

# Gitanos during the war (1936–1939)

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2020

Tracking down scholarly material about the Gitanos during the turbulent years of the war is a difficult task. However, it is possible to collect information on this theme by consulting journals and magazines that took an active role in reporting during the war. Today, the identification of these documents using databases and their accessibility through virtual newspaper archives has greatly facilitated the work of researchers. Of special interest to those attempting to locate material of the Gitano people reported during the war is the Hemeroteca Virtual de la Biblioteca Nacional de España (Virtual Newspaper Archive of the National Library in Spain) which today counts 2,411 titles and exceeds 68 million pages for public consultation. A significant amount of news on the Gypsy people using this and other digital sources can be found in *Mundo Gráfico*. An overall review of this weekly magazine alerts the reader to the progressive agenda that the magazine follows, leading to its censorship during Primo de Rivera's regime, and its support for the Second Republic during the war. *Mundo Gráfico* continued actively during the two first years of the battle, although with limited circulation due to paper shortages. In December 1938, the magazine closed its doors to the public, but prior to that several graphic reports on Gypsies offered substantial information and large-sized illustrative photos.

As an illustration, on 12 August 1936, Antonio Otero Seco dedicated three pages of the magazine to the Gypsy bullfighter, Rafael "El Gallo," Rafael "the Cock," (1936b: 13–15); and a news clip from 9 December paid tribute to the Gypsy painter from Jaén, Fabián de Castro, who was interviewed from his residence in France (1936d: 12). Other entries by the same reporter inform the reader on the whereabouts of the Gitanos at the beginning of the war. On 28 October 1936, Otero Seco photographed a group of male and female Gitanos waiting in the building of the Ministerio de Guerra (Ministry of War) to obtain a *laissez-passer* to be able to circulate out of Madrid while the capital was being bombed. The report's aim was to interact (and persuade) the reader that the Gitanos are on the side of the *pueblo* (the people) and, as such, they salute the reporter with their fists raised (Otero Seco 1936c: 10). The article includes some war anecdotes with members of the Gypsy community as protagonists. A Gitano from Cerro Muriano (Córdoba) being persuaded by a captain to join the militiamen makes his decision based on the following previous clarification: "¿De qué lado cae la Guardia civil?" [What side do the Civil Guard fight for?] and having been told that the police force sided with Franco, he responds: "Pues entonces, venga un fusil" [So then, give me a rifle] (Otero Seco 1936c: 10).

An exceptional war incident with a Gitano man was also written about and published in *Mundo Gráfico* and *La Voz*. José Palma León, also known as “Oselito,” was the son of a poor Gitano locksmith. He invented a means of transportation and a new sport, which entailed using as a vehicle a large, heavy oxcart metal ring of more than 50 kg, which allowed him to travel at the speed of 17 km per hour. Oselito had developed this skill out of necessity, as in his youth he was given the task of delivering these oxcart-wheel rings to customers of his father. Given the practical difficulty involved in such a task, his solution was to walk, and then run, inside the wheel in order to get himself and the wheel from place to place more efficiently. He gained local fame and was determined to participate in the *Olimpiada Popular* (Popular Olympics), an alternative Olympic game to the Nazi celebrations, to be held in Barcelona starting on 19 July 1936, although this was cancelled due to the outbreak of war. The report of the event is carefully made and includes images of Oselito traveling in his *aro* (ring) as he arrived in the capital of Madrid. Coincidentally, the news appeared two days after the assassination of the monarchic deputy, Leopoldo Calvo Sotelo, and two days before the military coup. In the news from 15 October 1937, in *La Voz*, Otero Seco reports Oselito’s death. He includes a picture of this extraordinary Gitano in the Sierra of Madrid holding the ring and carrying a gun (1937b: 4).<sup>1</sup>

A further example is Helios Gómez who used the rifle and the brush in unison to levy attacks upon the war’s enemy. Originally from the quarter of Triana (Seville), this artist joined the *leales* in Barcelona, Aragon, and the Balearic Islands, all the while producing paintings and war posters favouring the democratic side. He was appointed Political Commissar of the Unión General de Trabajadores (UGT) (General Workers Union), designed the masthead and artwork of the newspaper *El Frente*, and organized an exhibition in homage to the anarchist Buenaventura Durruti in Barcelona. Exiled to France after the war, Gómez was sent to concentration camps in Argelès-sur-Mer, Bram, and Vernet d’Ariège, and then was deported to the French camp in Djelfa (Algeria) between February 1939 and May 1942. Between 1945–1946 and 1948–1954, Gómez was arrested and imprisoned in the Modelo prison in Barcelona, where he painted the oratory known as the Capilla Gitana. Sadly, he died just two years later.<sup>2</sup>

The war and post-war hardships of this artist, who held conflicting communist and anarchist beliefs, have won broad critical acclaim (Tjaden 1996; Sierra 2018) and for this reason I am limiting the discussion of this issue here. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning his opinions about Gitanos, a group that he considered his own despite his uncertain Gitano origins. When the painter was interviewed by *Crónica* in 18 October 1936, he noted the common frivolous and folkloric image of Gitanos in Spain. Gómez considered the Gypsy race “as capable as any other [race] for work, arts, and the ideological conceptions” (J.F. 1936: 4).<sup>3</sup> From his experiences in Russia, a country where he lived and which he admired, Gómez recalled how the Gypsy community was completely integrated there, acquiring the “social category” of any other citizen, with the same level of performance and production (J.F. 1936: 4).<sup>4</sup> With the optimistic tone of someone who

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<sup>1</sup> Details about his death were also reported months later in *Mundo Gráfico*, see J.F., *Historias de nuestra guerra XXI. El testamento* (1938, 23 February). The case of Oselito has been studied in detail by Fernández Truan and Rodríguez Rosell 2013.

<sup>2</sup> This information has been retrieved from Gómez’s foundation page, see [www.heliosgomez.org](http://www.heliosgomez.org).

<sup>3</sup> The original quotation reads as follows: “tan capacitada como cualquier otra para el trabajo, para el arte y para las concepciones ideológicas” (English translation is mine).

<sup>4</sup> The original quotation reads as follows: “En Rusia, el gitano, considerado como individuo de una raza tan apta como todas para las actividades sociales, tiene una categoría política y social igual a la de todos. Esto es lo que hay que conseguir en España” [“In Russia, the Gypsy considered an individual of a race as apt as any other for all the

hopes for a communist victory at the beginning of the war, the painter ends the interview with the following visionary thought: “I am telling you that from this civil war that will light so many wonderful things, Spain is also going to get the vindication of the Gitanos, their total integration to the civil life” (J.F. 1936: 4).<sup>5</sup>

A Gitano widely known as “Marianet,” Mariano Rodríguez Vázquez, played an active role as general secretary of the National Committee of the worker’s trade union, Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT) (National Confederation of Labor) and, during his short exile in France, as secretary of the Consejo General del Movimiento Libertario (General Counsel of the Libertarian Movement). In October 1937, the director of the Republican daily journal of Frente Popular, *La Libertad*, interviewed this anarchist militant. Antonio Hermosilla, under the pseudonym of Pomponio Mela, describes the origins of this young militant in the unprivileged neighbourhood of Hostafrancs, in the Sants-Montjuïc district of Barcelona. The interviewer reproduced parts of his conversations with this anarchist Gitano, with whom he met on different occasions. In those encounters they discussed literature, the vital role of the trade unions, and the resistance of the Spanish people in a heroic act of valour and survival.

Several books have paid tribute to this bricklayer Gitano activist (Muñoz Díez 1960; Peirats Valls 2011) who in June 1939 was found drowned in the waters of the Marne River in the north-central French region of La Ferte-sous-Jouarre. In commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of his death, the 103<sup>rd</sup> issue of the CNT journal *Cenit* published a biographical sketch of Marianet by anarchist leader Federica Montseny. The depiction of her much-missed comrade, for whom she confessed feeling “an indefinable mix of mercy and admiration” [“una mezcla indefinible de piedad y de admiración”] is not exempt from preconceptions about the Gitanos (Montseny 1959: 2750). The revolutionary worker was, in Montseny’s eyes, an individual of *insuficiente cultura* (insufficient culture), *falta de conocimientos* (lack of knowledge), and with no expertise to handle difficult tasks: “he was a short of experience, unimaginably candid child” [“era un niño, falto de experiencia, incalculablemente cándido”] (Montseny 1959: 2749). The picture painted of this infantile figure, even if it is not a reliable image of the real character, illustrates the way Gitanos were perceived by some of their progressive *payo* (non-Gypsy) war-mates with whom they enjoyed solidarity. The proletarian leader was seen as a sullen and inaccessible comrade, but also “the man who had the most friends in our movement, because of a gift for personal friendliness, an attraction that can hardly be described with words” (Montseny 1959: 2749).<sup>6</sup> Marianet’s healthy, vigorous, and attractive appearance was also primitive, rough, and unsophisticated in Montseny’s eyes, and his coarse body thus contrasted with his childish, tender sensibility.

Despite the involvement of a significant number of Gitanos in the unions, anarchist movements, and leftist parties, the conflict was completely bypassed for many others. The neutrality and indifference of the Gitanos in the battle was, according to Martín Sánchez, due to the lack of support that they received from either the right or the left sides, and because of this, they were unsure which position they should adopt (2018b: 31). The few cases of revolutionary Gitanos that

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social activities, has the same political and social category as the rest. This is what we need to get in Spain”] (English translation is mine).

<sup>5</sup> The original quotation reads as follows: “Yo te digo que de esta guerra civil que alumbrará tantas cosas magníficas ha de salir también en España la reinvidicación de los gitanos, su integración total a la vida civil” (English translation is mine).

<sup>6</sup> The original quotation reads as follows: “ha sido el hombre que más amigos tuvo en nuestro Movimiento, por un don de simpatía personal, por un atractivo que apenas puede definirse con palabras” (English translation is mine).

we know of – Oselito, Helios Gómez, Marianet – survived the anonymity precisely because of their leading role in the war scenario, making this group attractive for Republican newspapers, not only to integrate marginal subjects in the liberal cause but also as material for propaganda against the racist and classist opponent. The voice of those Gitanos who felt like foreigners in their own land, as if the battle and its cause did not pertain to them, remained unknown until very recently. In the last 15 years, historical memory projects with the Gitano people as the main subjects have revealed a wealth of information regarding the hardships and challenges of this group in times of war and the following 36 years.

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Excerpted from “The memory of Spanish Gypsies: Scholarship, oral history, and archive research” *Romani Studies* 5, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2020), 15–47. ISSN 1528–0748 (print); 1757–2274 (online). doi: [doi.org](https://doi.org/)

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