Aerial photography of the bombings, which came into the illustrated press at the end of World War I, quickly entered the global visual vocabulary of war. During the Spanish Civil War, this perspective was systematically challenged by a number of internationally renowned journalists, photographers, and intellectuals, such as Robert Capa, Joris Ivens, and Ernest Hemingway, who were actively engaged with shaping the international anti-Fascist public opinion. To achieve this, they focused on civilians as primary war casualties, who had become obscured by the concept of “total war”, which abolished differentiation between combatants and civilians. The presentation explores two photographs of civilian victims made during the Spanish Civil War. The talk focuses on David Seymour’s (‘Chim’) photograph “Land reform meeting at Badajoz” and an anonymous photograph of the anarchist leader Buenaventura Durruti’s funeral, both from 1936. These images underwent radical re-signification, becoming icons that conveyed the suffering of women and children under the bombs. The transformation obscured the original politics of gesture, at the same time revealing powerful mechanisms of visual meaning-making. These case studies allow us to reflect on the evolving vocabulary for representing war violence, the role of visual imagery, and especially photography, in fostering political engagement in wartime and, more broadly, on the role of visuality in social-historical transformations.

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Visual Studies Platform (VSP) is a cross-disciplinary initiative designed to explore and propose innovative approaches to research and teaching visual imagery in the digital century.