

At the peak of her career in the 1940s and 1950s, photojournalist Margaret Bourke-White was one of the best-known women in the world.

As a staff photographer for Fortune and Life magazines, Bourke-White worked hard to carve a space for herself in a field dominated by men, and was present at some of the most significant historical events of the age.

She began her career as an industrial photographer covering machines, workers and factories, and became the first photographer of Fortune in 1929, when she was appointed by editor Henry Luce, who later made her one of four staff photographers of his illustrated news magazine, Life. In its day, Life was one of the most popular magazines in the world, read by 22.5 million people.

By the time Bourke-White arrived in South Africa in December 1949 on assignment for the magazine, she had already covered the liberation of the concentration camps in Europe, documented the independence of India, been with Mahatma Gandhi on the day he was assassinated in 1948, and covered race relations in the American South.

She spent four months in South Africa, covering the early period of National Party rule, including the inauguration of the Voortrekker Monument, the conditions of mineworkers and black life under apartheid.

An exhibition of the work she produced in South Africa shows the full extent of Bourke-White's activism as a photojournalist heavily influenced by the antifascist leftist environment she had emerged from to document the changes sweeping the world after the Great Depression and during World War 2.

Although she produced four essays on South Africa for Life, a separate book of the images was never produced. And so this work, even though it resulted in one of the longest photo essays Life ever published, has not had the same exposure as her World War 2 and India photographs.

The curator of the exhibition, Alex Lichtenstein, an associate professor of history at Indiana University, began to think about Bourke-White's apartheid photos while working in South Africa and, after discovering the larger body of unpublished work in Bourke-White's papers, "realised that her work would be an excellent way to explore how an American audience might have seen apartheid at the moment of its birth".

Life was a mainstream publication for a mass US audience. In that context, several of Bourke-White's images, particularly those depicting black resistance to apartheid, were excluded from her second photo essay because of the feeling in the US that opposition groups in South Africa were too closely linked to communism.

That omission is redressed in this exhibition in which, of the 40 images on display, only 11 appeared in the magazine, the rest having been sourced by Lichtenstein from Bourke-White's papers at Syracuse University.

The political circumstances at the time also meant that Bourke-White's first essay on Afrikaners at the opening of the Voortrekker Monument was given a less than critical per-



PAST IMPERFECT: Margaret Bourke-White, left; a three-year-old girl in Maroka; two miners underground, one of Bourke-White's favourite and most reproduced images; and miners in their room at Robinson Deep gold mine

Bearing witness to apartheid's birth

An exhibition of photojournalist Margaret Bourke-White's work reveals her commitment to exposing injustice and bringing it to the world's attention, writes **Tymon Smith**



MASS GATHERING: A crowd of 175,000 at the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria in December 1949



CHILD LABOUR: A boy working in a cornfield receives a noonday ration of wine from the farmer's daughter on the farm Ryssel
Pictures: MARGARET BOURKE-WHITE/TIME LIFE PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES

spective by the editors of Life, who wrote captions and copy that focused on the event as the culmination of the Afrikaner struggle for self-determination. But Lichtenstein believes it was also a necessary piece of cunning by Bourke-White. "In my view, she deliberately ingratiated herself with her white hosts in order to get unfettered access to the mines, compounds,

prison farms, shantytowns and other aspects she really sought to document." The second Life essay, "South Africa and its problem", was far more critical of the conditions of black South Africans and the racial policies of DF Malan's government.

Although she had seen the horrors of the concentration camps in Germany, Bourke-

White was shocked by what she found in South Africa, writing to a friend soon afterwards that her time in South Africa had left her "very angry. The complete assumption of white superiority and the total focusing of a whole country around the scheme of keeping cheap black labour cheap, and segregated, and uneducated, and without freedom of movement, and watched, and

hunted, and denied opportunity ... all through the patronising cover-all phrase 'he's not developed enough'." Bourke devoted a chapter in her autobiography to South Africa and spoke often of her experiences here. The iconic photo she took of two miners underground remained one of her favourite and most reproduced images. Although the

images are not as shocking as those by Ernest Cole and other photographers who chronicled the inequities of apartheid, they were the first exposure many outsiders had to what was happening in South Africa. Although it took many years after their publication for the anti-apartheid movement to grow into the force it became in the 1980s, Bourke-White's pho-

tos and her commitment to the exposure of injustice help us retrospectively to see that, as Lichtenstein puts it, "everyone — white and black, American and South African — knew what apartheid looked like from the beginning. That should both give us even deeper admiration for the persistence of those who struggled against it from the beginning, and yet remind us how long it took world — and especially American — opinion to catch up." Eventually forced to slow down owing to Parkinson's disease, Bourke-White died from the illness in 1971. ● Photos in *Black and White: Margaret Bourke-White and the Dawn of Apartheid in South Africa* is at Museum Africa until March 24

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