

The Bombing of Guernica

*From 1936 to 1939, General Francisco Franco, a Spanish military officer, led a successful revolt against the democratically elected Spanish government. As George Orwell pointed out in *Homage to Catalonia*, Spain's civil war became a battleground for competing ideologies. The Communist Soviet Union helped the Spanish Loyalists defend the established government, while Germany and Italy supported Franco's Fascist regime.*

Other Fascist leaders welcomed the Spanish war. Not only did it give them a strong ally. It also provided the opportunity to test military tactics and weapons that they would use a few years later in full-scale war.

In 1937, German planes bombed the small Basque town of Guernica for three and a half hours. The apparent object of this bombardment was to cut off the retreat of Loyalist troops. A lesser amount of bombing, however, would have done that. It seemed as if the Germans were determined to kill as many civilians as possible. The bombing was an act of terrorism, an announcement of a new ruthlessness in the conduct of war. A few years later, the German army committed even more brutal acts against innocent people all over Europe.

*The Spanish artist Pablo Picasso seems to have sensed that the attack on Guernica was an omen of even greater evils to come. In May and June of 1937, he painted the mural *Guernica* as a response to the event. Picasso's aim was to express the horror of unarmed, defenseless people being killed by an unseen, impersonal force. Distorted figures scream, lie limp and broken, or stare in shock. The two animals, a bull and a horse, are symbols, Picasso said. The bull stands for "brutality and darkness." The wounded horse represents "the people" (by which he probably meant humankind).*

It is not necessary to know what each figure in the work symbolizes. It is more important to react emotionally to the work than to understand it. For Picasso, the destruction of Guernica was not just a news event printed in the newspaper. He presents it as an immediate experience. The painting is an assault on its viewers. Bright, jagged areas flash out its dark background. In the harsh light, fragmented figures writhe or stiffen. This is how the victims in their confusion must have perceived one another. If viewers allow themselves to be drawn into the work, they cannot help identifying with the victims' pain and fear.



Review Questions

1. Why did the Germans attack the Spanish Basque town of Guernica?
2. How did Pablo Picasso use the medium of painting to express the brutality of the German attack on Guernica?