

**RE-THINKING ROMA RESISTANCE  
THROUGHOUT HISTORY:  
RECOUNTING STORIES  
OF STRENGTH AND BRAVERY**



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## **Chapter 9**

# **Forms of resistance during the Great Round-up (Spain, 1749-1763)**

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*The resistance of the Romani People to the rules of the capitalist system was neither ideological nor ethical, it was vital.*

- Pastora Filigrana<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction: the Roma Perspective on history**

As a Spanish *Gitano* man, and a sociologist situated within the decolonial school of thought, I find it important to use the decolonial perspective to create a counter-narrative of the history of Roma people. In doing so, I believe that it is imperative to place our capacity for action and agency in the foreground. Hence, my motivations for raising this counter-narrative from a decolonial perspective are twofold:

1. Even though Spain is often proclaimed a model of Roma integration, Spanish Roma are currently in a situation of socio-economic and political stagnation. Despite years of policies aimed at improving the situation of Spanish Roma citizens, their levels of education, health, housing and employment, remain nowhere near the level of the non-Roma majority population. Furthermore, the socio-political position of Roma

1 Pastora Filigrana, *El Pueblo Gitano contra el sistema-mundo. Reflexiones desde una militancia feminista anticapitalista* (México DF: Akal, 2020), 18. There is no English version.

- our visibility and our weak political influence - are seriously deficient; and we continue to be subjected to stereotypes. Structural exclusion, in short, does not allow us to enjoy full citizenship.

2. Roma across Spain remain largely ignored by both the public and the academic community. A lack of interest in the history of the Roma in Spain is reflected among Roma people themselves. As a result of this ignorance, Roma often perceive themselves as a community with no history, language or culture. This is magnified by the lack of Roma history and culture in school curricula, the media, and the mainstream institutions of culture and history.

This is why it is essential that we – as Romani scholars and activists – recover the often-forgotten stories of the past to create our own interpretation of Roma history, putting Roma people as protagonists at the centre. In this way, we challenge the ignorance about who we are as people, which still prevail both among the non-Roma majority and ourselves.

As an activist and a scholar, in this essay, I will focus on one of the darkest chapters of Roma history in Spain – the Great Round-up, which lasted between 1749-1763 – to show how Roma fought against injustice and engaged in diverse strategies of resistance.

## **A note on terminology**

In this essay I use the word “Rom”, and its derivatives, to refer to the Spanish *Gitano* population; with this terminology, I wish to imply that we, the Roma from Spain, are part of the larger Romani ethnic group. The Spanish word *Gitano* is pejorative. In fact, the normative and official dictionary of the Spanish language defines it in racist terms: alluding to nomadism and physical features and, even, making it synonymous with “trickster” and “swindler”. However, both in popular discourse and in the associative, academic or institutional spheres, we use *Gitano* with pride to define ourselves. We use it as an adjective to describe those things or creations that we consider our own. In Spanish, I usually use the Spanish expression “Pueblo Gitano” (Romani People), written with capital letters, to highlight my will to fight for our ethnic community’s political emancipation.

In this essay, I use the word resistance in a broad sense, that is, to mean the various strategies used by Roma to avoid oppressive state actions and its institutions, on the one hand, and, to ensure the survival of the community, on the other.

## A note on methodology

Furthermore, a short note on methodology is necessary. When I was 16 years old, I started my activism in the Asociación Nacional Presencia Gitana. There, I accessed its well-stocked library, and I was fortunate to meet Antonio Gómez Alfaro – a scholar who, at that time, was preparing his doctoral thesis<sup>2</sup> on the general imprisonment of Roma (Great Round-up) of 1749. He was the first scholar who revealed this unknown chapter of Spanish history. Thanks to him, I was able to see the original documents recovered from different historical archives that decreed the attempted extermination of my ancestors.

This discovery ignited a spark that I have always kept in my memory even though I have not devoted my professional attention to it. As a sociologist by training, I have dedicated myself to understanding and solving the social problems that the Romani People face. However, after my long experience trying to fight antigypsyism, I have understood that promoting knowledge about an episode as tragic as the attempted extermination during Great Round-Up of 1749 is necessary to restore a better social image of the Romani People in Spain. This realisation has guided my work since and led me to recently publish *Resistencias Gitanas*<sup>3</sup>, written together with Silvia Agüero.

In this essay, I rely on the study and analysis of secondary sources, especially, the various comprehensive works by Antonio Gómez Alfaro and Manuel Martínez Martínez, the main researchers on the Great Round-up in Spain.

2 Antonio Gómez Alfaro, “El expediente general de gitanos” (PhD diss., Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 1989). The paper remains unpublished. There is a short version: Antonio Gómez Alfaro, *La gran redada de gitanos* (Madrid: Presencia Gitana, 1993), available in English [The great Gypsy round-up: Spain, the general imprisonment of Gypsies in 1749] and in French [La grande rafle des gitans: Espagne, l’arrestation générale des Gitans en 1749]

3 [https://libros.com/comprar/resistencias-gitanas/?fbclid=IwAR2Uv1jZDNdyvqG-g2IzAs33-Dais7PsrswWXl8dHdRfAY3T\\_uuJDNJG48](https://libros.com/comprar/resistencias-gitanas/?fbclid=IwAR2Uv1jZDNdyvqG-g2IzAs33-Dais7PsrswWXl8dHdRfAY3T_uuJDNJG48)



## XV Century: The early history of oppression and resistance

It is important to highlight that the 1749 mass imprisonment of Roma in Spain did not appear out of anywhere; on the contrary, over two centuries of anti-Roma legislation provided the social and legal foundation for the Great Round-Up to happen. State-driven anti-Roma persecution in Spain began at the end of the 15th century when the so-called Catholic Monarchs issued the first Pragmática<sup>4</sup> against the Roma on March 3, 1499,<sup>5</sup> ordering the Roma to abandon their characteristic way of life, adopt a sedentary lifestyle or be permanently expelled from the Spanish territories.<sup>6</sup> From that time on, a legal framework was created that made it impossible for Roma to live in Spain and maintain a distinct Romani identity. This is why, since the Roma's presence in the Spanish territories, our ancestors used various resistance strategies to ensure our cultural survival.

The reading of this first anti-Roma Spanish legal text reveals a peculiar immigration law that permitted Roma to stay in its territory on the fulfilment of two requirements. From that point on, it became the backbone of all subsequent official policies, including those aimed at eradicating nomadism and laws regulating certain professions, such as jobs in agriculture under *Gadjikano*<sup>7</sup> landowners. This created economic dependency and a submissive relationship that would confine Roma status to that of slaves or vassals.

Since then, over 250 more laws were issued against Roma (Gómez Alfaro 2009, 9). Designed to eradicate the Roma people as a distinct ethnic group, they banned and punished everything that sustained Roma cultural identity (for example, Roma way of dressing, Romani language, our way of living). The 1499 *Pragmatica* is the basis of contemporary Spanish antigypsyism, and it is

4 In the Spanish legal tradition, a *pragmática* is a law of the highest rank, issued by the highest authority, with the aim of regulating fundamental aspects of the State.

5 Juan Ramírez, *Libro en que estan copiladas algunas bullas de nuestro muy santo padre concedidas en fauor de la jurisdiccion real de sus altezas et todas las pragmáticas que estan fechas para la buena gouernacion del reyno* (Alcalá de Henares: Estanislao Polono, 1503), 170-172

6 The *Pragmatica* ordered: "Egyptians to take trades or live with lords or leave the kingdom within sixty days". If they were captured within sixty days, they would receive a hundred lashes as punishment and be banished. The second time they were captured they would receive a cut on the ear (as a sign of having been captured) and would be imprisoned for 60 days. When they left prison, they would be banished again. If they were captured for the third time, they would become the slaves of their captors.

7 Meaning "non-Romani", in the Romani language; used as an adjective.

against this institutional and legal framework that the Spanish Roma people have been employing resistance strategies.

## **Importance of the Roma Resistance discourse in Spain**

Discovering, collecting and interpreting different Roma resistance strategies is a relatively new phenomenon inspired by the Roma Uprising during World War II at the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp in 1944. This event of Roma resistance resonates powerfully among Spanish Roma. In Spain in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Roma also had to employ strategies of resistance. During the Spanish Civil War,<sup>8</sup> many Romani individuals fought against fascism, especially as part of anarchist movements. Such was the case, for example, of a well-known Roma artist and a revolutionary Helios Gomez.<sup>9</sup> Later, during WWII, in which Spain remained neutral, many Roma of Spanish origin. He was in France when the war broke out and was held captive in French internment and concentration camps. Unfortunately, an in-depth investigation has not yet been carried out to properly document the suffering of Roma people of Spanish origin during this period. For this reason, we are unaware of the participation of Spanish Roma in resistance movements or other acts of heroism.

Although the entire history of Romani People in Spain can be characterised by their resistance to state oppression, in this essay, I will focus my analysis on one historical event: the attempted genocide<sup>10</sup> known as the Great Round-Up,

8 The Spanish Civil War erupted in 1936 and lasted until 1939. During the Spanish Civil War, the Republicans loyal to the left-leaning Popular Front government of the Second Spanish Republic, in alliance with anarchists, of the communist and diverse syndicalist fractions, fought against a revolt by the Nationalists, an alliance of Falangists, monarchists, conservatives and traditionalists, led by a military group. The Nationalists won the war and Spain was ruled under the dictatorship of General Franco until his death in November 1975.

9 Helios Gómez (Seville, May 27, 1905-Barcelona, September 19, 1956) was a trade unionist, anti-Francoist, painter, poster artist, poet and representative of the artistic avant-garde of the early twentieth century. Gómez is known internationally for his avant-garde black and white graphics. In the 1930s he fought against fascism for an ideal of social justice, using his political drawings to this end. He continued to fight after the war and, after spending three years in the concentration camps of France and Algeria, he painted and wrote in solitude and seclusion in rebellion against Franco's dictatorship. He also holds a record for the number of times he was arrested by the authorities, totalling seventy-one times across numerous countries, facing forty-two legal proceedings. Gómez led an extraordinary life, full of events and risks, in the service of revolutionary causes.

10 The term "genocide" was coined by Raphael Lemkin in his 1944 book *Axis Rule in*

perpetrated in the mid-18th century. The analysis of this historical chapter will allow me to propose a succinct taxonomy of resistance strategies carried out by Roma people during that time.

## The 1749 Great Round-up<sup>11</sup> (La Gran Redada)

Generally, it is left aside that the General Imprisonment of Roma represents an inherently racist process of accumulation of capital and an inherently capitalist radical attempt at racial extermination.

- Helios Fernández Garcés<sup>12</sup>

The 18th century was a time of recovery and reforms in many areas of Spanish life. The first Bourbons<sup>13</sup> adopted various centralising measures to establish a more efficient state and carried out an internal policy intended to rebuild the economy, politics, and society. During this time, the *Gitano* problem was not a priority in the Court of Philip V when Ensenada<sup>14</sup> was called to power in 1743. However, measures were taken against Roma to exert greater control over this population, starting with the censuses, and continuing with attempts to concentrate Roma in certain physical locations. Specifically, the first Bourbon maintained his predecessors' laws, but incorporated one novelty in the new anti-Roma Pragmatics of 1717 – Roma families were only allowed to settle in one of 41 cities. These localities were chosen because they met the criteria of having sufficient police resources and infrastructure to monitor and control the Roma population.

Occupied Europe, and is defined as the intentional action to destroy a people in whole or in part.

11 Gómez Alfaro called this historic event *la Gran Redada* (translated into English as the Great Round-up) but also used the expression “general prison for gypsies,” while Martínez Martínez often referred to this episode as “attempted extermination.”

12 H. Fernández Garcés, “*La Gran Redada de los Gitanos desde una perspectiva decolonial*” (unpublished), conference given at Instituto Alicantino de Cultura Juan Gil-Albert (Alicante, Spain, February 22nd, 2017). Translation is my own.

13 Bourbon (*Borbón* in Spanish) is the current reigning royal house of the Kingdom of Spain. It comes from Philippe of France, Duke of Anjou, grandson of Louis XIV of France, proclaimed as King of Spain in 1700 under the name of Philip V (1700-1746).

14 Zenón de Somodevilla y Bengoechea, 1st Marquess of Ensenada (April 20, 1702 in Hervías, La Rioja, – December 2, 1781, Medina del Campo, Valladolid). He came to occupy the positions of Secretary of the Treasury, War and Navy and the Indies. He was State Councillor during three reigns, those of Philip V, Ferdinand VI and Charles III.

In this context, the attempted extermination of the Roma people of 1749 – also known as the Great Round-Up or General Imprisonment of the Roma – took place. The raid was set in motion simultaneously across Spain on July 30, 1749, and aimed at capturing all Roma in the Spanish territory. The Round-up was authorised and organised by the Spanish authorities, the Monarchy and the Catholic Church, leading to the arrest of almost all Spanish Roma, ranging between 9,000 to 12,000 people.

The stated objective of the Great Round-up was “to exterminate them [Spanish Roma] at once” (Martínez Martínez 2014, 26). In doing so, the authorities were ruthless: men and children over seven years old were imprisoned in the marine arsenals of Cartagena (Murcia), La Carraca (Cádiz) and Ferrol (La Coruña) to rebuild the Spanish naval power lost after the War of Succession; women, girls and boys under the age of seven were incarcerated in hospices, hospitals and houses of mercy in Saragossa, Valencia and Málaga (Martínez Martínez 2014). More than 600 Romani women with their children under seven years of age were imprisoned in the Real Casa de Misericordia of Zaragoza,<sup>15</sup> in the exact space where the Pignatelli Palace stands today, home to the Autonomous Government of Aragon.

During the Round-up, the prisoners’ properties were confiscated by the authorities; an inventory and closure of the houses were carried out to prevent their looting. After being announced at a public auction, properties were auctioned to finance the operation itself.

Although the objective of the Great Round-up was to capture and apprehend all Roma residing in Spain at the time, some people managed to escape – especially nomadic families, and those who for various reasons were absent from their usual places of residence. On August 12, 1749, to complete the capture of all these people, an additional raid was carried out (Gómez Alfaro, 2009, 243). On the other hand, given the disorder in the classification of ethnicity, some Roma were granted the status of *castellanos viejos*<sup>16</sup> (Old

15 José Luis Gómez Urdáñez, “La Real Casa de Misericordia de Zaragoza, cárcel de gitanas (1752-1763)” in *Estudios en Homenaje al profesor Teófilo Egido*, ed. María de los Ángeles Sobaler Seco and Máximo García Fernández (Valladolid: Junta de Castilla y León, 2004), 329-343.

16 A Pragmatic of May 4, 1633, prohibited the use of the name “Gitano” (Gómez Alfaro 2009, 114) effectively erasing the Roma from historical sources. From there, the Roma began to be called “castellanos nuevos” (new Castilians). Immediately, this new denomination became as well known as the previous one, which is why some Romani families who were settled for several generations looked for ecclesial certificates that affirmed their condition as “castellanos viejos” (old

Castilians). Due to the authorities' mistakes, there were several individuals with this status among those captured, which led to various complaints to the authorities.

In fact, on September 7, 1749, a meeting of the *Junta de Gitanos*<sup>17</sup> (Board of Gypsies) at the Council of Castile was called to analyse the development of the raid in the city, concluding that those captured persons who possessed a Castilian status or were legitimately married or "living in a correct manner" should be released. This partial pardon, produced through the Royal Instruction of October 28, 1749 (Gómez Alfaro 2009, 247), led to the liberation of many Roma. However, more than 2,000 people remained in prison until 1763 (Martínez Martínez 2014, 52).

The General Imprisonment of Roma lasted until 1763 when the general pardon was decreed. On June 16, 1765, King Charles III authorised Julián de Arriaga, Secretary of State for the Navy, to communicate his resolution of pardon without the need to open new procedures, thus, ending the Roma extermination project (Gómez Alfaro 1993, 113).

It should be highlighted that the 1749 Great Round-Up is the oldest-known attempted genocide against the Roma people carried out in the Spanish territories. To understand this better, a note of clarification is necessary. The term "genocide" did not yet exist in the language of the time; in official documents, the term "extermination" was used. However, the authorities did not intend to immediately "exterminate" the Roma population in prisons. Instead, they wanted the destruction of Roma people to be the consequence of imprisoning men and women separately, making it impossible for a new generation of Roma to be conceived. Therefore, from today's perspective, the General Imprisonment complies with the contemporary definition of the term "gen-

Castilians). Being "old Castilian" meant not residing in Romani neighbourhoods but mingling with non-Roma neighbours, not meeting other Romani families in public or in private, marrying non-Roma people, and fulfilling the obligations of being Catholic.

<sup>17</sup> Junta de Gitanos was created inside of the Consejo de Castilla (Council of Castile, the chief body dealing with administrative and judicial matters of the realm) in 1721 to find a strategy aimed at ending the *Gitano* problem (Martínez Martínez 2014, 22). To date, neither the composition of this board, nor what its functions were, is known in depth.

ocide”<sup>18</sup>. Furthermore, the consequences of the Great Round-Up persist until today: the family structures were destroyed and, therefore, the traditional channels of cultural transmission were broken. Thus, eventually, the capacity to use the Romani language was lost; until today, the Romani language in Spain has not been revived.

## **Types of Roma Resistance during the Great Round-Up**

The desire to return to their freedom makes them so resolute and still angry that it is rare the day that they do not commit one or another attack.

- Governing Board of the Royal house of Mercy of Saragossa<sup>19</sup>

Still today, the Great Round-up is a historical episode which remains little known to the general, non-Roma public, nor has academic historiography paid much attention to it. Furthermore, to date, there is no comprehensive study on our people’s resistance during this time.

Nonetheless, there is evidence that our ancestors carried out different acts of resistance both at the time of the Great Round-up and throughout the period of incarceration. Below I describe the typology of these different acts of resistance which aimed at the physical but also cultural survival of the Roma people, ranging from “looking for inclusion” (creating first Spanish Romani organisation), to confrontation (uprising and escaping) and legal resistance (using legal tools).

### **“Looking for inclusion”**

In 1753, in the midst of the General Imprisonment, a group of Roma from

18 The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide defines genocide as: “any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

(a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;

(c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;

(d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;

(e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

19 Report sent to the Marquis de la Ensenada on September 4, 1753.



Triana<sup>20</sup> (Sevilla) led by Sebastián Miguel de Varas y Miranda, who had managed to avoid prison, decided to establish the first brotherhood of Roma in Spain - Hermandad de Señor de la Salud and María Santísima de las Angustias<sup>21</sup>, aka “Los Gitanos”, in Seville. Although it is a religious organisation, the creation of this brotherhood had the objective of improving the Roma’s social image by emphasising their true faith and religious commitment through active participation in ecclesiastical acts. This strategy did not free Roma people from prison but did create the idea that there are Roma families that are respectable, integrated, and part of society.

### Confrontation

During the period of imprisonment, organised armed resistance also took place. For example, a group of 13 Roma fleeing troops took refuge in the Monastery of Santa María de la Victoria (El Puerto de Santa María, Cádiz) where they resisted for two weeks. Finally, on August 12, 1749, they were captured when the ecclesiastical authority authorised the Army to enter the Monastery (Martínez Martínez 2014, 33). Another example of armed resistance happened in the hermitage of San Andrés (El Viso del Marqués, Ciudad Real) during the first days of August 1749, where a group of more than 40 Roma managed to resist arrest in the massive imprisonment action of the authorities. The Army’s intervention and the justices of El Viso del Marqués and Calzada de Calatrava were necessary for their capture (Martínez Martínez 2014, 40).

These two examples show that, at least in part, our ancestors were not willing to be captured peacefully, and they resisted as they could. We must consider the relevance of these acts of resistance, taking into account that they were families (men and women of all ages) who faced professional and armed

20 Triana was a *gitanería* (a Romani neighbourhood, a mahàla) from the 16th century till 1957, when Civil Governor Hermenegildo Altozano Moraleda, in collusion with the City Council, carried out the destruction of the Triana Romani community on account of speculative urban development. Triana was one of the places where flamenco art was born throughout the 19th century and part of the 20th, with mythical dynasties of Romani bullfighters and singers such as the Cagancho and the Pelaos. On July 20 and 21, 1936, at the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, Triana was the scene of heavy fighting between rebel soldiers and leftist militants who tried to prevent the triumph of the military coup. After the victory of the Francoist troops, Triana suffered a harsh repression.

21 “Historia”, Hermandad, Hermandad Sacramental Los Gitanos <https://www.hernandaddeosgitanos.com/historia/>

soldiers. Furthermore, there is evidence that our Roma ancestors, men and women, rebelled against the Great Round-Up from its start. Roma eagerness to regain their lost freedom prompted them to engage in continuous escape attempts to return to their places of origin, searching for their relatives, particularly wives and children. In fact, according to Martínez Martínez, between 1752 and 1765, a total of 335 escape attempts by Roma boys and adults were recorded; it is estimated that 85% of these attempts were successful (Martínez Martínez 2014, 72). Such acts of resistance - armed uprisings and escapes - happened in La Carraca where a first mutiny took place on August 8, 1749 (Martínez Martínez 2014, 55); and in Cartagena, where after completing the work, 16 Roma prisoners destined for the galleys, led by Juan Castellón, rebelled and fled in the first massive escape attempt of July 22, 1750 (Martínez Martínez 2014, 71).

It is important to highlight that there are also multiple examples of Romani women rebelling against their imprisonment. On the night of January 18 to 19, 1753, after having opened a breach in the wall armed with nails that they had previously pulled from the roof beams, 52 Romani women fled (Martínez Martínez 2019, 85) from the Royal House of Mercy in Saragossa.<sup>22</sup> This massive escape was led by a Romani woman named Rosa Cortés (Martínez Martínez 2015, 291). Likewise, at the end of August 1753, 40 women escaped, helping each other climb the four and a half meter-high wall; 12 Romani women imprisoned in the Royal House of Mercy in Saragossa organised a riot in June 1758 (Martínez Martínez 2019, 87).

#### Legal resistance

During the time of the Great Round-Up, many Roma knew the law and used available legal tools to resist unjust treatment. The legal resistance was of such intensity that on November 15, 1751, it prompted the Madrid Chamber of Mayors to order all Roma who approached the Court with the request of freeing their relatives to be sent to prison (Gómez Alfaro 2009, 253).

Another moment of legal action was in 1753 when after four years, the Great Round-up came to an end. Although Roma people had been imprisoned because of their ethnicity, they have often been regarded as vagrants and beggars, with existing anti-vagrancy legislation applied to them. Trying to benefit

22 The Royal House of Mercy in Saragossa, current headquarters of the General Council of Aragon, that is, of the Aragonese Government, served as a prison for more than six hundred Romani women.

from an analogical interpretation of the law on vagrants and beggars – which established a 4-year sentence for such “crimes of vagrancy” – several Roma presented a request asking for their freedom after having been imprisoned for four years (Gómez Alfaro 1993, 97-98).

## **Conclusions**

These few stories of resistance show, contrary to popular perception, that we as a people have not been apathetic and passive in the face of our own historical destiny. The three types of resistance proposed (inclusion, confrontation and legal resistance), practised during the Great Round-up, show that our ancestors used the means at their disposal to resist against the ominous power of the State.

Knowledge of Roma history in Spain is still largely unknown, both among the Roma community and the general public. Greater awareness of this aspect of the history of Spanish Gypsies would contribute to improving the social image of Roma people and, in this way, combat antigypsyism. The Roma must be included as part of the main canon of Spain’s history, as its integral participants. Therefore, it is necessary to implement public policies to support historiographic research and dissemination on the Roma past, which must be well endowed financially and planned and developed by Roma experts and researchers.

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