

The bombing of Guernica

By [Paul Preston](#) | Published in [Volume: 57 Issue: 5 2007](#)

Paul Preston remembers the journalist and Basque sympathizer who broke the news of the bombing of Guernica on April 26th, 1937.



The ruins of Guernica, 1937

In early 1938, Martha Gellhorn wrote to her friend and mentor, Eleanor Roosevelt:

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You must read a book by a man named Steer: it is called the Tree of Gernika. It is about the fight of the Basques – he's the London Times man – and no better book has come out of the war and he says well all the things I have tried to say to you the times I saw you, after Spain. It is beautifully written and true, and few books are like that, and fewer still that deal with war. Please get it.

Martha Gellhorn's judgement has more than stood the test of time. Steer was the correspondent of *The Times* whose account of the bombing of Guernica perhaps had more political impact than any single article written by any correspondent during the Spanish Civil War.

To a world that experienced the slaughter unleashed by Hitler and Stalin, the Spanish Civil War might well seem small beer. Yet, the bombing of the sleepy Basque market town on April 26th, 1937 has probably provoked more savage polemic than any single act of war since and much of that has revolved around Steer's article. This is partly because what happened at Guernica was perceived as the first time that aerial bombardment wiped out an undefended civilian target in Europe. In fact, the bombing of innocent civilians was a well-established practice in the colonies of the Western powers and had most recently and most thoroughly been carried out by the Italians in Abyssinia. Even in Spain, the bombing of Guernica had been preceded by the destruction of nearby Durango by German bombers at the end of March 1937. As the special envoy of *The Times*

with the Republican forces in Bilbao, George Steer, who had witnessed the horrors of bombing in Abyssinia, described what was done at Durango as 'the most terrible bombardment of a civil population in the history of the world up to March 31st, 1937'. However, with the aid of Picasso's searing painting, it is Guernica that is now remembered as the place where the new and horrific modern warfare came of age. It has been claimed that, but for Picasso, Guernica would have soon been forgotten as a regrettable but unavoidable act of war. The survival of the controversy owes as much to George Steer as to Picasso.

George Lowther Steer was born in East London, South Africa, in 1909. He was educated in England, at Winchester College and then at Oxford University. At Christ Church, he secured a double first in Classical Greats. After freelancing for the *Yorkshire Post*, he laid siege to *The Times* which eventually hired him as a special correspondent to cover the coming Italo-Ethiopian war. He left London in June 1935 for Addis Ababa where he was joined by a band of correspondents among whom were several who would also go to Spain.

Steer's sympathy with the Ethiopians led to him establishing a close relationship with the Emperor and being given access to his general staff throughout the war. His descriptions of Italian atrocities made his reputation as an intrepid war correspondent. They also ensured that he would be expelled from Abyssinia a week after the victorious forces of the Duce occupied Addis Ababa on May 5th, 1936. The day before, Steer married Margarita Trinidad de Herrero y Hassett, the correspondent for a Paris newspaper, *Le Journal*. Barely had George and Margarita settled into a flat in Chelsea when he was sent to Spain as a 'special correspondent' for *The Times*. From August 8th to mid-September, he was at the Franco-Spanish border and witnessed the fall of the Basque town of Irún. He produced dispatches about panic-stricken refugees heading for France and on the destruction wreaked on the town by retreating anarchists enraged by their lack of ammunition. Steer stayed in Spain to complete his book *Caesar in Abyssinia* which was finished in Burgos. His discomfort at the scale of the repression being carried out by the rebel forces led to problems with the Francoist press censors who were already highly suspicious of Steer because of his anti-fascist reports from Abyssinia. Steer was expelled from the Nationalist zone in late 1936 which is why he ended up reporting on the Basque campaign from the Republican side.

He returned to Spain, to Bilbao, at the beginning of January 1937. He met and quickly became an admirer of the Basques and their President, José Antonio de Aguirre. The Basques came to symbolize for Steer the best elements of the fight against fascism. He empathized with them more than he had done with the Abyssinians and more than he could with Spain's left-wing Republicans. Indeed, Steer quickly came to share the Basques' hostility to Spain, and when he spoke of 'the Spanish attack upon the Basques', he was referring both to the oppressively centralist military rebels and the forces of the left.

At the end of the month Steer received news that his wife Margarita was seriously ill in London. It was typical of the Basque government's treatment of correspondents that a mine-sweeping trawler was placed at his disposal for the first leg of his return journey, a thirteen-hour trip across a storm-tossed Bay of Biscay to Bayonne. He arrived in London to the worst. Margarita died in premature child-birth on January 29th, 1937. Although devastated, Steer took advantage of his time in London to lobby government on behalf of the Basques. He gave detailed estimates of German and Italian positions and strengths, which may have suggested a more than casual connection with British Military Intelligence or simply reflected his determination to alert the establishment to the scale of Axis intervention.

By the beginning of April, Steer was back in Bilbao. On March 31st, Franco had unleashed a major assault on Euzkadi (the Basque Country) under the command

of General Emilio Mola. The campaign opened with a proclamation from Mola both broadcast and printed in a leaflet dropped on the main towns:

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If submission is not immediate, I will raze Vizcaya to the ground, beginning with the industries of war. I have the means to do so.

This was followed by a massive four-day artillery and aircraft bombardment in which the small town of Durango was destroyed. 127 civilians were killed during the bombing and a further 131 died from their wounds.

Bilbao was starving. The rebels announced that they would permit no more supplies to enter the port. The pro-Franco British Ambassador Sir Henry Chilton reported that the rebel fleet commanded the waters off the Basque coast and that the immediate approaches to Bilbao were mined. Since Britain had not granted belligerent rights to either side in the war, British merchant ships had the right to Royal Naval protection at least outside Basque territorial waters. To avoid embarrassing clashes, the British government decided on April 8th to order all British merchant vessels within a hundred miles of Bilbao to go to the French Basque port of St Jean de Luz. In response to Chilton's report that the Francoist authorities would repel by force any British merchant ships trying to enter the Nervión estuary at Bilbao, the cabinet decided on April 10th that the Royal Navy would not protect British shipping.

From the Basque Government offices, Steer sent a telegram to his friend, the Labour politician Philip Noel-Baker, pointing out that the blockade was a bluff and did not exist in any meaningful way 'for any power prepared to protect its shipping outside Spanish territorial waters'. He reported that Basque mine-sweepers had cleared the approaches to Bilbao and that Basque batteries of naval artillery with a fifteen-mile range were holding the Francoists at bay. On the night of April 19th, the SS *Seven Seas Spray* left St Jean de Luz. Ten miles off the Basque coast, it was met by a British destroyer which signalled the Captain, William Roberts, that he entered Bilbao at his own risk and wished him good luck. On April 20th, Steer went out on a Basque trawler to meet the *Seven Seas Spray* after it had successfully run the gauntlet. He was aboard as it made a triumphal passage down the River Nervión that lead to Bilbao. His moving account of the cheering crowds helped lead eventually to Royal Navy ships escorting subsequent food convoys.

Steer's advice to Aguirre to telegraph the British government and his own numerous telegrams to Liberal and Labour members of the parliamentary opposition in London played a considerable part in reversing British policy. As he wrote in *The Tree of Gernika*,

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I take to myself the credit that I, before anyone else, exposed the fake in the blockade and recovered the truth. A journalist is not a simple purveyor of news, whether sensational or controversial, or well-written, or merely funny. He is a historian of every day's events, and he has a duty to his public ... and as a historian must be filled with the most passionate and most critical attachment to the truth, so must the journalist, with the great power that he wields, see that the truth prevails.

On April 26th, Steer spent fifteen minutes in a bomb crater west of the small town of Guernica being strafed by the machine-guns of six Heinkel 51s. He was in Bilbao later that night when news came in that Guernica was burning. With Christopher Holme of Reuters, Noel Monks of the *Daily Express* and Mathieu - Corman of *Ce Soir*, he hastened to the town which was still ablaze when they arrived at 11pm. Steer had witnessed horrors in Abyssinia and in Spain, but

nothing prepared any of them for the desolation of Guernica. They watched helplessly as weeping *Gudaris* (Basque soldiers) frantically tried to dig out the bodies from the ruins. Steer stayed in the charred, smoking ruins until the early hours of the morning of the 27th interviewing survivors – ‘my authority for all that I have written’. He picked up three silver tubes of German incendiary devices and returned to Bilbao, where he slept on his story. The next morning, he spoke with many of the refugees who had reached the capital, before driving the fifteen miles back to Guernica to view the damage in daylight.

Steer’s report, which appeared on April 28th in *The Times* and the *New York Times*, subdued and unsensational in tone, managed to incorporate a vivid sense of both the scale of the atrocity and of the extent to which it represented a new kind of warfare:

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, the most ancient town of the Basques and the centre of their cultural tradition, was completely destroyed yesterday afternoon by insurgent air raiders. The bombardment of this open town far behind the lines occupied precisely three hours and a quarter, during which a powerful fleet of aeroplanes consisting of three German types, Junkers and Heinkel bombers, did not cease unloading on the town bombs weighing from 1,000 lbs. downwards and, it is calculated, more than 3,000 two-pounder aluminium incendiary projectiles. The fighters, meanwhile, plunged low from above the centre of the town to machine-gun those of the civilian population who had taken refuge in the fields.

The article stimulated compassion for the plight of the victims but also indignation about the wider implications of what had taken place:

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In the form of its execution and the scale of the destruction it wrought, no less than in the selection of its objective, the raid on Guernica is unparalleled in military history. Guernica was not a military objective. A factory producing war material lay outside the town and was untouched. So were two barracks some distance from the town. The town lay far behind the lines. The object of the bombardment was seemingly the demoralization of the civil population and the destruction of the cradle of the Basque race.

Steer did not know that the attack had been planned by Colonel Wolfram von Richthofen who would later mastermind the Blitzkrieg attacks on Poland and France. Nevertheless, his prophetic view of this new kind of warfare ensured that his dispatch would have a more disturbing impact than those of his colleagues. The *New York Times* editorial condemned ‘wholesale arson and mass murder, committed by Rebel airplanes of German type’. A few days later, Bishop Francis J. McConnell, of the Methodist Episcopal Church, published an ‘Appeal to the Conscience of the World’ signed by several hundred prominent Americans, including senators and congressmen. It specifically cited Steer as a witness. On May 10th, Congressman Jerry O’Connell of Montana quoted Steer in the House of Representatives as proof of German participation in the Spanish Civil War.

On April 29th Steer’s report was reprinted in the French Communist daily, *L’Humanité* where it was read by Pablo Picasso. At the time, he was working on a commission by the Spanish Republican government to provide a mural for the great Paris Exhibition for the summer of 1937. On May 1st, 1937, he abandoned his original scheme, and began work on what would become his most famous painting.

The Nationalists immediately denied that Guernica had happened. The head of the Francoist foreign press bureau, Luis Bolín, spread the view that Guernica had been dynamited by Basque saboteurs. Bolin's views were rapidly taken up by a number of English friends of the Francoist cause, Douglas Jerrold, Arnold Lunn, and Robert Sencourt. The most consistent feature of their writing was the denigration of Steer's integrity. *The Times* cabled Steer in Bilbao: VIEW OTHER SIDES DISMISSAL YOUR GUERNICA STORY FURTHER JUDICIOUS STATEMENT DESIRABLE. Steer's reply, sent on April 28th, was published the next day:

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The denial by Salamanca of all knowledge of the destruction of Gernika has created no astonishment here, since the similar but less terrible bombing of Durango was denied by them in spite of the presence of British eye-witnesses. I have spoken with hundreds of homeless and distressed people, who all give precisely the same description of the events. I have seen and measured the enormous bomb-holes at Gernika, which, since I passed through the town the day before, I can testify were not there then. Unexploded German aluminium incendiary bombs were found in Gernika marked 'Rheindorf factory, 1936.

Fearing that *The Times* might not publish it, Steer copied his original telegram to Philip Noel-Baker, urging him to use it in the House of Commons and get the information to Lloyd George and Anthony Eden.

The Times had published Steer's report in the period of the most avid appeasement demonstrated by the paper's editor, Geoffrey Dawson. In response to the virulent Anglophobia with which the controlled German press had reacted, Dawson wrote to *The Times*'s acting correspondent in Berlin, H.G.Daniels:

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I did my utmost, night after night, to keep out of the paper anything that might hurt their susceptibilities. I can really think of nothing that has been printed now for many months past which they could possibly take exception to as unfair comment. No doubt they were annoyed by Steer's first story of the bombing of Guernica, but its essential accuracy has never been disputed.

It was to no avail. As Daniels informed him, Nazi propagandists had discovered that *Times* spelt backwards is 'Semit', which was broadcast as proof that the newspaper for which Steer wrote was a Jewish-Marxist operation. George Steer's name was placed on the Gestapo's Special Wanted List of 2,820 persons who were to be detained after the Germans occupied Britain in 1940.

Steer received threats that, if he was caught alive by the Francoists, he would be shot immediately. He stayed in what was left of Euskadi through the next six weeks of relentless bombing, going to where the fighting was thickest and reporting almost daily on the dogged defence against the Francoist advance on Bilbao despite the lack of air cover. Indeed, aware that rebel air superiority was the key issue to the defence of the city, he bombarded Noel-Baker with requests to use his influence to get the French to permit Republican aircraft to fly over their territory. Steer also accompanied the Spanish delegation that went to the League of Nations in Geneva at the end of May in search of recognition of Axis aggression and visited the American Consul to show him documents proving German participation in the bombing of Guernica. Back in Bilbao, he even participated in a meeting of the Basque government and military high command called by Aguirre on June 13th, to discuss whether to defend the city to the last

man. When Bilbao fell, he covered the subsequent retreat westwards into Santander. He wrote a moving account of the evacuation of 200,000 people first on trawlers and then, when the Francoists had taken the port, on lorries along the road to the west, bombed and strafed by the Condor Legion along the way.

During these last desperate days in Bilbao, he assisted the British Labour MP, Leah Manning, who was helping the Basque Government organize the evacuation of 4,000 children to Britain. The Dean of Canterbury, Hewlett Johnson, wrote to *The Times* to commend Steer whom he described as 'your own heroic and extremely able correspondent, whom I had the privilege of meeting in Bilbao as the only British journalist at that time in that city'. Noel-Baker wrote to Steer that his report on Guernica had helped change government policy, a reference to the decision to permit the evacuation of Basque children to Britain.

At the end of June, Steer managed to find his way to Paris. There, he began to write his book. He could not, however, just cut himself off from his beloved Basques. Having interrupted his writing to seek more material, on August 18th, he made the dangerous flight across the Bay of Biscay to Santander where the Basques were cornered, facing superior Italian forces. He stayed with them for a few days, flying back before their ignominious end.

The Tree of Gernika: A Field Study of Modern War was published in early 1938. The text reflected Steer's romantic commitment to the Basque part in the battle against fascism. It also reflected his contempt for the farce of British commitment to Non-Intervention. Steer's book is a classic of Spanish Civil War historiography; it is a moving defence of Basque Nationalism and a heart-breaking account of the reasons for its defeat at the hands of Franco. It was written as a warning to the democracies of what awaited them. His attachment to the cause made Steer something of a Basque hero. Unable to see the book published in Euzkadi in Franco's lifetime, exiled Basques published the book in translation in Caracas in 1963.

Steer remained a militant anti-fascist for the rest of his life. He was in Africa in 1938 collecting material on German colonial ambitions. Whatever else he was doing, he always kept his mind on the Basque cause. On October 12th, 1938, he wrote to Noel-Baker for advice as to whether it would be better to continue to work to keep the Nazis out of Africa or else

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... to come home in November and take part in any negotiations for mediation in Spain, my object being to press Basque claims. I think this is vitally important, if we are ever to have a point of concentration to resist Italo-German influence in Spain. Basque autonomy, Catalan autonomy, removal of the Italians from Majorca and the Germans from Morocco are essentials.

Not without arrogance, he added: 'I don't think anybody could press these points better on the War Office and the Air Ministry than I can'.

After the outbreak of the Second World War, Steer headed north to cover the Russian invasion of Finland. In his reporting, he drew frequent comparisons with what the Germans had done in Euskadi. He was drawn always to the doomed struggle of small nations facing overwhelming odds. He remained in contact with the exiled Basque leadership in France and during the retreat from Dunkirk, he tried to persuade the British government to bring Aguirre to Britain to be the focus of a Basque anti-Franco resistance.

Steer served in the Sudan and Ethiopia and in the North African campaign until in 1942 when he was posted to Madagascar to take part in operations to prevent the Japanese taking over the island. There was considerable competition from several sections of the Special Operations Executive for his services. At the beginning of

1943, now Major Steer, he was sent to India, to take part in the campaign to recover Burma from the Japanese. He was killed, not in action but in an accident, on Christmas Day 1944, when his jeep went off the road. It was a tragic irony that a man who had taken so many risks in such great causes should die in so banal a way.

Despite publishing five important books and a military career that saw him compared to Lawrence of Arabia, Steer is remembered, most of all, for the crucial despatch from Guernica. From 1935 onwards, he made it his business to alert the world to the imperialist ambitions and ruthless aggression of fascism. His commitment to apparently lost causes, led him to a level of involvement that went far beyond the duties of a war correspondent. The words of Steer in *Tree of Gernika* summing up the Basque part in the Spanish Civil War capture the tragedy and dignity of an entire people:

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After all, the Basques were a small people, and they didn't have many guns or planes, and they did not receive any foreign aid, and they were terribly simple and guileless and unversed in warfare; but they had, throughout this painful civil war, held high the lantern of humanity and civilisation. They had not killed, or tortured, or in any way amused themselves at the expense of their prisoners. In the most cruel circumstances, they had maintained liberty of self-expression and faith. They had scrupulously and zealously observed all the laws, written and unwritten, which enjoin on man a certain respect for his neighbour. They had made no hostages; they had responded to the inhuman methods of those who hated them by protest, nothing more. They had, as far as anyone can in war, told the truth and kept all their promises.

Next to his body lay his most precious possession, a gold watch given him by José Antonio de Aguirre, inscribed 'To Steer from the Basque Republic'.

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