





Big shots: Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, photographed in 1963 by Eve Arnold at the local pub in Shepperton, England, where Burton was filming *Becket*. Elizabeth's packet of sausages would be cooked for her dinner by the chef at her hotel.

A MOMENT IN TIME

A great photograph can open a window on history for all of us, and for 60 years many of the most famous images of all have been captured by members of the photographic co-operative Magnum Photos. **Robert McFarlane** reports.

Elegant composition, coupled with the sensitive portrayal of often vulnerable human subjects. Compassion without sentimentality. Since 1947, when the agency was founded in New York, these have been the hallmarks of a Magnum photograph. Today its enormous archive, much of it in black and white, forms a catalogue of the critical events and catastrophes that have afflicted the world.

But Magnum Photos has been concerned with more than just politics and tragedy over the past six decades. Photographers such as Elliott Erwitt leavened Magnum's traditional appetite for social issues with their wry humour. The co-operative's photographers also anticipated changing social and artistic currents after World War II – especially in cinema.

When Frank Taylor, producer of John Huston's *The Misfits*, invited Magnum photojournalists to visit the film's Nevada desert location in 1960, it changed forever how films would be publicised, especially in America. Each Magnum photographer, from Henri Cartier-Bresson to Elliott Erwitt and Inge Morath, brought an independent vision and, above all, sensitivity to covering the making of Huston's enduring, elegiac film.

Their response was to photograph what they found – not fabricate predictable publicity pictures. In the process, their images redefined the fading image of film legend Marilyn Monroe, then working on what would be her last completed film, scripted by her husband, playwright Arthur Miller. The natural warmth of Cornell Capa's black-and-white close-up of Clark Gable and Monroe (page 22) assumes added poignancy considering both died soon after the film was finished. In an extraordinary postscript, Magnum photographer



Inge Morath would marry Arthur Miller in 1962, six months before Monroe's death.

Traditionally, photographers were invited to join Magnum for their visual style as much as for the intimate, human content of their pictures. From the co-operative photo agency's founding – appropriately for bon-vivant co-founder Robert Capa in the penthouse restaurant of New York's Museum of Modern Art – Magnum attracted the best eyes of each generation.

There is a story told of a talented young *Life* photographer who approached Magnum in the late 1950s, when its members were redefining magazine photojournalism, especially in photo essays. Feeling confident, he asked whether he might be invited to join the famous co-operative. "We like your pictures," came the measured response of Magnum's Cornell Capa, "we think you're very talented. But we are only hiring genius." The young photographer left crestfallen and angry but recovered to build an impressive, if not stellar, international career.

Such Magnum "chutzpah" probably derived from one of its founders, Robert Capa, whose initial fame as a photojournalist was not so much earned as invented. Growing up Jewish in right-wing Hungary, the handsome, charismatic young student – then named Andre Friedmann – was a member of many leftist organisations. The rise of



Close encounters: (clockwise from top) Alek Soth's Canadian image *Impala*, 2005; Magnum co-founder Robert Capa's 1938 image of loyalist troops during an offensive along the Rio



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Segre near Fraga, during the Spanish Civil War; in Polish photographer David Seymour's 1948 image, Teresa, who grew up in a concentration camp, draws a picture of "home" on a blackboard.



fascism and an already well-developed instinct for survival saw him move to Paris in 1933 for both his personal safety and a career in photography.

When little interest was expressed in the pictures he was taking early in that politically turbulent decade, the young Hungarian reinvented himself. Conspiring with his talented Polish photo-journalist girlfriend Gerda Taro, Friedmann assumed the identity of a supposedly famous (but non-existent) American photographer on assignment in Europe.

The pair named this mythical celebrity Robert Capa, intending to appropriate the surname of popular American film director Frank Capra. However, typically for someone who spoke five languages, few of them well, the young man misspelled Capra's name. Gerda Taro contacted magazine editors saying Robert Capa's pictures were available for publication at 150 francs each – three times the going rate.

THAT FRIEDMANN WAS ALREADY A FINE photojournalist helped this conceit succeed for a time. In 1932 his first published photograph had captured the fiery, fist-shaking oratory of Leon Trotsky in Copenhagen – in close-up and with the beginnings of the Capa visceral, personal style. Capa would famously declare, “If your pictures aren’t good enough, you’re not close enough.” He later modified this to a more enigmatic and confusing, “If your pictures are not good enough, perhaps you are too close.” Capa also once argued that “it was not enough to have talent ... you must also be Hungarian!”

Eventually Capa and Taro's ploy was discovered by Lucien Vogel, their editor at *Vue* magazine,



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Magnum force: (above) in Jonas Bendiksen's 2000 photograph, Russian villagers collect scrap from a crashed spacecraft, surrounded by white butterflies; (left) the departure of a military train from Barcelona for the front was captured in this 1936 Robert Capa image from the Spanish Civil War; (below) in 1960 Cornell Capa, Robert's brother, captured Clark Gable and Marilyn Monroe on the scene of *The Misfits*.





Between them, Magnum co-founders Capa, Cartier-Bresson and Seymour had covered the Spanish Civil War, the Sino-Japanese conflict and World War II.

Now and then:
(clockwise from above)
Trent Parke's *Town Hall Station, Sydney, Australia 2006*; George Rodger's 1940 vision of life in

London during the Blitz; refugees exercising to drive away lethargy and despair in Henri Cartier-Bresson's 1947 image of a camp in the Punjab.

who was still sufficiently impressed by Capa's pictures to commission him and Taro to cover the Spanish Civil War.

There Capa took a now legendary 1936 photograph of a Loyalist soldier apparently at the precise moment he was killed by gunfire. The controversial picture, and Capa's wider coverage of this bloody prelude to World War II, would make him famous. His career as a photojournalist prospered and his photographs of civilians experiencing air attacks for the first time were widely published. Tragically, Capa would lose his companion Gerda Taro in 1937 when she was fatally injured by an out-of-control Loyalist tank.

When Capa invited George Rodger, Henri Cartier-Bresson and David (Chim) Seymour to form Magnum in 1947, it was primarily to establish and protect ownership of pictures for which they had sometimes risked their lives. Magnum would also encourage each photographer to freely pursue projects of their choice. The founding of Magnum Photos effectively invented photographers' copyright.

From the beginning Capa had understood that he and his gifted, courageous colleagues were witnessing history with their compact Contax, Leica and Rolleiflex cameras. Consider the combined life experience Capa, Cartier-Bresson and Seymour (Rodger was unable to attend) brought to the historic founding meeting at the Museum





of Modern Art in April 1947. Between them, they had covered the Spanish Civil War, the Sino-Japanese conflict and World War II. Henri Cartier-Bresson had escaped from imprisonment in Germany and joined the French Resistance, while Robert Capa, ever the gambler, chose to go ashore on D-Day in 1944 at Omaha Beach and photograph the first wave of US forces invading German-occupied France. David Seymour had documented the Spanish Civil War for two years and been decorated for his service with US Intelligence in World War II.

George Rodger had photographed the liberation of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp and been traumatised by documenting the effects of the Holocaust. In the 1989 book *In Our Time – The World As Seen By Magnum Photographers*, Fred Ritchin wrote that Rodger had found it “obscene to ... frame ... atrocities in [the] viewfinder – getting the dead into nice photographic compositions”.

After helping found Magnum, George Rodger decided “to get away where the air was clean” and began a 50,000-kilometre odyssey through tribal Africa “to find and depict a purity of [the] human experience”. His pictures, especially of the Nuba wrestling culture, influenced generations of photojournalists from Leni Riefenstahl to this year’s winner of the W. Eugene Smith Grant in Humanistic Photography, Australia’s Stephen Dupont.

NOW, 60 YEARS LATER, MAGNUM PHOTOS has published an epic survey of the survival and prosperity of the extraordinary co-operative photo agency in *Magnum Magnum*, in which today’s member photographers comment on fellow members’ pictures. It is a book

History in the making: in Thomas Hoepker’s version of September 11, 2001, young people chat while a huge plume of smoke rises in the background following the attack on the World Trade Centre.

worthy of its title in size as well, with a shipping weight of more than seven kilograms.

There are signs in the book that the agency has reinvented itself for the changing photographic market of the 21st century. Even as print markets decline, a wave of younger photographers joining the co-operative promise an evolving new language in photojournalism, including digital photography. Where Magnum’s pioneers used miniature Leica and Contax cameras for lightness, portability and work in low light, Alec Soth, for example, chooses a massive 20cm x 25cm camera to create his large, ironic, explicit environmental portraits. Soth’s studied vision has few precedents at Magnum, with the possible exception of Bruce Davidson’s large-format portraiture from his 1966 book, *East 100th Street*.

Magnum Magnum is also an acknowledgement of the art world’s belated embrace of documentary photography as fine art. Soth’s recent exhibition at New York’s Gagosian Gallery explored – in the peerless detail only large-format photography can give – an introspective, off-balance America, recalling the pioneering visions of Diane Arbus and Bruce Davidson. A single colour print was reported to have sold for close to Robert Capa’s entire fee for his 1948 Magnum assignment in Russia, and Soth’s total sales reached six figures.

It is easy to see what attracted the legendary photographers’ co-operative to offer Australia’s Trent Parke full membership in Magnum. Parke has consistently striven to create a visual signature that sets a human presence against the extreme scale of often bleak urban environments. That

Parke achieves this with a sense of light that seems to dance between citizens and high-rise cityscapes, as in *Town Hall Station, Sydney, Australia 2006*, makes his acceptance into Magnum anything but surprising.

Colour emerges as an important factor in Magnum’s new photography. Thomas Hoepker’s relaxed observation of September 11, 2001, shows four men and a woman sitting beside New York harbour, across which the twin towers of the World Trade Centre and much of Lower Manhattan have vanished beneath a pall of smoke. Astonishingly, no one seems to be looking at the disaster, with all absorbed in conversation.

In a surprisingly poetic comment on technological pollution, Jonas Bendiksen’s 2000 colour photograph shows Russian youths scavenging scrap from a spent, damaged spacecraft lying in a country field amid a cloud of butterflies. The once advanced spacecraft looks about as high tech as discarded boilers from an industrial laundry.

For now, it seems the challenge for new Magnum members (the agency is, after all, owned by its members) is to balance the elegance and somewhat static beauty of artists such as Soth and Bendiksen with the need to continue covering controversial political issues, and to capture the difficult, compassionate pictures that need still to be seen. There is little evidence the world has lost any of its bad habits, and while the charm of Soth, Bendiksen and even the constantly surprising Parke is all very well, who will they send to photograph the hard places? **GW**

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