's *Guernica* was a milestone work in the narrative of the Spanish Civil War. As *Guernica* continued to be exhibited around the world, Picasso's exquisite painting skills quickly made this painting famous and widely acclaimed. The creative background of this masterpiece also attracted people to pay more attention to the facts that occurred during the Spanish Civil War. Sibelius (2017) points out that Picasso once said that his mission as an artist was to constantly fight against reactionaries and the death of art, and in *Guernica*, Picasso believed that he showed his fear of the destruction that the military class was causing to Spain. As Picasso said, he used his talent to solidify a microcosm of the Spanish Civil War into an oil painting called *Guernica*, and this painting's depiction of the Spanish Civil War sparked global condemnation of Nazi atrocities. Picasso's clever use of symbolism, composition, and scale created a heartfelt and emotional experience for the audience. Picasso's paintings thus became a medium to protest the rise of fascism, praise the resilience of the Spanish people, and shape the narrative of the Spanish Civil War from an anti-fascist and anti-war perspective. *Guernica* was not forgotten by history with the failure of the Spanish republican cause. Instead, it was constantly awakened by new historical events and gradually ascended to the altar, becoming an eternal symbol of anti-war.

3. Hemingway: War in Reporting and Fiction

In addition to Picasso, American novelist and journalist Ernest Hemingway was also deeply involved in the Spanish Civil War, and through his reports, novels, and script, he demonstrated the brutality of war and truthfully recorded what happened during the war.

3.1 Hemingway and War Reporting

In 1937, Hemingway went to Spain and began writing reports on the Spanish Civil War, which were published by the North American Newspaper Alliance (NANA). After arriving in Spain from Paris, he bravely went to the front line to report on the Spanish Civil War. In his report published on April 27, 1938, Hemingway provided a detailed description of the situation of civilians displaced by war. Meanwhile, he also reported on the situation of the Lincoln and Washington Brigades. The tragic experiences of civilians and the difficulties faced by international Brigades portrayed in this report provided a detailed description of the harm caused to civilians by the Spanish Civil War and the difficulties faced by volunteers coming to International Brigades, showcasing the brutality of war (Rose, 2004). In addition to personally reporting on the front line, Hemingway also actively participated in many pro-Republican propaganda activities. For example, Hemingway was signed on to work with Dutch filmmaker Joris Ivens as a screenwriter for the film *The Spanish Earth*. After being broadcasted in the United States in July 1937, *the Spanish Earth* promoted aid from countries around the world to the government of the Republic of Spain (Muller, 2019). In July 1937, the *Second International Congress of Writers in Defense of Culture* was held in Barcelona and Valencia. Hemingway and the famous writer Pablo Neruda attended the conference together to discuss the attitudes of intellectuals toward the Spanish Civil War (Thomas, 2001). At

this meeting, Hemingway presented his views to many colleagues and actively persuaded others to join the side of supporting the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War.

3.2 The Fifth Column and the First Forty-Nine Stories and For Whom the Bell Tolls: The War in Hemingway's Novels and Plays

Hemingway also expressed his political views during the Spanish Civil War through his literary creations. In October 1938, Ernest Hemingway published *The Fifth Column and the First Forty-Nine Stories*. *The Fifth Column* is Hemingway's only full-length play set during the Spanish Civil War. Its main character, Philip Rawlings, was a secret agent for the Second Spanish Republic born in the United States (Hemingway, 1939). The theme of this play is a condemnation of the war; generally, people believe that Philip Rawlings is Hemingway (Baker, 1973). After the end of the Spanish Civil War, on the basis of his experience as a reporter, Hemingway wrote one of his most prominent novels, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. This novel was set in the Spanish Civil War and told the story of an American dynamiter, Robert Jordan, who fought alongside republican guerrillas. Hemingway's novel provided a detailed portrayal of the brutality of war and the role played by ideological conflicts in this civil war. The portrayal of different characters showcased the ideological conflicts between Nationalists and Republicans during the Spanish Civil War, as well as the ideological differences within Republicans (Hemingway, 2002). The close relationship between Hemingway and many commanders at the Brigades, as well as his multiple experiences of observing and documenting the war on the front lines, fully proved the authenticity of the content of his reports and novels (Muller, 2019). And this authenticity provided resonance for readers. This allowed Hemingway's exploration and portrayal of the complexity of the Spanish Civil War and its consequences in his works to provide a detailed and enduring narrative of this crucial historical event. Throughout the entire process of the Spanish Civil War, people around the world obtained information about the war through various media. Newspapers, movies, and novels were very influential media during times of war. Hemingway successfully utilized these media to construct a writer's narrative about the Spanish Civil War. Through these media, the world was able to understand the situation of the Spanish Civil War.

4. Robert Capa: The Spanish Civil War in Photography

In addition to writers and painters, photographers also captured the true situation of the war during the Spanish Civil War to help the world understand the truth behind what happened in Spain at this time. As a Hungarian American war photographer, Robert Capa worked in Spain during the Spanish Civil War, and his camera was his weapon. Capa famously said, "If your pictures aren't good enough, you aren't close enough" (Capa et al., 2001).

4.1 Robert Capa and The Falling Soldier

During the Spanish Civil War, Capa was active on the front lines of the war alongside Republican soldiers. Through his realistic and heart wrenching images, Capa showcased the harsh reality of the Spanish Civil War to global audiences. In Capa's iconic work *The Falling Soldier* (1936), he captured the moment when a Republican soldier was hit and killed by a bullet. The soldier's body twisted into a dynamic and dramatic posture, leaving a deep impression on all viewers (Capa, 1936). Although the authenticity of this photo has been questioned in terms of its true location and the identity of the subject being photographed (Whelan, 2002), as *Picture Post* points out, Capa was still known as the greatest war photographer in the world (Davenport, 1999). Capa was good at capturing the decisive moments and recording real war scenes with strong visual impact, allowing viewers to feel the cruelty and tension of the war. Capa's photos humanized war by capturing the faces and emotions of people in the crossfire. He often stayed on the front line with soldiers, establishing a close connection between the audience and the filming subjects. Therefore, Capa's works often had a strong visual impact and successfully allowed people to get up close to understand the brutality of the Spanish war. His photos focused on depicting the lives of civilians, injured soldiers, and the consequences of war, conveying a profound humanistic sentiment. Perhaps the camera itself cannot prevent war, but photos not only reveal the cruelty of war but also convey a desire for peace.

4.2 The Narrative Rhetoric of The Falling Soldier

With the spread of the photos, *The Falling Soldier* also achieved both symbolic and aesthetic functions after successfully completing its original purpose. Because over the years, this photo has become a symbol of Franco's repression and the Spanish Civil War. This image had spread throughout the world and appeared in all history books of the 20th century. It has made this photo go beyond its pure cognitive function, becoming a symbol, and also fulfills its aesthetic function, making people moved by the beauty of its composition when analyzing this photo. As Clavería López (2015) concluded, this photo also allowed people to explore the brutality of the Spanish Civil War. At the moment when the young soldier who supported the republican government was hit in the head by enemy bullets, people easily felt that death was so real and war could easily take a young life in a few seconds. Although the young soldier died in the photo, it did not symbolize the victory of Franco's fascist army. On the contrary, this photo sparked people's anger towards Franco's fascist army. The anger sparked by the death of young soldiers could inspire soldiers who support the Republican government to bravely fight against the Nationalist force. It is precisely because of this that even after the end of the Spanish Civil War, this photo can still serve as a symbol of Republican soldiers who remained uncompromising and never gave up resistance against fascist forces during the war. In addition, this photo also allows people to understand the cruel

facts of the Spanish Civil War. The audience also had a profound memory of this civil war as a result. Capa's visual narrative not only documented the Spanish Civil War but also fundamentally changed war photography by emphasizing the human side of the conflict. His works demonstrated the impact of war on individuals and groups, fostering empathy and understanding. The war is a disaster for both sides, and there is no winner, which encourages people to bravely say no to the war.

5. Conclusion

The Spanish Civil War that occurred in the 20th century not only became the front line of ideological conflicts, but its brutal conflict process and consequences also promoted the development of artistic expressions and the spread of influence of related artworks during the war. Many left-wing artists participated in the Spanish Civil War in their respective artistic styles, showcasing war to the world from the artist's perspective and expressing their political views. Just like Hemingway, Picasso, and Capa, their contributions in the fields of painting, literature, and photography successfully captured the complexity of human experiences in political turmoil and left a lasting impact on the depiction of the Spanish Civil War. Although this war had gone far away, the narratives of these artists about the Spanish Civil War had been permanently preserved. Their works continued to resonate and serve as a powerful reminder of the indelible mark left by the Spanish Civil War in art, literature, and public perception.

In addition, as a war in human history that had been narrated by intellectuals, artists, and writers using various media, the Spanish War also brings us to think about war narratives. In the era of highly developed Internet and social media, similar things are happening again, such as the current Russian-Ukrainian war is called the "live war." Through the Internet and social media, we see extremely real and shocking war scenes, air strikes, bombings, ground battles, and soldiers' deaths... all of which are shown one by one in the media. There are also different narratives about this war on the Internet. War and the narrative of war are equally worthy of attention, which is also an important revelation that the Spanish Civil War brings to us.

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