

Taro readings – Richard Baxell – January 2018

On 16 January 2018, [Sir John Kiszely](#) (@JohnKiszely), the former Director General of the [Defence Academy of the United Kingdom](#) and National President of the [Royal British Legion](#), posted a photograph on twitter, showing a doctor tenderly caring for his patient. She looked to be a young woman, lying prone with her eyes closed, arms folded across her abdomen and with blood flowing from her nose and mouth. She appeared ominously still. The gentle doctor, Sir John recounted proudly, was his father, who was working for the Spanish Republican medical services during the civil war of 1936-39.



Hungarian Doctor Johnnie Kiszely with patient (presumed to be Gerda Taro), July 1937.

As is often the case when photographs of international volunteers are posted – particularly by family members – the image proved immediately popular, with numerous users expressing their gratitude for the father's efforts on behalf of the Spanish Republic and remarking on the sensitive and powerful nature of the image. However, one sharp-eyed user (@barne065) stunned those taking part in the discussion, by suggesting that the young woman in the photo could be Gerda Taro, the famous photo-journalist, who was tragically killed during the Battle of Brunete in July 1936, aged only 26. Following a number of eager requests, John posted an image of the rear of the photo, on which had been written a brief pencilled note:

Frente Brunete Junio 37.

(En Torrelodones)

Mrs Frank Capa = of 'Ce Soire' of Paris.

Killed at Brunete.

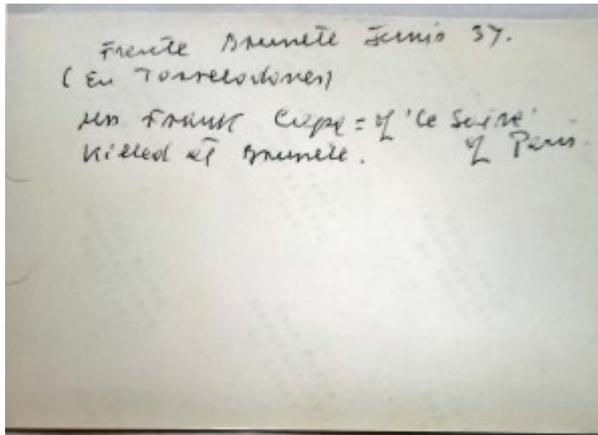
Possibly written later, the caption is incorrect in a number of details (the Battle of Brunete was in July, not June 1937 and Gerda Taro was the

girlfriend of Robert Capa, rather than 'Mrs Frank Capa'), but was nevertheless strongly supportive of the theory that the image was of [Gerda Taro](#).

At this point, the discussion was picked up by the wider media. The journalist and author [Giles Tremlett](#) (@gilestremlett), who knows a good story when he sees one, quickly put together a piece for [The Guardian](#). Having talked to historians and the author and filmmaker [Jane Rogoyska](#) (@janerogoyka), who is a [published expert on Gerda Taro](#), Giles came to the conclusion that the photograph was genuine. There were clearly a number of unanswered questions and more research needed to be done, but it was Taro.

However, not everyone was convinced. A Spanish biographer of Taro, [Fernando Olmeda](#), penned an article for the [Spanish New Tribune](#) listing his reasons to believe that (probably) the woman in the

photo was not her. He pointed out the lack of signs of serious injury, inconsistent with someone who had been crushed by a tank, as Taro was known to have been. He also noted the obvious errors and inconsistencies within the text on the reverse and wondered not just who had written the text, but who had taken the photo? Was it an amateur, or was it, as the careful and elegant composition might suggest, a professional photographer? And if the latter, why did it not appear in the media at the time? After all, Gerda Taro was a major celebrity and her tragically premature death received widespread coverage. Olmeda concluded, not unreasonably, that with so much unclear or unknown, there was little possibility of a firm identification.



Rear of photo, identifying patient as 'Mrs Frank Capa of "Ce Soire". Killed at Brunete.'

What Olmeda and other commentators may not have been aware of, is that the Hungarian Doctor, Janus (known as 'Johnnie' after the famous Hungarian Tarzan, Johnnie Weismuller) Kiszely was interviewed in 1992. The tape forms part of the [Imperial War Museum](#)'s Spanish Civil War Collection in London. According to the interview, the wounded young woman was rushed into the operating room at Torrelodones,

to the west of Madrid, where Kiszely worked alongside British medics. He remembered her being 'more or less dead when she came into my hands'. At that stage, he admitted, 'I did not have a clue who she was ... nor did the person who took the photograph.' All Kiszely knew was that she was some kind of reporter. It was only later that he was informed of the identity of the mortally wounded young woman who he had just treated.

She was then taken away (if it were Taro, it would have been to the main 35 Division hospital at El Escorial, just under 20km away, where she later died), but Kiszely had no time to spend thinking about her. With more than 10 000 casualties passing through the hospital during the battle of Brunete, it was rare to have the time for anything but responding to the urgent needs of patients. Lacking the resources to treat everyone, Kiszely recounts how a number of French doctors went round at night, giving lethal injections to those who had been mortally wounded and had been left to die in the open air, 'covered in flies and dust ... not even cleaned up properly'.

Despite the widespread surprise at the photograph turning up so long after the event, it has in fact, appeared before, as a number of twitter users (@RevistaFv and @alexis_nogeur) have pointed out. It (or a slightly less tightly cropped version), can be found in *Sanidad de las Brigadas Internacionales* an account of the Republican medical services and in the biography of the famous Catalan surgeon [Moisès Brioggi](#), *Memoria de un cirujano*, who worked with Johnnie Kiszely. Unfortunately, neither add any further details. Nor do they reveal the identity of the photographer. Sir John cannot add much to the story either, for the photo is the only image he possesses of his father in Spain. It didn't arrive into his hands until after his father's death, when it was passed to him at an [International Brigade Association](#) commemoration event.

In situations such as this, with so much unknown, it's very difficult to categorically identify the woman in the photograph. Equally, however, it's not possible to say that it definitely *isn't* Gerda Taro. All that can reasonably be stated is that, based on the currently available evidence (Johnnie Kiszely's plausible account, the text on the reverse of the photo and the similarity in appearance of the young woman to Gerda Taro) it is more likely to be her, than not.