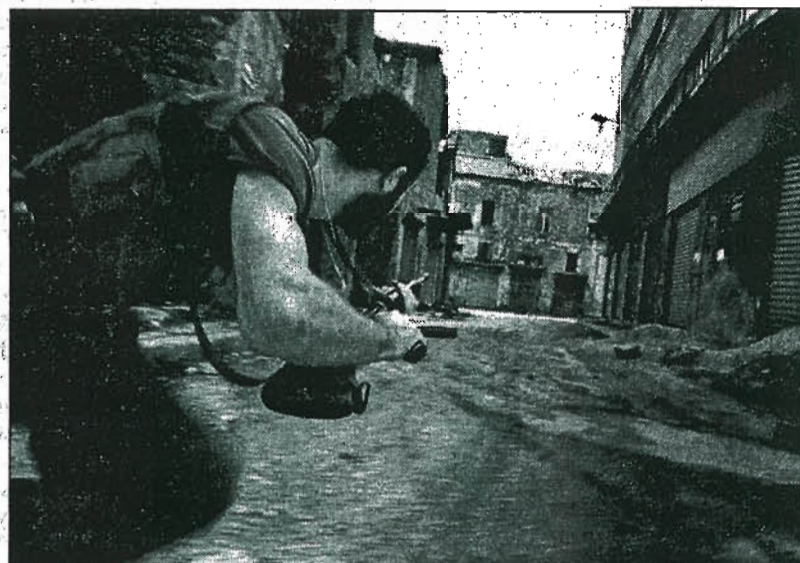


BOOK REVIEW

History in Focus

How a bold, embattled photo agency captured world events — and transformed photojournalism



Photos from "Magnum"

Left: Constantine Manos' shot of a woman at the South Carolina funeral of her nephew, who was killed in Vietnam, 1966. Above: Raymond Depardon's photo of a Christian Phalangist militiaman firing his rifle in Beirut, Lebanon, 1978

MAGNUM Fifty Years at the Front Line of History

By Russell Miller

Grove Press, 324 pages, \$27

Reviewed by Sarah Coleman

Magnum, the world's most prestigious and talented photo agency, is also its most factionalized and impoverished. While its members have produced some of the defining photojournalism of the 20th century, they've also been responsible for temper tantrums and fights on a scale rarely seen outside kindergarten. As British journalist Russell Miller writes in his introduction to "Magnum: Fifty Years at the Front Line of History," theirs is "a cracking good story," and one he proceeds to tell with wit and energy.

It begins in the 1930s, with the charismatic war photographer Robert Capa. A handsome Hungarian with a

taste for gambling and other men's wives, Capa was a penniless emigre in Paris when he met up with fellow photographers Henri Cartier-Bresson and David "Chim" Seymour. The three soon set off for the Spanish Civil War, where Capa's visceral (and much-debated) photograph of a dying Loyalist soldier established a new standard in war photojournalism. Capa's photographs from the front showed war "as it had never been seen before," writes Miller, "so close to the action you could see the fear in the eyes of the troops and almost feel the boom of artillery."

Back in Paris, Capa grew angry at editors who obliged him to give over his images' copyright and dreamed of an independent photo agency. He would establish one, along with Chim, Cartier-Bresson and British photographer George Rodger. In 1947, Capa organized a lunch at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and announced

► FOCUS: See Page 6

FOCUS

From Page 1

the foundation of Magnum, though with characteristic one-upmanship he was the only charter member present at the gathering.

Magnum's early years provide Miller with plenty of material for an absorbing narrative. Through extensive interviews and research into Magnum's archives, he shows the ways in which the agency's four founders steered photojournalism away from illustration and toward art — all while they argued fiercely about their various assignments. The naturally reticent Chim and Cartier-Bresson, flamboyant Capa and sensible Rodger made up “the unlikeliest band of brothers imaginable,” writes Miller, but each was capable of capturing what Cartier-Bresson would come to call “the decisive moment” in photography.

Miller deftly conveys the excitement of being a photojournalist at a time when world events were unfolding at a furious pace and photography, not yet challenged by television, was the dominant visual medium. In 1947 alone, we learn, Cartier-Bresson was to achieve a major scoop with his pictures of Gandhi's assassination, while Capa delivered rousing material on the foundation of Israel and on everyday life in Russia at the outbreak of the Cold War.

As he chronicles Magnum's expansion to more than 50 members, it's to Miller's credit that the various personalities and their issues remain distinct. Ernst Haas, the first Magnum photographer to work in color and move beyond traditional photojournalism, is recalled by Magnum secretary Inge Bondi as “a slender,



From “Magnum”

Although known for its war photography, Magnum also had a lighter side, evident in Elliot Erwitt's shot from New York City, 1974.

lightly stepping young man with a shock of hair that rose like cascades in a Chinese landscape.” And, with a journalist's nose for a good story, Miller gives over a whole chapter to Magnum photographer W. Eugene Smith, whose obsessiveness turned a two-week assignment on Pittsburgh into a multiyear saga that almost bankrupted the agency.

As Miller notes, the issues that have divided Magnum's members are endemic to photojournalism. Wisely, he lets the photographers speak for themselves on topics ranging from the ethics of profiting from human misery to whether photojournalists should aspire to the title of “artist” — but he makes their disagreements highly entertaining. At one annual meeting, he notes, “the shouting got so bad that Erich Lessing, who is a professor of photography in Vienna and was then in his 60s, was obliged to clamber on

to a table, stamp his feet and bellow at the top of his voice to try to restore order.” Over and over, the interviewees liken Magnum to a family. “Oh yes, we're a family,” snarls photographer Ferdinando Scianna. “I hate my family.”

Filled with colorful characters and world-shaking events, the story of Magnum is a gift to any biographer. Miller navigates its chaotic waters with grace and humor. Oddly, the only omission is photographic — it's a shame that more key photos by Magnum members couldn't be included in the book (a small selection is featured). But this lively account should engage anyone interested in modern history, artists' collectives or the ethics of photojournalism — and anyone who simply likes a cracking good story. ■

Sarah Coleman contributes to Photo Metro and other publications.