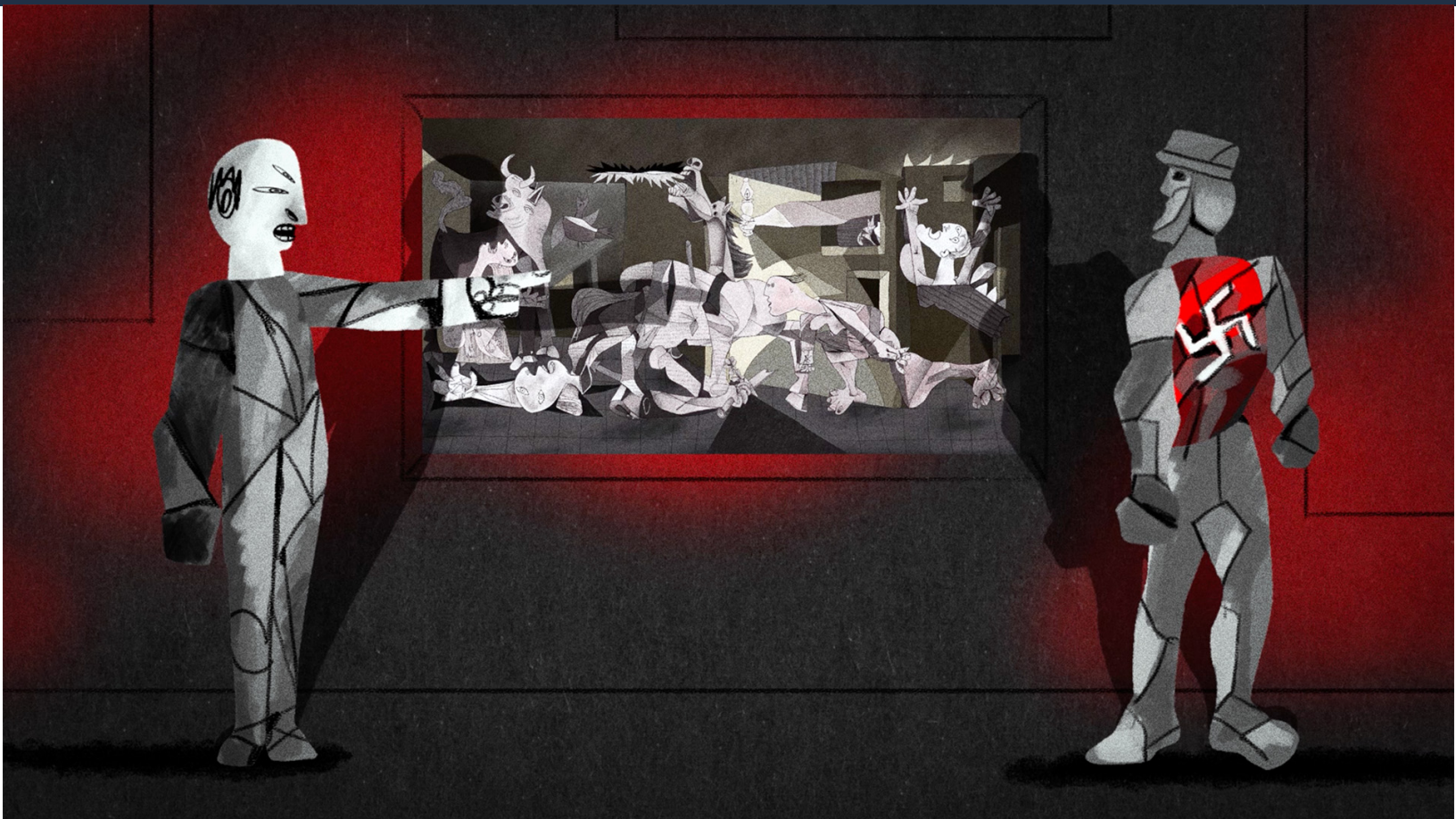




Spanish Civil War: Hitler's Testing Ground for WWII

On a quiet market day in 1937, Nazi planes reduced the Basque town of Guernica to rubble. Pablo Picasso turned his grief and outrage into one of the most famous paintings in history. But Guernica isn't just a masterpiece. Teach your students to use it as a window into how the Spanish Civil War became a dress rehearsal for World War II.

**0:00**

Aerial view of Guernica, Spain, on the left is a clock tower and “April 26th, 1937” is overlaid; black and white footage of farmers and local towns and people; outline of Spain with war footage within; clock tower with planes flying around it; rubble amongst destroyed structures and dead locals; Pablo Picasso; film stock of Eiffel Tower, Moulin Rouge, a Paris street; Picasso creating art.

April 26th, 1937. In a small town in the Basque region of Spain, the sky is falling. The day began like any other. It was a Monday, market day, when local farmers would bring their crops to the town square and people from all over the region would come to buy them. Up to 12,000 people were in Guernica that day—nearly double the town’s usual population, most of them civilians.

Nine months earlier, Spanish Nationalist forces had launched an uprising to overthrow the country’s democratically elected Republic, igniting the Spanish Civil War. Since then, a vague sense of danger constantly hung in the air—but the nearest battlefield was 18 miles away, and in Guernica, it was business as usual.

At around 4 p.m., the bells of the Church of Santa María rang out—a warning that Nationalist planes had arrived. Four hours later, 85% of the buildings in Guernica were reduced to rubble, and hundreds of civilians were dead. News of the air raid soon reached Pablo Picasso in France. Spanish by birth, he had moved to Paris in 1904, attracted to the city’s vibrant, avant-garde art scene. He was a committed anti-fascist and had already been working on a commissioned painting to show support for Spain’s struggling Republic. But, stunned by news of the attack’s brutality, he quickly shifted his focus and completed an enormous new artwork in just 35 days.

1:31

Animated view of Picasso’s artwork “Guernica” zooming into sections; Franco in a military cap; Trocadéro Fountains and Eiffel Tower with “Exposition Internationale” poster overlaid; outline of Europe’s map with artwork “Guernica” in the background; Westminster Bridge and Big Ben in London, a large pair of boots; film stock of war footage featuring Hitler; animation of Hitler and Picasso viewing the artwork “Guernica, talking.

Measuring over 11 feet tall and 25 feet wide, *Guernica* captures the town’s devastation after the raid. Victims lie crumpled and broken at the bottom of the canvas. A mother holding her deceased infant howls, her head thrown back to the heavens. A man engulfed in flames screams with his arms outstretched, seeking a savior that will never come. Animals, too, bellow their pain and horror at being trapped in this inferno of death and destruction.

Guernica became an instant symbol of resistance against the Spanish Nationalist movement and its leader, Generalissimo Francisco Franco. The painting debuted in the Spanish pavilion of the International Expo in Paris. Then it toured Europe to raise money and support for the struggling Republic. In one exhibit in London, the price of admission was a pair of boots in good enough shape to be sent to the Spanish front.

Years later, after the Nazis occupied Paris, a German officer visited Picasso in his studio. Upon seeing a photo of *Guernica*, he asked the artist, “Did you do this?” Picasso replied, “No, you did.”

2:41

Footage of rubble, destroyed structures, military: leaders, soldiers, equipment, and sites; members of the Fascist Party dressed in historical attire overlaid is their emblem; split image - on the left a map of Europe highlighting several countries, on the right a map of Japan; footage of religious, cultural, and societal practices in Spain; coin with graphic of a handshake.

Why would Picasso blame a German for the bombing of a Spanish town during the Spanish Civil War, ordered by Spanish Nationalist leader Franco?

The answer is, Franco wasn’t acting alone. He was part of a global slide into fascism and authoritarianism that occurred between the world wars. By the time Franco and his partners declared a coup against Spain’s leftist government, many countries already had right-wing regimes in power or on the rise, including Germany, Italy, Poland, Hungary, Romania, Finland, Austria, Japan, and Greece.

The rebelling Nationalists aimed to cleanse Spain of liberalism and democracy, which they believed were dismantling traditional society. They wanted clearly defined social hierarchies, gender roles, and Catholic morality. A beefed-up military would be used to enforce government policies. Franco’s uprising quickly generated fears of another world war.



3:41

Political leaders signing documents; Spain's map and coat of arms with military footage in the background; stylized soldier in helmet overlaid is "The International Brigades"; clips of Mussolini; clips of military weapons, vehicles, and equipment; map with five Nazi eagle symbols positioned across different areas; two figures in full body armor shooting at each other; opposing soldiers facing one another - each holding a flag.

In August 1936, more than 20 nations, including France, Great Britain, Italy, Nazi Germany, and the Soviet Union, signed an agreement that they would not intervene in Spain. But this commitment to neutrality didn't last—international support for both sides flooded in. To the Spanish Republic, the Soviet Union sent hundreds of tanks, trucks, planes, and armored cars, as well as hundreds of thousands of weapons and over 29,000 tons of ammunition. The International Brigades, made up of 40,000 volunteer soldiers from more than 50 countries, also supported the Republic. Meanwhile, Italy, led by fascist dictator Benito Mussolini, sent 75,000 troops along with planes, warships, submarines, and hundreds of thousands of weapons. Nazi Germany sent fewer troops—only about 19,000—but its air force was crucial in transporting Franco's Army of Africa from Morocco to Spain in the early days of the war. Before long, Spain had become a dress rehearsal for World War II: Republicans vs. Nationalists, left vs. right, democracy vs. fascism.

4:54

Clips of Hitler giving speeches with Nazi symbols overlaid; footage of the development and use of weapons and war equipment; text "Luftwaffe" with Nazi symbols surrounding it; war aircrafts; footage of military tanks; text "Panzer II III IV" with tanks surrounding it; fleet of aircrafts firing and attacking; portrait of Wolfram von Richthofen.

Hitler, in particular, had powerful motivations for supporting Franco. Two years earlier, he had risen to become the absolute dictator of Germany and immediately set his sights on the rest of Europe. Hitler and the Nazis were preparing for what they saw as an inevitable war for conquest. In defiance of the military restrictions laid out in the Treaty of Versailles, they began developing new technologies like the Panzer I tank, and the cutting-edge bomber and fighter planes that powered their new air force, the *Luftwaffe*. Spain provided, not only an opportunity to divert Europe's attention from Hitler's actions, but also a laboratory to experiment with these new war technologies and tactics.

The Spanish Civil War proved to be a valuable testing ground for the Nazis. They quickly realized that the Panzer I was outclassed by the Soviet armored vehicles: it was prone to overheating and had inadequate armor protection, requiring its squads to carry bigger, anti-tank guns. These lessons informed the upgrades and modifications of the Panzer II, III, and IV. The Nazis also experimented with a new air tactic: the bombing of cities and civilians with the intent to create terror. In fact, the Guernica bombing was planned by the same German officer—Wolfram von Richthofen—who would later design the air raid on Poland that began World War II.

6:18

Clips of tanks and aircrafts firing and bombing "Blitzkrieg" is overlaid; Francisco Franco; maps of England and France with the Nazi eagle centered; Spain's coat of arms broken in pieces; artwork "Guernica"; stylized illustration of NYC skyline and Museum of Modern Art with spectators out front; illustration of Pablo Picasso; Spain's map; image of Reina Sofía Museum; museum guests observing the artwork "Guernica".

In that war, the Nazi military would deploy their Panzers and *Luftwaffe* in a combined strategy called Blitzkrieg, or "lightning war"—coordinated, unrelenting attacks that overwhelmed Europe. By 1939, with help from the Nazi and Italian governments, the Nationalists had captured virtually all of Spain. England and France had yielded to Hitler in ways that made it clear there would not be a strong anti-fascist European coalition. Franco declared victory on April 1st. The Spanish Republic was no more. That meant *Guernica*, commissioned by the hopeful Republic two years earlier, had no home. The painting traveled to New York City's Museum of Modern Art, where an estimated 20 to 30 million visitors witnessed Picasso's bold political statement. Picasso's ultimate wish was for *Guernica* to remain on loan to MoMA until democracy was restored in his native Spain. In 1981, six years after Franco's death and eight years after the artist's death, Picasso's attorney confirmed that the painting should be returned to Spain. *Guernica* now hangs in the Reina Sofía Museum in Madrid.