

Robert Capa: D-Day

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'Le Flou d'un Temps où les Choses Étaient Nettes', *Reporters Without Borders*, no. 50. 2015, special issue: *Robert Capa: 100 Photos for Press Freedom*, p. 100.



Capa ironically called his autobiography *Slightly Out of Focus*, his lack of technical perfection being caused by the pressures of working up close to fast-moving subjects, often in battle. The D-Day pictures are famously blurrier than most—and not only because of the intensity of enemy fire on Omaha Beach but because of exposure errors and (it has long been claimed) a darkroom drying accident that destroyed most of Capa's negatives, and gave the few that survived an extraordinary surface of jagged fluidity which seemed to express the tensions in the event between panic and advance, steel and sea. The combination of extreme exposure to peril and what seems to be a mannerist individualised style now lends the D-Day images an oddly contemporary air. They are, after all, the embedded photojournalism of an earlier time, being officially commissioned, despatched and subject to censorship. Yet their contemporary sheen is a paradoxical one, since it is forced up against the depiction of a great-power conflict of ideologies and of colossal military forces, of a kind which the world has not seen for over half a century.

Capa's main focus is on the few soldiers who surround him as they struggle to the shore, and towards some hope of freer movement, and cover from the fire being poured down upon them. But in the background of some pictures lie the hulks of vast battleships, the photographic traces of what remains the largest seaborne invasion of all time. The close, the subjective and the accidental are here jammed up against a world-historical event, and one that Capa (a veteran of the anti-fascist struggle from Spain onwards) had long wanted to see: the crumbling of Nazism under attack on two sides, and the long-delayed relief of pressure on Soviet forces in the East. Capa offers a fragment of a larger whole—of desperate and terrified conscripts forced into the sea under murderous fire. But they did not, as so often in recent small wars, face death in some tawdry scabble over minerals or in hubristic neo-colonial adventures, but in a total war to determine the face of the future.