

Imanol

THE UJA, ONE OF THE VERY FIRST GROUPS TO FIGHT FRANCOISM

Here we are again, trying to shed some light upon and revive the memory of a sizable, if rather little known, batch of anti-Francoist fighters.

Today we shall be tracking the footsteps of what was practically a trail-blazer in activity in Catalonia, as well, as, quite possibly, the one with the lowest average age, given that its membership ranged from 13 year-olds to 23 year-olds. Not that that was the only special quality that there was to them, as we shall see. Their ranks included at least three women, which was a rarity in itself. Not just that but if you do a search on the web, you will find photos for just two members and might be led to think that they would be a couple of guys. Wrong. A lucky mistake, as it turns out. The first and best-known picture we have shows Julia Romera, one of the women members. Bearing in mind that as a rule scarcely any information has come down to us about female participation in such things, you will appreciate how great is our delight. Another notable distinguishing feature about the group in question was that it never relocated to France, albeit that it did not have the time to do so, given its brief existence. Finally, its members came not from the well-known libertarian barrios of Poble Nou, Sants or El Rabal, but from Santa Coloma de Gramanet and from Sant Adrià del Besòs, towns adjacent to the Catalan capital.

Given those clues, I imagine a few of my readers will have realized that the group in question was the UJA.

But in the event that they have never heard tell of it, what was the UJA? Why, the Union of Antifascist Youth (Unión de Juventudes Antifascistas), no less.

A bunch of very young people, because, as mentioned above, the oldest member was 23 years old. It was a group that grew up around the Libertarian Youth in Santa Coloma, almost all of them being members. As for the date when it was started up, we need to go back to mid- or late January 1939. By then the civil war was all but over and Barcelona was on the brink of being captured, as indeed it was on 26 January 1939.

The city fell without a fight. Combatants from disbanded or retreating units simply headed for their homes. One of them was Epifanio García Murcia, formerly a militiaman with the Ortiz Column.



Epifanio García

Alongside Epifanio in the group that set up the UJA we find Joaquín Miguel Montes, Salvador Alarcón, Miguel Colás Tamborero, Vicente Abad Lara, Fernando Villanueva and Antonio Asensio Forza. Little by little, fresh faces started turning up at their early meetings which usually took place in the home of the Campeny Pueyo brothers, or that of the Abad Lara brothers. When the numbers had grown, the meetings began to move to the countryside or the hills around Santa Coloma. By February, the organization was up and running. Not only that, but it had spread into nearby Sant Adrià del Besòs and was making inroads into Barcelona proper. In addition to the members named above, we know of the following: Pedro Gómez Segado, Julia Romera Yáñez, Juan Ballesteros Román, Julio Meroño Martínez, the brothers Joaquín and Manuel Campeny Pueyo, Manuel Abad Lara, José González Catalán, Bernabé García Valero, Jesús Cárcelos Tomás, Antonio Beltrán Gómez, Enrique Vilella Trepas, Ernesto Sánchez Montes, Amadeo Prats Mallarín, Antonio Fernández Vallet, Miguel Planas Mateo, Concepción Vázquez Agulló aka *Conxita* plus Ángela Boada.

Over the course of those meetings, they set out the group's structures, its aims and the location chosen for its operations, into which to spread its tentacles. Among the various panels, there was an intelligence-gathering panel headed by Fernando Villanueva and Miguel Colás; there was an armaments panel, headed by Antonio Asensio and Pedro Gómez, and a propaganda panel, led by Antonio Fernández.

The UJA had a typewriter on which to type up its propaganda and a selection of weapons gathered from retreating republican units. As far as we know, its modest arsenal consisted of 5 rifles, 3 'Winchester' rifles, one hand grenade and a range of ammunition. This gear was hidden in an old mine near Sant Adrià. Albeit that it was never stated, it is more than likely that it had access to a

number of handguns, because in the ensuing trial there were references to certain weapons seized from their homes.

Prominent among the UJA's aims was the attempt to undermine the new dictatorship that was being imposed, insofar as this was doable, of course; keeping up active resistance and dissent, whether through operations, propaganda or sabotage attacks on infrastructure; financially assisting families with members behind bars or in exile – to which end they set up and maintained a file on reactionaries to be robbed or from whom a revolutionary tax would be levied.

Among its operations, there were several armed robberies and beatings meted out to leading far right personnel, a raid on a small barracks in Casas Baratas that was used by Italian troops and from which some documentation was stolen. They also procured the plans of an army barracks that they were thinking of attacking, and the production and distribution of socially-minded anti-Francoist propaganda materials like the well-known "*Less of the Franco and more of the white bread*" leaflets. Other UJA texts declared: "*Citizen: the antifascist front for resumption of the fight against the fascists and their criminal handiwork is up and running. Join this organization once you get the word*", or "*Those who think they are helping the poor with painless donations are wrong, since that presupposes that they are unaware that the best way of helping them is to provide them with work and not get them used to beggary and idleness, which is the root of every vice and criminality. That is what social aid looks like.*"

As for sabotage, suffice to say that they carried none out, due to the speed with which the UJA was dismantled.

As several of them had seen active service and were experienced in the use of firearms, they began instructing the others from the group in their use and it was one gunshot that triggered a mass round-up.

That gunshot was overheard by a neighbour of Fernando Villanueva's. He wasted no time in making his way to the Civil Guard post to report it. And that spelled the beginning of the end. The arrests started on 30 May 1939 and continued into early June and it was not long before the entire group was in police hands. Well, not quite the entire group. For one thing, Ángela Boada had died and so she was spared the police's sinister dungeons. Another two group members managed to evade the round-up – Epifanio García and Salvador Alarcón. Both had been called up into the Francoist army and were away doing their military service in Barcelona.

Meanwhile, the remainder of the group was subjected to ghastly police torture and tried to survive with as much of their dignity intact as they could manage. They were brought before the courts that year, inquiries having begun after that July, and the verdicts were brought in on 2 January 1940.

In June 1939 Epifanio García and Salvador Alarcón were arrested in their barracks and tried separately. Luckily for them, no incriminating evidence was forthcoming. Even so, they were held in prison until April 1943, at which point they were sent back to their respective units. Epifanio escaped from the barracks shortly after that and there was a search and arrest warrant for him outstanding until 1960.

The sentences handed down were extremely harsh. Five of the members of the UJA were sentenced to death – Manuel Campeny Pueyo, Jesús Cárceles Tomás, Bernabé García Valero, Joaquín Miguel Montes and Enrique Vilella Trepát. Shortly after that, four of these sentences were commuted to life imprisonment. Manuel Campeny Pueyo was not so lucky and was shot in the Campo de la Bota on 29 July 1940. He was 22 years of age.

In late 1943, Joaquín Miguel Montes successfully escaped. Bernabé García Valero was released in May 1945. Jesús Cárceles was not released until August 1959.

Sentences of life imprisonment were passed on Antonio Beltrán Gómez, Joaquín Campeny Pueyo (who was freed in January 1944), Miguel Tomás Tamborero, Julio Meroño Martínez, Ernesto Sánchez Montes (who was freed in July 1954), Juan Ballesteros Román, Miguel Planas Mateo and Julia Romera Yáñez, who passed away in the female prison in Barcelona on 8 September 1941, from the mistreatment doled out to her in the cells of the Santa Coloma Civil Guard.



Julia Romera Yáñez

Vicente Abad Lara was given a 20-year sentence, but was released in September 1946, and Antonio Asensio Forza was freed on license in late 1943. In 1946 he was rearrested for unlawful association and illegal propaganda and was held behind bars until late 1958.

Amadeo Prats Mallarín was given a 15-year sentence but released on licence in July 1945. Pedro Gómez Segado left prison in April 1944, as did Justo Álvarez Álvarez and Antonio Fernández Vallet.

There were also three acquittals for the three youngest militants who were under 16 – José Catalán, Fernando Villanueva and Manuel Abad were handed over to the Court for the Protection of Minors. Also acquitted was Concepción Vázquez Agulló aka *Conxita*, but in an interview conducted in 2015, she acknowledged having served two and a half years in prison, time allegedly not mentioned in the court records.

The parents of the Abad and Campeny brothers received 6-year sentences for complicity. Vicente Abad was released in October 1942, whereas Felipe Campeny had to wait until May 1943 for release.

El Salto, 27 February 2021

<https://www.elsaltodiario.com/ni-cautivos-ni-desarmados/la-uja-uno-de-los-primeros-grupos-en-combatir-el-franquismo>

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