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## Ernest Hemingway at War: The Question of Courage

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### ABSTRACT

Ernest Hemingway had real-life adventures that he used as a basis for his writings. His desire for adventure led him to volunteer for the American Red Cross where he was badly wounded serving on the Italian-Austrian front in World War I. His political views, namely his strong opposition to fascism, led him to aid the cause of the Spanish Republicans in the Spanish Civil War and the Allies in World War II. He faced danger in the Spanish Civil War, as well as combat and possible capture by the enemy in World War II. Hemingway voluntarily exposed himself to danger in these conflicts, although his poor vision had kept him from officially serving in the military. Hemingway's wartime experiences greatly influenced him as a person and a writer. He emphasized the importance of the personal experiences of writers, and both his fiction and non-fiction writing were inevitably shaped by these events. Ultimately, Hemingway demonstrated courage by putting himself into dangerous situations when he was not required to do so, choosing to participate in wars that he could have easily avoided. A study of his actions provides a clearer indication of Hemingway's personal values and his willingness to sacrifice his safety to promote his political beliefs.

**Keywords:** Hemingway, wartime, courage, journalism, fascism.

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Courage played a very important role in Ernest Hemingway's life. Both in his personal actions and in his writings, courage served as an important ingredient in defining one's character. His own actions supported this belief as he participated in three wars: World War I, the Spanish Civil War, and World War II. Hemingway was a volunteer in all these conflicts, and he put himself in harm's way without any requirement to do so. Many scholars have dealt with Hemingway's interest in courage and the importance that it played in both in his approach to life and in his writing. By considering his courage one can develop a better understanding of Hemingway and his personality. This knowledge is essential to understanding his personal beliefs and actions, as well as to gaining a greater insight into his writing. Scholars such as Jeffrey Meyers, Mary V. Dearborn, Nicholas Reynolds, James McGrath Morris, Amanda Vaill, Gilbert H. Muller, and Kenneth S. Lynn have discussed Hemingway's willingness to expose himself to danger in a variety of situations.

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Ultimately, Hemingway will demonstrate courage in three wars, and in all cases his participation in these wars was voluntary. Initially, Hemingway wanted to experience the glory of war in World War I, which led to him being severely wounded in his legs. His later experiences in the Spanish Civil War and World War II were based more on his opposition to fascism than his desire for glory. His actions in these later wars demonstrated his ideological commitment to anti-fascism and his willingness to sustain physical harm to promote his political views. In this way, his courage helps demonstrate his deep political beliefs and his willingness to do what was necessary to promote his ideological views. Through a discussion of Hemingway's participation in these wars, a clearer indication of his beliefs and actions will occur. An examination of both primary and secondary sources will reveal that Hemingway's actions demonstrate courage beyond what was required from a man who never officially served in the military.

While some instances of Hemingway's bravery may be in doubt, since he tended to exaggerate and embellish his stories, other instances, such as helping wounded Italian soldiers in the trenches while being shot on the Italian front in World War I, were likely true. Since he never served in the military in an official capacity, a complete picture of his combat experience can be hard to obtain. Indeed, it should be remembered that Hemingway was excluded from service in the U.S. military because of his eyesight, so his presence on the front lines in three wars was completely voluntary. He first sought adventure in World War I, and he was later involved in the Spanish Civil War and World War II largely because of his strong anti-fascist beliefs. Although he was badly wounded in World War I that did not keep him from exposing himself to danger in future conflicts and in the process gaining valuable experiences that were used in his writing.

During the early years of World War I, Hemingway was living in Kansas City, Missouri, where he was working as a reporter for the *Kansas City Star*, and he served briefly in the Missouri National Guard. Yet he was ultimately denied a place in the United States Army due to poor vision. He instead volunteered for the American Red Cross, where he initially served as an ambulance driver. He later switched to the rolling canteen service, bringing refreshments to the Italian soldiers serving in the trenches and traveling to and from the front lines by bicycle. Hemingway volunteered for this more dangerous assignment. It brought him closer to the battle and significantly increased the chance that he would be wounded or killed.

On one such visit, after an attack by Austrian forces in July 1918, Hemingway suffered serious wounds in his legs from shrapnel and machine gun fire. The Italian soldier next to him absorbed the brunt of the explosion, which allowed Hemingway to survive, although he was seriously injured. Hemingway was first treated by medics who administered a tetanus shot as well as a morphine injection. He also had his legs shaved and some of the splinters removed. (Morris, 2017, pp. 54-55). Hemingway had over 200 pieces of shell and splinters in his leg, although they were mostly flesh wounds. The bullets from the machine guns did not damage his joints and they were safely removed, allowing him to later walk normally. Hemingway claimed that he had carried an Italian soldier to an aid station who was later determined to be dead. Some question exists as to Hemingway's actions, but there is no doubt that he was severely wounded in his job working for the rolling canteen service (Meyers, 1999, pp. 30-31). Fortunately, he was able to avoid infection and serious blood loss, both of which could have been deadly in an era before antibiotics and modern blood transfusions. The citation for his Italian medal of valor cited his bravery and his concern about the Italian soldiers who were also injured in the blast (Meyers, 1999, p. 31).

Hemingway later corresponded with his family to reassure them that he would be okay. He wrote, "This is a peach of a hospital here and there are about 18 American nurses to take care of 4 patients. Everything is fine and I'm very comfortable and one of the best surgeons in Milan is looking after my wounds" (Baker, 1981, p. 12). He maintained a positive air in his letters. As he explained, "My fingers are all cleared up and have the bandages off. There will be no permanent effects from any of the wounds as there are no bones shattered. Even in my knees" (Baker, 1981, p. 12). He recounted his war experiences and told his family "I was all through the big battle and had Austrian carbines and ammunition, German and Austrian medals, officer's automatic pistols . . . and almost everything you can think of . . . It was a great victory and showed the world what wonderful fighters the Italians are" (Baker, 1981, p. 12).

As he healed, Hemingway wrote again to his family on 18 August 1918. He commented, "You know they say there isn't anything funny about this war. And there isn't. I wouldn't say it was hell . . . but

there have been about 8 times when I would have welcomed Hell. Just on a chance it couldn't come up to the phase of war I was experiencing" (Baker, 1981, p. 14). He later added, "I can now hold up my hand and say I've been shelled by high explosive, shrapnel and gas. Shot at by trench mortars, snipers and machine guns, and as an added attraction an aeroplane [sic] machine gunning the lines" (Baker, 1981, p. 14). Although he had only a brief experience of war for his first military adventure, he had seen quite a lot for an eighteen-year-old youth.

Later in life, in his introduction to the edited volume *Men at War*, Hemingway wrote of his experiences in the First World War: "When you go to war as a boy you have a great illusion of immortality. Other people get killed; not you . . . Then when you are badly wounded the first time you lose that illusion and you know that it can happen to you. After being severely wounded two weeks before my nineteenth birthday I had a bad time until I figured out that nothing could happen to me that had not happened to all men before me. Whatever I had to do men had always done" (Hemingway, 1999, p. xii).

Hemingway spent much of the rest of the war recuperating from his wounds (Spanier, Vol.1, 2011, pp. 115-16). While his service lasted only a few weeks, he did have a chance to participate in the war, and he showed true courage by putting himself in danger to help the Italian troops on the front line. While there was a tendency for Hemingway to exaggerate his actions, there is no doubt that he did suffer serious wounds in the course of his work with the Red Cross (Dearborn, 2018, p. 61). His experience in war gave him the sense that he had achieved something special that others who had not been wounded did not experience. (Meyers, 1999, p. 35) In true Hemingway style, he later imagined himself a soldier because of this action, although he never was one. In many ways, his inability to truly serve as a soldier, primarily due to the poor eyesight in his left eye, left him with an insecurity about his manhood which he constantly tried to prove. He did this especially through boxing which he did regularly when he lived in Paris in the 1920s, and he would challenge someone to a fight in stressful situations when he felt that his honor had been questioned.

Hemingway's interest in politics grew in the late 1920s and 1930s, and he became a supporter of the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War – a belief that was strengthened by his relationship with Martha Gellhorn. Yet, his desire to be of use would propel him into combat situations in Spain. Hemingway found both romance and adventure in the idea of being under fire (Lynn, 1987, p. 442) In the Spanish Civil War, Hemingway served as a reporter for the North American News Alliance. He first went to Spain with Martha Gellhorn in 1937. He spent much of his time in Madrid at the Hotel Florida, which was under regular bombardment by the fascist forces of Francisco Franco, whose forces were aided by his allies Germany and Italy.

There is no question that while Hemingway was in Spain his life was in jeopardy many times, although he was not suicidally brave (Lynn, 1987, pp. 445-46). Hemingway enjoyed the reality of warfare – including the bombardments in Madrid and his trips to the front. His nervousness subsided after a couple of weeks in Spain and after that he relished the opportunity to be near the fighting (Meyers, 1999, p. 305). In April 1937, Hotel Florida came under heavy bombardment. Hemingway went out after the shelling had stopped to assess the damage to the hotel and the surrounding structures (Vaill, 2014, pp. 172-73). Although Hemingway's rooms faced away from the shelling he was still in danger, and in one instance a stray machine gun bullet flew through his window. Luckily, while he saw death and injury all around him, he escaped unscathed. On the Guadalajara front, Hemingway spent several days going over the battle ground and following the tank trails. This showed his deep understanding of military tactics which helped him when he was reporting from the front lines (Lynn, 1987. p. 446).

He traveled to the front lines on several occasions, and in one photograph he is seen inspecting a Republican soldier's rifle. The first time he left Madrid was for the front lines in Guadarrama in April of 1937. He was put in an armored car and driven to an area under enemy fire (Vaill, 2014, p. 181). When he was filming the documentary *The Spanish Earth* with Dutch film director Joris Ivens, Hemingway reported that they missed being hit by bullets by a matter of inches. He reputedly crawled on his hands and knees to recover a camera that had been left behind by Ivens. Ivens, who knew Hemingway well, had a very positive view of him and felt that he was a serious and responsible person, one who was liked by the Spanish military leaders (Meyers, 1999, p. 312).

Hemingway's second tour in Spain came as the Nationalist forces under Francisco Franco controlled two-thirds of the country. He was reporting for the opposing Republican side and commented

that the smell of death was so thick in the air in the front lines that the troops recovering the bodies of the fallen needed to wear gas masks (Muller, 2019, p. 167). Hemingway toured the Aragon front where the Republican forces had captured Belchite. He entered Teruel with the victorious Republican troops in December. At the Battle of Teruel, Hemingway was forced to lie flat with his face in the dirt as bullets flew above him. Two soldiers nearby were killed during this action (Muller, 2019, p. 183). Fortunately, he had a good “military mind,” which allowed him to see the whole combat situation at once – which was a quality that the best military commanders had (Muller, 2019, p. 210). Hemingway and his fellow reporters, Herbert Matthews and Tom Delmer, traveled almost 3,000 miles during this period covering the war during this period in the fall of 1937 (Meyers, 1999, p. 316).

Hemingway and his companion, the journalist Martha Gellhorn, dealt with the fighting as they covered the war from March to mid-May in 1938. He covered the battle of the Ebro delta, which led to the Nationalists cutting the communications between Madrid and Barcelona, which was the last major city controlled by the Republican forces. (Meyers, 1999, p. 320). They contended with many challenges covering these battles, as Muller states, “they plodded through the trenches filled with mud, contending with mortar and machine-gun fire” (Muller, 2019, p. 179) Through his experiences in Spain, Hemingway “had handled the ultimate test of courage under fire that defined him and his art” (Muller, 2019, p. 94) His presence in Spain boosted morale for the Republican forces and influenced world opinion. As Martha Gellhorn commented, “I think it was the only time in his life when he was not the most important thing there was” (Meyers, 1999, p. 324). In many ways Hemingway’s courage came through when he was in Spain precisely because he was able to put the battle against fascism first.

Hemingway’s bravery in this war was different from that of World War I. There he was a naïve young man searching for adventure and a change to get close to the fighting, which he was otherwise denied because of his poor eyesight. In Spain, he was a much more mature man who was deeply concerned about the spread of fascism. While he was not a combatant in this war, he was willing to put himself in physical danger to bring the news of the war to the outside world. Hemingway’s actions in Spain may have been supported by his religious beliefs. Many years later, Morley Callaghan wrote that “what happened to him in Spain . . . [came] to me second hand . . . from people who were with him in Madrid. I think Hemingway had a much larger sense of religious destiny than a lot of formally religious people who have lived according to the orthodox charts” (Morley Callaghan to Robert Morgan Brown, 21 September 1954, Hemingway Papers).

Hemingway was hoping for a stronger support for the Republican forces from the western democracies, and he was willing to risk his life to encourage this assistance. Hemingway opposed fascism both as a person and as a writer. Indeed, he commented to a meeting of the Congress of American Writers that there was only one of government that could not produce good writing – and that was fascism (Moorehead, 2003, p, 110.) With Archibald MacLeish and John Dos Passos, Hemingway was part of a group called Contemporary Historians, Inc. that was created to make films about the Spanish Republic, such as *The Spanish Earth*, with the hope that they might obtain U.S. support for the Republican cause (Reynolds, 2017, pp. 20-21). That support was ultimately not forthcoming, but Hemingway demonstrated his commitment to the cause by putting himself in danger to help save the Spanish Republic.

While Hemingway’s experience in the front lines was limited in his first two wars, his greatest military participation came in World War II. Again, Hemingway was officially serving as a war correspondent, but this time his actions went well beyond what was normal for someone in that position. Unlike the Spanish Civil War, which was an irregular conflict with American volunteers, the United States military fully participated in World War II. Hemingway was therefore in a much more defined role as a correspondent in this conflict, and he was limited in what he could legally do. As a non-combatant, he could not engage in military actions, carry weapons, or lead troops. He was there merely to report on the progress of events in the war, not to participate in it. He was not required to go to Europe and be in the thick of the fighting – this was again his choice to subject himself to the danger and hardship of serving with a military unit. By this time, Hemingway was in his mid-forties, so he was no longer a venturesome or idealistic young man. He was, however, a strong opponent of fascism and chose to participate in the war for that reason.

Hemingway wrote to his future wife, Mary Welsh, from the battlefield in France in late July and early August 1944: “We have had a tough, fine time. This is the eighth day we have been attacking all the

time. Have been with very good guys. . . Anyway been very happy here and had good time with infantry again” (Baker, 1981, p. 558). He continued his letter the next day: “I ... asked permission to stay with the Division as long as we are fighting and then catch up with the other people. We are fighting the most important part now, and I do not want to leave because timeliness means nothing and like to finish what you start” (Baker, 1981, p. 560). He clearly was enthralled by being near the fighting and having a chance to witness it first hand. Also, unlike the Spanish Civil War where the fascist forces were victorious, in World War II the fascists were on the run and being defeated by the Allies. For Hemingway who was saddened by the victory of the fascists in Spain, World War II was a chance to celebrate fascism’s final defeat.

Hemingway continued to serve with the U.S. forces as they moved closer to Paris. As he again wrote to Mary Welsh in early August: “Will go with the first attack in the morning and stay through all day I think if can find same outfit we attacked with yesterday since that is the best way to learn: with people you know already” (Baker, 1981, p. 562). He chose, however, to go well beyond the legal limits of a correspondent and worked with the U.S. forces assisting in the military campaigns in the territory surrounding Paris and the later liberation of Paris from German occupation (Reynolds, 2019, pp.151-52). He also admitted in his private correspondence to leading a group of the Maquis (French Resistance Fighters) during the battle to liberate Paris. His military mind, that he showed during battles in the Spanish Civil War surfaced again in World War II. There are photos of Hemingway dressed in a U.S. Army uniform without the required war correspondent badge – a violation of his status. Even though he was technically in France and Germany as a correspondent he only filed five stories during the ten months that he was in Europe. He was eventually brought up on charges of violating his non-combatant status. Other correspondents disliked his behavior and accused him of improper actions. Hemingway lied his way out of the situation – essentially admitting in his private correspondence that he did do the things he was accused of doing.

Later, in a letter written to Malcolm Cowley in April 1948, Hemingway did admit that he was armed at least part of the time that he was in Europe during World War II. He wrote, “Actually, when I was armed, I never wore any correspondents [sic] insignia; nor carried any correspondents credentials. I knew that I was not harming any other correspondents by my actions as I would not be treated as an ordinary correspondent if I were captured since I had written in the introduction to *Men at War* advocating the sterilization of all Nazi party members and since I had been engaged in intelligence work and illegal work at sea against the krauts since 1942” (Hemingway to Cowley, 9 April 1948, Hemingway Papers). Hemingway went on to say that “they would not harm legitimate correspondents for the misdeeds [sic] of an irregular who did not wear correspondents insignia nor carry correspondents credentials. I figured that if I was picked up I would have a chance at escaping if not too badly wounded. But most of the time I figured on not being picked up” (Hemingway to Cowley, 9 April 1948, Hemingway Papers).

David Bruce, who was a colonel in the Office of Strategic Services and served with Hemingway remarked, “I entertain a great admiration for [him] not only as an artist and friend, but as a cool resourceful, imaginative, military tactician and strategist. He unites . . . that rare combination of advised recklessness and caution that knows how properly to seize upon a favorable opportunity” (Meyers, 1999, p. 407). Bruce also felt that although Hemingway had a strong streak of independence, “he was a leader of men, and, in spite of his strong independence of character, impressed me as a highly disciplined individual” (Meyers, 1999, p. 407). Hemingway was certainly instrumental in aiding the allied forces in the capture of Paris, based on his knowledge of the surrounding area and his ability to speak French. Much of his work was done in intelligence, providing vital information to the advancing troops. (Dearborn, 2018, pp. 457-58). Following the liberation of Paris, Hemingway remained in the city for quite some time. He enjoyed staying at the Ritz and visiting his old haunts. While Hemingway and all correspondents were barred from carrying weapons, that rule was often overlooked. It was easy enough to carry a weapon, such as a revolver in the jeeps when they traveled. Other correspondents felt that Hemingway was endangering their safety by flouting the rules, since it might put them in danger if they were captured by the enemy (Meyers, 1999, p. 408).

As the forces moved into Belgium, Hemingway recounted his experiences to Mary Welsh. He wrote, “We are living in a fine forest today and there is some little fighting and there will be more but everything is very good. . . we slept in a pine needle forest floor last night. It did not rain and the wind

was high and heavy and blew the tops of the pines” (Baker, 1981, p. 565). By September 1944, Hemingway was in Germany as the U.S. forces moved closer to victory. He wrote to Mary Welsh, “after a fine wild day of chasing and shooting . . . settled down in a deserted farm house for the night. It was a sort of spooky night . . . and we drank up everything we had to celebrate that day. It was a fine day, following tank tracks through the woods and flushing them finally. Seeing the artillery catch them when they had to take to the roads” (Baker, 1981, p. 568). In many ways he had never been happier than the time he spent with the U.S. military in August and September 1944. He enjoyed the camaraderie of the troops and the chance to feel as if he was part of the action (Dearborn, 2018, p. 468).

Hemingway was also in the Hurtgen Forest campaign and was under fire much of the time. His time in the forest also demonstrated Hemingway’s bravery. He suffered through the battle that left 24,000 men killed, captured or missing. The Germans had left behind them mines and hidden bunkers full of German soldiers. This, along with unfavorable battle conditions, made this battle a perilous undertaking. It was one of the worst battles he had seen and one of the worst that had been fought (Dearborn, 2018, p. 471) Here Hemingway was not a participant, but rather an observer. He tried to stay out of the way during the battles although he had to endure the fighting as the men did. (Dearborn, 2018, p. 472). He could have stayed in Paris and enjoyed life in the recaptured city, but his willingness to travel to the front line showed that he was interested in experiencing the life of the combat soldier. As he wrote to his son Patrick on 19 November 1944, “We are in the middle of a terrific damned battle . . . that I hope will finish off the Kraut Army and end the war . . . and I cannot leave until our phase of it is over” (Baker, 1981, p. 576).

By mid-December the U.S. troops went through the forest, capturing the cities of Gey and Grosshau. Hemingway had endured some of the harshest fighting of the war and emerged unscathed. Inevitably the stress took a toll on him, but Hemingway told Colonel Buck Lanham, with whom he was serving, that he was tempted to stick with the war until the end. This was because he felt the most alive when he was in the thick of combat (Dearborn, 2018, pp. 472-73). Hemingway caught pneumonia when he was in the forest in December 1944. He left and went back to London, where he met Martha Gellhorn who had by that time asked for a divorce. They had been living separate lives for quite some time, and Hemingway had met fallen for Mary Welsh, so his divorce from Martha was not surprising or unwelcome (Meyers, 1999, p. 413).

Hemingway was later awarded the Bronze Star Medal for his time in Europe, which was the highest military award which may be given to a civilian. The citation officially credited him with bringing his readers into the fray of the battle and providing them with a detailed account of the war. Of course, since some of Hemingway’s military actions, such as leading a group of the French partisans were illegal, he could not be officially credited with performing them. There is sufficient evidence to demonstrate that while his actions could not be mentioned in the citation, they must have surpassed the five articles that he wrote during his time in Europe.

The question remains did Hemingway demonstrate courage in his time at war? The answer is yes. Since he was excluded from military service due to poor eyesight, Hemingway could have simply decided to remain at home, away from harm’s way. Indeed, many in his situation may well have chosen such a path. Yet Hemingway deliberately chose to put himself on the front lines in three wars. He suffered serious leg wounds in World War I, fortunately avoided amputation of his leg. He endured shelling during the Spanish Civil War and served on the front lines on World War II. His knowledge and experience made him an asset to the US forces in France. Yet his status in all these wars was unofficial, so it is easy to overlook his role in these conflicts.

Hemingway later mused about his feelings regarding war. He told Cowley “I hated war but I had a certain talent for some aspects of it as [Colonel] Buck [Lanham] may have told you. Or maybe I hadn’t any such talent and just imagined it. But I truly never gave a shit on any given day whether I died or not although I loved to live and I could impart this feeling to other people and I was very very cagy and I do not think I ever put anyone in any unnecessary danger all my life” (Hemingway to Cowley, 9 April 1948, Hemingway Papers).

Ultimately, Hemingway used his wartime experiences to frame some of his major novels, especially *A Farewell to Arms* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Hemingway’s writing style was best suited to fiction, although he did serve as a correspondent for both the Spanish Civil War and World War II. War shaped Hemingway’s personality and his view of the world. While he often felt a need to prove his

masculinity – challenging people to box with him, hunting wild game and putting himself in danger in his overseas adventures, Hemingway was a truly brave man who had his military service been of the conventional type, probably would have received many awards and accolades. He probably would have struggled as a conventional soldier, however, since he wanted to have a good amount of personal freedom in choosing how and where he fought. In this way, his role as an unconventional soldier suited him well.

Hemingway was a complicated individual who battled insecurities about his masculinity, while at the same time choosing to put himself in dangerous situations. Ultimately, none of these experiences killed him. Hemingway explained to Malcolm Cowley, “All my life, since I grew up, I have been a man and a writer and it is so much easier to be a good man than a good writer. You take refuge in one and sometimes neglect the other . . . I think there is a steady renewal of immortality through storms, attacks, landings on beaches where the landing is opposed . . . and many other things which are . . . hateful to those who are not suited to them . . . but is a very enobling [sic] thing for those who are suited for them and have luck so they survive them” (Hemingway to Cowley, 9 April 1948, Hemingway Papers).

In the end, a better understanding of Hemingway’s courage explains his personality and his beliefs. Although he was badly wounded in World War I, that did not stop him from putting himself in danger in the Spanish Civil War and World War II – two struggles where his ideological opposition to fascism pushed him to participate. In both later struggles he risked his life, perhaps unnecessarily, to stand up for democracy and his personal ideals. By understanding Hemingway’s willingness to put himself in dangerous situations we can better glimpse his personal beliefs and the things that mattered most in his world view.

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