

# Avant-garde humour as ideological supplement: Francoist propaganda for the unenthusiastic in *María de la Hoz* (1939)

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## Abstract

*In 1939, when the Spanish civil war had recently ended, avant-garde humorists Miguel Mihura and Tono published an absurdist propaganda ‘novel’, María de la Hoz [María of the Sickle], about the republican zone during the conflict. Unlike other Francoist propaganda pieces of the time, it did not focus on the violence or the alleged moral degeneracy of the ‘reds’ but rather on what its authors perceived as the absurdity of egalitarianism and the progressive ideals. The novel, while not contradicting the emerging official ideology, conspicuously overlooked some of its key tenets, particularly those related to nationalism, Catholicism and Franco’s leadership. This article contextualises María de la Hoz in the development process of Spanish avant-garde humour and in Francoist propaganda fiction during and immediately after the civil war in order to analyse the ideological stance it represented and, potentially, reinforced. As a political piece, the book seems to convey the position of an affluent middle class who did not enthusiastically believe in Francoism but preferred it to the republican alternative, caricatured as a communist regime by nationalist propaganda.*

*Keywords: avant-garde humour, political satire, propaganda, Spanish civil war, Francoism.*

## 1. Introduction

In January 1937, roughly half a year into the Spanish civil war, humourist Miguel Mihura, then living in republican Madrid, received a letter from his friend and colleague Tono (Antonio de Lara). Sent from Paris, it inquired about Mihura’s health – he had long suffered joint tuberculosis in his right leg - and mentioned an unnamed “bone specialist” who did “miraculous cures”: “It’s a pity that you cannot come, for he would surely help you get well” (Mihura 2007: 91).

It was a thinly veiled invitation to flee, but Mihura did not need any encouragement. He had been trying for months to find the best way to get out of the republican zone (Moreiro 2004: 176). By the end of January, Mihura and his mother travelled to Valencia and sold some family jewels to buy their tickets for a flight from Valencia to Toulouse on February 20<sup>th</sup>. Tono, from Paris, offered them the use of a house he owned in Hendaye, where they stayed for a short while until their return to Spain, this time to the Francoist zone (Moreiro 2004: 177).

For the rest of the war, adopting the pen name *Lilo*, Mihura contributed to Falangist magazines, directed the propaganda weekly *La ametralladora* [The machine gun] and published a humorous ‘novel’ with Tono, *María de la Hoz* [María of the Sickle].

Eighty years later, the work produced by Mihura during that period remains controversial. It can hardly be considered anything other than Francoist propaganda, since it was published as such and wilfully distorted the reality of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Republic, but it is often unconventional, at the very least in its relative mildness and in its formal approach, much more in line with the principles of the surrealist humour that *los humoristas del 27* [the humourists of 27] (Bauer 2010) had been developing before the war than with the usual partisan satire. In fact, documentary evidence shows that Mihura intended to use *La Ametralladora* as a vehicle to further explore the “new humour” and was comparatively uninterested in proselytising or pumping up troops’ morale (see, for instance, Moreiro 2004: 192; Llera 2007: 40-43; Mihura 2007: 96, 98-100; Bauer 2010: 70). All the same, however unconventional, much of his work during the war is still propaganda that presents a self-serving caricature of the other side: Ríos Carratalá suggests that “*María de la Oz* [sic] is a pamphlet that, once perused, should be promptly forgotten” (Ríos Carratalá 2013: 57).<sup>1</sup>

This article will argue that there is indeed something to be gained from delving deeper into an ideological and literary artefact as peculiar as *María de la Hoz*. It is propaganda written by a self-proclaimed sceptic who normally refrained from politics, both in his work and his public statements. Mihura would be undoubtedly influential in Spanish popular culture during the dictatorship, first as the director of a humour weekly, *La codorniz* [The quail], and later as a playwright: in both capacities, he was pivotal in the shaping of mainstream Spanish humour. And while he wrote his Francoist propaganda pieces, he was pursuing an aesthetic agenda that was frontally opposed to satire, political or otherwise. Hence, analysing *María de la Hoz* might help not only to ground finer socio-political interpretations of the authors’ later, less explicitly political work, but also to illuminate the complexity of the ideological stances supporting Franco’s coup and subsequent dictatorship, the social makeup of those who held such positions and the ideological multifunctionality of humour.

## 2. “New humour” at war: between *Gutiérrez* and *La codorniz*

The Spanish “new humour” flourished during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, from minority avant-garde to mainstream success. First theorised (and practiced) as “pure humour” by Ramón Gómez de la Serna (Bauer 2010: 68-69), it was embraced and developed between the ’20s and late ’40s by *los humoristas del 27*, a group of humourists spearheaded by Mihura, Tono and Jardiel Poncela. The “new humourists” rejected the “bitterness” of satiric humour, its moralising and its political partisanship, and favoured a playful, absurdist approach to (or departure from) reality.

As regards Mihura and Tono, their contribution to the “new humour” can be divided into three periods:

- 1) Pre-war: contributions to *Buen humor* [Good humour] (1921-1931) and *Gutiérrez* (1927-1934), two humour weeklies that departed from the prevailing satirical humour and featured many of Mihura and Tono’s articles and short stories under the header *El humor nuevo* [The new humour].

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<sup>1</sup> However, as Ríos Carratalá cautions, consigning lesser propagandistic works to oblivion should not imply plainly forgetting the fact that “the humourists were also involved in the war effort” (2013: 57). His valuable book is partly devoted to an insightful discussion of such fact.

2) Spanish civil war: Mihura directed the propaganda weekly *La ametralladora*. Shortly after the war was over, Mihura and Tono culled several of their short stories from *La ametralladora* and published them as a ‘novel’, *María de la Hoz*.

3) Post-war: Mihura launched and directed *La codorniz* (1941), now completely devoted to humour as he conceived it. The magazine was greatly successful and, while Mihura vacated his position as director in 1944, it would live on to be the longest-running humour magazine in Spain,<sup>2</sup> eventually folding in 1978.

Like almost any avant-garde offering, the “new humour” initially appealed to a minority. *Gutiérrez*, a magazine for the general public, never sold more than 20,000 copies of any single issue (Moreiro 2004: 93). But over time “new humour” went on to become considerably popular: Mihura’s *La codorniz* was so fashionable among young readers that some were said to “speak in *codorniz*” (Moreiro 2004: 2018-219), that is, to emulate the magazine’s signature verbal puns in everyday speech.

The civil war period, then, seems to stand like a politicised intermediate stage between two periods of “pure humour”. However, once Mihura was appointed as director of *La ametralladora*, he seized the opportunity to continue developing his conception of “new humour” (Llera 2007: 40-41). In its first few months (the first issue had been published in January 1937), the weekly had been a standard propaganda magazine for the troops. When Mihura assumed the director role, he was cautious enough to leave the doctrinal work to others (initially, the Falangist writer Tomás Borrás; see Moreiro 2004: 189; Mihura 2004: 1394, 1465, 1480; Llera 2007: 37), which freed him to put together a staff of like-minded humourists and focus on producing more “new humour”. Of course, he was not completely free nor unsupervised: on occasion, he was called to attention by Francoist authorities who felt the magazine was not fulfilling its purpose (Mihura 2007: 96), and he had to carefully negotiate some wriggle room for himself (Mihura 2007: 98-100). But during his two-year tenure he managed to turn a propaganda operation into a successful commercial enterprise (Mihura 2004: 1393-1394, 1465-1466) and a dry run of *La codorniz* (Moreiro 2004: 193).

Mihura’s *La ametralladora* was, then, an unconventional (but successful) propaganda magazine, that advanced the “pure humour” agenda in an exceptionally polarised situation. And the pieces of propaganda humour that he wrote and/or drew were equally unconventional. *María de la Hoz*, a collection of some of his most ‘militant’ stories disguised as a ‘novel’ (or, rather, a novella, given its length) may be considered a strategic move to highlight his contribution to the cause in the context of the newly established Franco dictatorship.

### 3. A bourgeois anarchist: political ideology in Miguel Mihura

Mihura’s politics have been debated by critics in reference to different aspects of his life and work: his flight from republican to Francoist Spain in 1937; the articles and cartoons he produced during the Spanish Civil War, and his role as director of *La Ametralladora* and founder and first director of *La Codorniz*; and the political implications of his work for the stage, from the allegedly non-conformist message in his first play, *Tres sombreros de copa* [Three top hats] (1932) to the bourgeois complacency that some identify in the bulk of his output as a playwright and in his career choices.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The record was recently beaten by *El Jueves* [The Thursday] (1977 - ongoing).

<sup>3</sup> Including Mihura (2004: 1500) himself: “I wanted to earn a living writing plays and was not at all interested in being an avant-garde writer. [...] I decided to sell myself out and write plays that could reach the general audience”.

There are three basic interpretations of Mihura's political stance: 1) Mihura as a moderate conservative who usually avoided politics but, when pressed, showed his true colours; 2) Mihura as an essentially apolitical writer, more concerned with comfortable living and the poetics of humour than with social problems; 3) Mihura as a sly critic of tradition, social convention and bourgeois morality, who hid his barbs under the guise of "pure humour" and craftily avoided censorship under a totalitarian regime.

Each interpretation seems to highlight a specific dimension in a complex character. When pressed to make a choice during the Spanish Civil War, Mihura actively, if perhaps unenthusiastically, sided with the Francoist faction; the trouble he took to escape from Madrid shows that he was not just following the path of least resistance, although he was anticipating worse inconveniences if he stayed. It is also true that, in the majority of his work, he avoided anything remotely related to "current affairs" and was noticeably uncomfortable with the notion of (usually left wing) "engaged literature" (Mihura 2004: 1469). But there is also a critical streak in his work, specifically targeting the bourgeoisie he belonged to,<sup>4</sup> and a constant focus on the unsolvable conflict between society and the individual: many of the characters in his plays are either self-marginalised from society, rebel against it, or exemplify the problematic nature of social integration (Miguel Martínez 1997: 25-71).

In the later years of the Francoist regime, during the seventies, Mihura was sometimes asked in interviews about his political views in general and his side taking in the war in particular. He was consistent in his replies. Regarding his politics, he usually said that he was really not interested in the topic, that he considered himself as a "bourgeois anarchist" and his ideology varied depending on the time of day and the newspaper he was reading, so he was everything (but a communist, he would significantly point out) and nothing (Mihura 2004: 1452-1453, 1457, 1468, 1492, 1507, 1513). His option for the Francoist side in the Spanish civil war had, he insisted, "nothing to do with ideologies" (Mihura 2004: 1498), since he had "always had very liberal ideas" (Mihura 2004: 1511): he was "uncomfortable with the Popular Front here in Madrid" (Mihura 2004: 1393). As he elaborated:

Like all intellectuals back then [...] I was very liberal and a bit of a leftist. Then the Republic came and nothing happened. But I was a very good friend of Joaquín Calvo Sotelo and, when they killed his brother José,<sup>5</sup> our gang, where, as I said, we were a bit left wing, in that moment we all said: "This cannot go on like this, this is all over, this is utter shit". And we backpedalled. Or, more precisely, we inhibited ourselves...

(Mihura 2004: 1498-1499)

The turning point was, according to Mihura, the shooting of José Calvo Sotelo: this led to the war, to "red Madrid" and his being compelled to choose a side. Up to that point, he had been "a bit of a leftist" with a liberal outlook. Then, during the war, he had to produce Francoist propaganda and did only what was strictly necessary. Finally, after the war, he was able to return to the "pure humour" he favoured. Humour, he stressed, that was not about "making fun of anyone nor scolding anyone" (Mihura 2004: 1410).

Consciously or not, Mihura may have downplayed his ideological stance in those reminiscences. Some of the articles and short stories that Mihura published before the war do not fit with their narrative, particularly the series entitled *Las más bellas estampas de la revolución* [The most beautiful vignettes of the Revolution] which was featured in the humour weekly *Gutiérrez* from December 1932 to February 1933. These articles have also elicited different interpretations: while Díaz (1997a, 1997b) reads them as satirical invectives against

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<sup>4</sup> Mihura (2004: 1483) explicitly assumed this satirical intention: "I am middle class, but I make fun of the middle class".

<sup>5</sup> José Calvo Sotelo (1893-1936) was a conservative MP in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Spanish Republic.

specific reformist policies implemented by the socialist government during the first biennium of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Spanish Republic (1931-1933), Moreiro (2004: 110-112) argues that Mihura did not have a definite ideological intention; his satirical articles of that period may be uncharacteristically political, but Mihura was simply being sceptical, like he always was, rather than promoting a conservative agenda. In any event, these pieces are relevant for an ideological characterisation of Miguel Mihura, not only because they show that his anti-republican writing pre-dates the war and began being published barely one year into the Republic, but also because some of them were later recycled in *La ametralladora* and even in *María de la Hoz*, the ‘novel’ which allegedly satirised “red Madrid during the war”. This would imply that, in his view, the Republic was already becoming a communist regime, years before the war. It also implies that, contrary to the narrative he used to present in interviews in the ’60s and ’70s, he was not pushed into choosing a side in the later days of the Republic, but had already shown a defined political stance in 1932.

Besides *Las más bellas estampas de la revolución*, other articles published in *Gutiérrez* during the same period show a similar sceptical/conservative stance, addressing topics such as free love (Mihura 2004: 584-586) or nudism (“the most boring invention in the world”; Mihura 2004: 590-592). *Nuestra tía Asunción* [Our aunt Asunción], published in the July 1<sup>st</sup>, 1933 issue, is headed “*Los grandes programas políticos para muchachos jóvenes*” [The great political agendas for young lads], and apparently diverges from the other ‘political’ articles he wrote at the time. It proposes the creation of a political party “whose single goal should be to annoy our aunt Asunción as much as possible” (Mihura 2004: 608). Members of the party should do exactly the opposite to whatever their aunt Asunción would want them to do: “Our aunts Asunciones stifled our imaginations with their black stockings, their black dresses and camisoles, and it’s their fault that now the whole Spain is a big office full of gentlemen who dye their hairs” (Mihura 2004: 610). “Our Aunt Asunción” represents “proper” bourgeois values and customs, and Mihura’s “political agenda”, as laid out in the article, is to subvert those values and costumes using humour and imagination, but “being careful not to join the communist youth federation, for the communist youth never understands anything either, and still wears a grand tie with a big knot, and still reads Russian literature” (Mihura 2004: 608). Mihura seems to feel the need to underscore that his ‘political agenda’ cannot be identified with any existing party, particularly the communists, who are as stiff as “our aunt Asunción”.

Mihura’s work after the war was not completely devoid of the occasional political dabbling. Two of his plays, *Ninette y un señor de Murcia* (1964) [Ninette and a gentleman from Murcia] and its sequel (1966), caricatured republican exiles as political illiterates.<sup>6</sup> In general, the ideology that Mihura’s dramatic output conveys has been summarised into two key features: mild scepticism, eventually bordering fatalism, and selfish individualism (Miguel Martínez 1997: 143). These seem consistent with Mihura’s own manifest stance: “I have always defended individualism [...]. I believe that freedom is fundamental, but when freedom goes marching through the streets under a flag it is not freedom anymore” (Mihura 2004: 1457).

In summary, the ideological characterisation that emerges from Mihura’s life and work shows a number of consistent features, in spite of Mihura’s resistance to be politically pinpointed. In fact, such resistance appears as one of his political defining traits: an aversion to formal politics and established ideologies. His stance is defined by opposition: his few overtly political writings, before, during and after the civil war, are written against something or someone, always identified with the Republic or the left wing (particularly communism, the ideology that Francoist propaganda would falsely depict as hegemonic in the Republic). The range of targets widens when the attacks are not directed against specific politicians or

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<sup>6</sup> Critics believe that it was a deliberate nod to Francoism (Domènech Ivorra, in Facio 2006: 65-66). Typically, Mihura (2004: 1506) denied any political intention: “it’s not that I wanted to play politics, not in the least. I just wanted to present human, colourful characters”.

ideologies: then he makes fun of bourgeois social conventions, values and institutions (particularly marriage), and everything that gets in the way of individual freedom. However, there is no positive political programme to enhance freedom: it can never come from any party or collective movement, since it is strictly individual. Mihura is not explicitly 'in favour' of any political regime; he is decidedly against communism, or what he regards as such, and, should he be compelled to choose, he would go with the option that allowed him to keep his individual freedom: "when I arrived at the national zone, yes, you would see ladies carrying scapulars this big, but they were well-mannered [...] between those people and the damned Russians... I mean, I chose my freedom" (Mihura 2004: 1467).

#### **4. The ideologies of Francoism**

The Francoist dictatorship survived until Franco's death in 1975 by adapting to changing circumstances, from its Fascist origins to later Developmentalism (Saz Campos 2004). So did its official ideology and the propaganda designed to disseminate it (Pallol Trigueros 2013). Beyond the essential lines of continuity, specific features can be distinguished in propaganda pieces from different periods of the regime.

Hence, any approach to the ideology of Francoism and its expression in propaganda must be period-specific and distinguish at least three separate levels: 1) the formal political ideologies that supported the coup and, in varying proportions, coalesced into Francoism; 2) the ideological implications in the actual exercise of power; and 3) the 'official' ideology that was disseminated by propaganda and in public ceremonies and rituals.

Francoism was, from its early days, an ideological blend that attempted to combine disparate trends in the right, widening its social base by connecting the groups identified with those trends: the radical right, unwilling to upset traditional elites, and fascism, which accommodated the emerging middle classes and intended to mobilise the masses. The radical right was anchored in traditional religiosity, while fascism aimed at a cultural revolution that should give birth to a secular political religion (Selva Roca de Togores 2013: 481-482). The dictatorship would, in the one hand, allow the expression of the different positions in the right within the framework of a "limited pluralism", and, in the other, cherry-pick ideas, characters and symbols from the past, often on the basis of circumstantial needs (Cazorla Sánchez 2013: 570-571). This "political syncretism" was embodied in the regime's single party, Falange Española Tradicionalista y de las JONS, which combined fascism with traditionalism despite their apparent incompatibility (Vandaele 2010: 85).

What these different trends in the right had in common was their rejection of the Republic, in an increasingly polarised arena where violence and rumours about violence from the other side pushed moderate positions out. These dynamics of terror destroyed liberal civic values and "transformed the variety of right wing stances that had existed during the Republic into a mass which was receptive to militaristic and increasingly totalitarian message from the rebel leaders" (Cazorla Sánchez 2013: 578). The coup was justified presenting the Republic as a disorderly regime, where violence and crime were the normal state of affairs, laws were manipulated, and the country's economy and morals were being systematically destroyed (Ascunce Arrieta 2015: 78-79).

Historiographic accounts of the Republic have highlighted the endemic problems that prevented its stabilisation, such as the exclusion (and self-exclusion) of ideological positions held by significant proportions of the population (Álvarez Tardío & Villa García 2010). This narrowed the variety of ideologies and parties supporting the Republic, from moderate conservatives to the left wing. However, neither the outcomes of elections during the Republic (Villa García 2016), where the communists never reached even 4% of the seats in Parliament,

nor the manifestos of the main parties (Artola 1974) warrant its characterisation as a communist regime or as a radical experiment at the verge of a communist revolution. Rather, the depiction of the Republic under such a light can be understood as a deliberate, consistent and sustained propaganda effort to repeal social and educational reforms presenting them as the work of communists in coalition with Jews and masons (Preston 2021).

Justifying itself as an imperative patriotic counter-attack against the *contubernio judeo-masónico-blochevique*, the main ideological features of Francoism were the following (Cazorla Sánchez 2013: 581-589):

1) *Emphasis on public order*. Its enemies (liberals, masons, Marxists, atheists) had to be exterminated. The anti-Semitism of the early days dimmed throughout the forties, but ‘reds’ were consistently characterised as degenerates, criminals by nature who resented their inability to thrive in society, which led them to indulge in violence (Cazorla Sánchez 2013: 583). The political formulas they used to achieve their ends (democracy, parliamentarism, republicanism) were to be rejected (Ascunce Arrieta 2015: 106).

2) *Emphasis on social and moral order*. The left had upended labour relations, so hierarchy had to be restored in order to achieve true social justice. The same could be applied to morals and sexual relations: Catholicism would take over education and restore order and the proper relation between genders.

3) *Militarism, imperialism, nationalism*: the restoration of moral order, and the deliverance from foreign (i.e. Russian) influences would lead to a new dawn of imperial Spain (Muñoz 2009).

4) *Autarky*: Spain was going to be self-sufficient, partly in emulation of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, partly forced by international isolation after World War II. This resulted in decades of poverty and social backwardness, which were overlooked by propaganda.

5) *Franco’s leadership*: during early Francoism he was presented as the “undefeated leader” in the crusade against the ‘reds’; since the mid-forties, after World War II, he was the “Caudillo of peace” who had saved his country from getting involved (Cazorla Sánchez 2013: 589).

These ideas were conveyed in different media and formats, with different emphases, in different periods and to different audiences (Pallol Trigueros 2013). Propaganda needed to be modulated according to its target: books and novels published during the war or the early days of the regime were not intended for the masses, given the unequal literacy and education levels in different strata of the population (Ascunce Arrieta 2015: 39; Altarriba 2013). Thus, between 1936 and 1939 several middle-class writers and humourists chose the Francoist side in the Spanish Civil War and found themselves creating propaganda to advance the cause of the rebels against the 2<sup>nd</sup> Republic, contributing to the dissemination of an ideology that was still in the making and would not stop evolving in the following decades (Saz Campos 2004; Muñoz 2009).

## **5. Francoist propagandists during the war: Tomás Borrás, Wenceslao Fernández Flórez, Enrique Jardiel Poncela, Tono**

*María de la Hoz* was published in late 1939, months after Franco’s triumph in the civil war, in the series entitled *La novela del sábado* [The Saturday novel]. To provide a better context and highlight the peculiarities of Mihura and Tono’s work, we will now refer to four different propaganda pieces published between 1938 and 1939: a non-humorous novel on the same topic (‘red Madrid’) by a non-humorous writer (*Checas de Madrid* [Chekas of Madrid] by Tomás Borrás), a non-humorous novel by a humourist whom Mihura considered a major influence on

his own humour (*Una isla en el mar rojo* [An island in the red sea] by Wenceslao Fernández Flórez), a satirical novella by a humourist of Mihura's generation (*El naufragio del "Mistinguett"* [The sinking of the "Mistinguett"] by Enrique Jardiel Poncela), and a cartoon collection by Mihura's co-author in *María de la Hoz* (*100 tonerías de Tono* [100 tonerías by Tono]).

Tomás Borrás was the Falangist writer who had collaborated as a 'political supervisor' with Mihura when the latter took over *La Ametralladora*. Unlike Mihura, Borrás was a true believer, and hence *Checas de Madrid* (1939) is a straightforward propaganda piece dramatically detailing the horrors of 'red Madrid' with presumed journalistic veracity. Like *María de la Hoz*, it was published in *La novela del sábado*. The series had started in January 1939 under the aegis of Falange and was cancelled in May 1939. It was re-launched shortly after the war, in September 1939, with the publication of *Checas de Madrid*. The main purpose of the novel is bearing witness to the crimes allegedly committed by the republicans: it exposes the 'true nature' of the enemy by vividly describing their violent acts and having them explain their own vicious plans. For instance, "Clavel" [Carnation], an effeminate Socialist, "vain in his Marxist rhetoric" (Borrás 2016: 134), expounds on the scheme to annihilate the bourgeoisie: "Repression must be scientific. When I was in Russia I learned the steps in the shift from the bourgeois regime to the dictatorship of the proletariat" (Borrás 2016: 135).

*Una isla en el mar rojo* was published in 1938 to considerable success. Its author, Wenceslao Fernández Flórez, was an acclaimed humourist, but the novel is not humorous: it tells the story of a lawyer chased by republican militiamen who hides with other refugees in a foreign embassy in Madrid. Although more cohesive in its plot than *Checas de Madrid*, its portrait of the 'reds' is basically the same: the streets of Madrid are flooded by

that rabble typical of every revolution: dirty sub-humans with murderous scowls; hyena women, vociferous and dishevelled, in whose eyes you could see their joy for being allowed to kill; young troublemakers, proud of the guns they had secured, but whose greatest pleasure were the flames of arsons; all that mob who suffers from physical or spiritual ugliness, who carries the snakes of envy in the caduceus of its impotence.

(Fernández Flórez 1939: 39)

Physical ugliness is indeed emphasised in the graphic descriptions of the 'reds' and their violent actions. The mob indulges in murder, mutilation, rape, looting and church burning, encouraged by the Republican government.

The main character and narrator of the novel is not a pious man: he admits to praying for the first time since childhood (Fernández Flórez 1939: 69) and having had many affairs before he met his fiancée. His journey to escape to Francoist Spain leads to a spiritual awakening: while his fiancée, the daughter of a republican politician, refuses to hide him, he is helped by a young girl of Scandinavian descent who risks her life rescuing prisoners from the "checas". When they meet again in France, she reassures him:

I have been in National Spain, our Spain. I have seen the joy and the faith in those who march to defend all those things that you fear humanity has rejected. [...] You have met the ghastly side of a coin that has an opposite. And when you get to be there, among our people, your faith will be reborn, stronger than before.

(Fernández Flórez 1939: 348)

Franco's army is presented as effective, disciplined and merciful, in contrast to the anarchic hordes in the other side, who believe sheer fanaticism is enough to win a war (Fernández Flórez 1939: 141, 163).

Jardiel Poncela's *El naufragio del "Mistinguett"* (1938) is not presented as a realistic record of the war: it is a short satirical allegory where the survivors of a shipwreck, drifting in a makeshift lifeboat, represent the state of international relations in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. An Englishman proclaims himself master of the vessel and divides the available space assigning lots to representatives from different countries. He reserves half of the boat for his own use, while a German, an Italian and a Japanese passenger are granted lots "which were visibly insufficient for their needs" (Jardiel Poncela 1938: 14).

Later on, three other survivors arrive, two of them (a Spaniard and a Russian) swimming, while the third, a Jew by the name of Barucher, rides on the Russian's shoulders. The narrator, who is also Spanish, describes his recently arrived compatriot, Ramírez, as "an ignorant, brutish, but quite friendly lad" (Jardiel Poncela 1938: 20). Barucher had been introduced earlier in the narrative, when he was caught looting empty cabins during the shipwreck. Soon he starts creating discord between the survivors, pitting them against one other while feigning innocence. He manages to get the German beaten, humiliated and stripped of his clothes, his weapon, and eighty percent of his food; all these goods are given to Barucher. The description of Barucher's *modus operandi* and motivations (Jardiel Poncela 1938: 24-27) would not be out of place in *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* or the work of Spanish epigones such as Juan Tusquets (Preston 2021): he plans to dominate everyone, even those (the French, the American, the Englishman) who are now his 'friends'. He encourages a friendship between the Russian and Ramírez, the 'brutish but friendly Spaniard', who gradually, under Barucher's influence, develops a hatred of the narrator.

Eventually Barucher, who had hoarded all the fishhooks and fishing threads, dumps the food overboard and stands in complete control of the only source of nourishment. 'War' breaks out: unable to put up with Barucher's rule, some passengers including the Spanish narrator rebel against Barucher's servants. The two Spaniards fight one another and, in this small-scale civil war, Ramírez, who obviously stands for a Republic dominated by the communists,

blaspheming, resorted to every dirty trick: he bit me, he slandered me with the worst accusations, he aimed the most treacherous and criminal blows at me, tarnished my honour and howled in joy whenever he managed to spill my blood; his brutality was exasperated to madness; but I had intelligence by my side. And reason.

(Jardiel Poncela 1938: 30)

Ramírez is killed, the proud Spanish flag is planted on the Spanish lot, and the insurrection succeeds.

Jardiel's allegory frames the Spanish Civil War in the context of the 'Jewish plot for world domination': the Jews secretly promoted the alliance between the Russian communists and the unsophisticated Republicans, and Spanish patriots had no other choice but to rise up and defend their nation against communism. It is, like the novel by Fernández Flórez, a remarkably humourless book by a humourist.

In contrast, Tono's single-panel cartoons collection, *100 tonerías de Tono* (1938), is decidedly humorous and, leaving the war topic aside, mostly coherent with his usual surrealistic style. Excepting a few unrelated cartoons, the bulk of the book is devoted to the civil war and, more specifically, the 'red zone'. Tono's main concern when caricaturing the Republicans is evident: 22 out of 100 cartoons are about hunger in the 'red zone', and 10 about shortages, queues, and disarray in the distribution of goods. As González-Grano de Oro (2005: 165) noted, these cartoons read like an invitation addressed to the republicans to join Franco's side so they could enjoy better living standards. But Tono did not provide any glimpse into life in the Nationalist zone. The only cartoon praising Franco in the book shows two Frenchmen at a café, commenting on a newspaper report: "It's remarkable how much value can these Spaniards squeeze out of a franc" (the Spanish word for *franc* being *franco*).

Republicans are depicted as pitiful losers who make fools of themselves. Violent (in 8 cartoons) or thieving (in 3 cartoons) as they may be, they are mostly defined by their stupidity and cowardice. These negative qualities are presented in a detached, playful way. Tono's drawing is childlike and highly stylised: his republicans are only different to his other characters in the hammers and sickles in their uniforms, when they are wearing them, and, in some cases, their hairy cheeks and bushy eyebrows. Very few of Tono's cartoons could be used to illustrate *Checas de Madrid* or *Una isla en el mar rojo*: their tones are too different.

Tono does underscore the Russian influence on the supposedly communist Republic, like the other authors, often pointing to its incongruence in a Spanish context, how poorly concealed it is, or the mendacity of Russian propaganda. Some cartoons also question the nature of the 'equality' promised by the left: in one of them, a donkey and an anarchist militiaman eat carobs from a plate while the donkey says "It was high time to be treated equally".

## 6. *María de la Hoz*

*María de la Hoz* is not a novel but, rather, a rehash of previously published material. As a compilation of articles, it lacks a continuing plot: it is a string of vignettes without a main character. "María de la Hoz" herself only appears in the title; it is a humorous reference to the popular song "María de la O", which Mihura had already parodied in *La ametralladora* (Mihura 2004: 671). If the original María de la O is a Gypsy woman, who laments having left her boyfriend for a wealthy man, Mihura's María de la Hoz is a Spanish communist who likes bombs and arson, queues for food in Madrid, and expects to pass for a Russian because when socialising she raises her clenched fist. Even if the character María de la Hoz does not appear in the novella, it is an apt title for the book; its incongruous combination of Spanish stereotype ("María de la O") with communist symbol ("la Hoz", the sickle) advances one of the novella's main humour mechanisms and also one of its main ideological assumptions.

### 6.1. Summary

The book begins with the declaration of war: in Chapter I, the Republican General Staff assembles in a coffee shop, "to take resolutions and eat some prawns" (Mihura 2004: 906). In Chapters II and III, the Republican Government decides to relocate the front, then in Badajoz, to the outskirts of Madrid, so it is handy to visit for families. Chapter IV is about the queues in Madrid. Chapters V and VI are about the lack of provisions. In Chapters VII and VIII, the republican population take the social distribution of wealth in their own hands<sup>7</sup> until the minister of Finance takes over: first distributing furniture, then "goods, night watchmen and other things" (Mihura 2004: 917), and, finally, men, women and ministers. Chapters IX and X describe the pitiful efforts of the Republic to forge international alliances. In Chapter XI, we learn about the minister of the Navy, who entrusts his only ship to a left wing bureaucrat from the Treasury. The sailors are office workers and the most pressing concern is having enough ink for them to do their paperwork (Chapter XII).

Chapters XIII to XV tell the melodramatic story of a battalion of militiawomen, "Las Infames" [The infamous ones], made up of forty women who work at Madrid's slaughterhouse. The female battalion meets a male battalion, "Los feroces dependientes de ultramarines finos" [The fierce clerks of fine groceries], and a courtship ensues: the battalions, each acting like a single individual, marry, have a child and move together into a nice little flat. But then the female

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<sup>7</sup> These stories are condensed from the first three "vignettes from the revolution" that Mihura published in *Gutiérrez* in December 1932 (Mihura 2004: 565-574). Interestingly, the episodes of surrealistic violence in the original pieces were omitted in *María de la Hoz*.

battalion meets another male battalion and is caught by her husband hugging with the other battalion on the sofa (Mihura 2004: 929).

Chapters XVI and XVII deal with public transport. Chapters XVIII to XX tell the story of the communist leader *La Pasionaria*, who in this book is not a woman as she was in real life; 'she' is a gentleman dressed in black, with beard and a moustache, who earns 3 'duros' (15 pesetas) a day for playing *La Pasionaria*: "Just like Azaña, the man was such a consummate housewife" (Mihura 2004: 938). This barb about President Manuel Azaña's sexuality leads to Chapters XXI and XXII, where the authors explain that Azaña embraced the revolution out of spite after the failure of a vaudeville act he wrote.

The three final chapters (XXIII to XV) stress the "simulated" nature of the revolution: the workers need to make up "silly, groundless excuses" to participate in the revolution. "Russia had to take action and distributed red slips to all the anarchists, explaining what they had to say" (Mihura 2004: 942). Everyone in Madrid wears a disguise: "Honourable people who had enough reason to avoid being recognised wore disguises. And so did the reds, to look even redder" (Mihura 2004: 944). The revolution is "a great carnival", and "with all these things, people were really satisfied, and painted this slogan on walls: 'They shall not pass! And if they do pass, even better'" (Mihura 2004: 945).

## 6.2. Francoist ideology

Some of the ideological features of Francoism (see Section 4) can be found in *María de la Hoz*, albeit often in an unconventional form:

1) *Emphasis on public order*. The novella is almost completely devoid of violence, particularly when compared to the books discussed in Section 5. Violent acts, and war itself, are emptied of their horror and become abstract ideas, framed into a humorous, surrealistic ordinariness: "Militiamen worked hard at the front and there were some who, after shooting all day long, took work home in the evening" (Mihura 2004: 909). There is a reference to *paseos* [walks], (a euphemism for taking people out of their homes to be shot), when horses refuse to go with their coachmen because they fear they will be given "a walk" (Mihura 2004: 930). Fear of being killed for looking like a *señorito* is also mentioned (Mihura 2004: 930). But violence is generally depicted as unreal, also when its alleged sufferers are 'reds', like the workmen who complain that their "heartless employer sucked [their] blood through a rubber cannula" (Mihura 2004: 942; this is supposed to be a story made up by the Russians to justify the revolution). Arguably, *María de la Hoz* is a novella about the essential absurdity of 'red Madrid', rather than about its horrors.

2) *Emphasis on social and moral order*. The book constantly mocks the egalitarian ideal both as an impractical organisational principle and a hypocritical excuse for institutional larceny. Since all citizens must be equal, passengers squeeze next to coachmen and drivers, while coaches and streetcars remain empty; and coachmen cannot whip their horses, because they are "as much Lenin's children as anyone else" (Mihura 2004: 930). Egalitarian distribution of wealth is just as nonsensical: "land distribution" means that women and children go with buckets and shovels to the Buen Retiro Park in Madrid and take some earth home. When there is no more earth left to share, other things in the park are distributed: the trees, the pond, the music kiosk and the peanuts vendor (Mihura 2004: 915-916). Organised distribution of wealth by the minister of Finance only makes matters worse; once all the goods are distributed, the minister decides to distribute people. The implicit moral is that the egalitarian ideal distorts proper order, where everyone sits in his or her place.

Regarding moral order, there are no mentions of religion, Catholicism or the Church at all; no distinct hints of anti-Semitism either, besides mentions to specific politicians, such as Margarita Nelken, whose Jewishness is not alluded to in any direct or indirect way. The story of the love triangle between the female battalion and the two male ones, written as a parody of trite melodrama, does not seem to convey a moral condemnation but rather condescension towards self-deluded ‘reds’ who aspire to new, revolutionary sexual mores and cannot help falling into the stalest clichés. For Mihura and Tono, the problem with the republicans is not that they are degenerates, but that they deny themselves their true nature.

3) *Militarism, imperialism, nationalism*. The three are conspicuously absent from the novella. Nonsensical ideas like having a warship full of bureaucrats relocating the front, so that civilians can enjoy a walk around, or soldiers queuing daily to go to the front, reinforce the notion of an incompetent republican army, but there is almost no mention of the Francoist army, besides the hope that it will come soon.

In the other hand, the Russian influence is profusely mentioned: in the early days of the war *La Pasionaria* works as a maid at the Russian embassy (Mihura 2004: 909); when the Russian tanks arrive, all the Spanish ‘reds’, including wet nurses, want to have one, and militiamen steal them (Mihura 2004: 909-910); the first militiaman in a queue is always a Russian, and a Spanish general uses his friendship with Stalin to cut in the queue (Mihura 2004: 912); Russian ships bring supplies to Valencia, including Russian recordings of “María de la O” (Mihura 2004: 914); horses are “children of Lenin” (Mihura 2004: 930); Republican miners sing “sad Russian songs” (Mihura 2004: 936); the man who plays *La Pasionaria* opens an office for revolutionary counselling dressed as a Russian with a polar bear by his side (Mihura 2004: 937); and, perhaps most importantly, Russia provides made-up excuses for the Republican population to join the revolution (Mihura 2004: 942). The other countries simply ignore Republican Spain when minister Álvarez del Vayo tries to make his case in the Society of Nations, excepting France, who is friendly with the minister, since he met “her” during a train journey (Mihura 2004: 919-921).

4) *Autarky*. *María de la Hoz*, like Tono’s cartoons, stresses hunger and supply shortages in the Republican zone. Rice is the only food that can be obtained in Madrid, but some ingenious Republicans can cook a steak with potatoes or squids in their ink using only rice. There is no way to obtain any meat, so cows, afraid to be shot on sight, hide at their friends’ houses or disguise themselves as militiawomen. It is all the Government’s fault, because it has made a mess out of supply distribution (Mihura 2004: 913).

5) *Franco’s leadership*. Franco’s name never appears in the novella. He was indeed mentioned in the much shorter song parody “María de la Hoz” (stating that Franco will arrive soon; Mihura 2004: 671). But, again, the main point in the book is not the greatness of Franco or Francoist Spain, but how nonsensical ‘red Spain’ was.

### 6.3. Simulation and incongruence

Given the diverse ideological positions that supported the coup and the Francoist side in the ensuing civil war, it should be expected for Francoist propaganda during the war to focus on the elements that such positions had in common; particularly, their repudiation of republican Spain. As we have seen, *María de la Hoz* does that, but with different emphases to those in other propaganda pieces of the time. The book does not seem to be intended to induce moral outrage in readers, like the novels by Borrás, Fernández Flórez or Jardiel Poncela, but rather to highlight the absurdity of the Republic as a communist regime.

Perhaps the most distinctive aspect in Mihura and Tono's approach to political propaganda is their depiction of a society and its political regimen as a simulation, a sort of childish charade, which is essential for their sceptical perspective. *La Pasionaria* is not the only character played by someone in disguise: "in Madrid, from the very first moment, everyone was in disguise", so, just three days later, "people in Madrid did not recognise one another, and it seemed like we had suddenly moved into a different country" (Mihura 2004: 944). Women were constantly sewing costumes for their husbands and uncles; militiamen asked their mothers to sew Russian costumes for them. The revolution was "a great carnival": on Sundays, there were costume contests in Madrid, and living in the city was "like living in a new country" (Mihura 2004: 946). Even the reasons to join the Revolution were false: factory workers, sailors and day laborers had been given made-up stories to tell (Mihura 2004: 942-943).

Mihura and Tono's Spanish Republic is a society pretending to be something else. And such simulation is incongruous with the Spanish people, like an Andalusian stereotype, María de la O, trying to pass for a ludicrously sovietised "María de la Hoz". Mihura stated that he decided to leave republican Madrid when he "understood that the red zone matched neither Spain nor us, the Spaniards" (Mihura 2004: 1467). Regardless of the discrepancies between his autobiographical accounts in later interviews and the evidence of his past political stances, this is the point of view that he elaborated on with Tono in *La Ametralladora* during the war and summarised in *María de la Hoz* when the war was over. The authors made no effort to sell a glorious, new regime to their readers. They were telling humorously stylised stories of a Spain that, in their view, had turned into a travesty of itself, pretending to be Russia. They emphasised 'real life' nonsense through fictional nonsense.

## 7. Conclusion: humour as ideological supplement for the unenthusiastic

Unlike other propaganda pieces, focused on the viciousness of the reds and the moral superiority of the 'nationals', *María de la Hoz* takes a comparatively gentle look at republican Spain based on the absurd: the satirical *reductio ad absurdum* of one of its main tenets (i.e. egalitarianism), and the absurdist caricaturing of other features usually attributed to it (disorganisation, scarcity of supplies, Russian influence, etc). Mihura and Tono could take other, harsher features for granted: readers could learn about violence in 'red Madrid' from many other sources. There also were more passionate apologists keen on singing Franco's praises, or to defend a conservative moral stance that Mihura was far from sharing in his private life (although he found it acceptable to impose upon others).

*María de la Hoz* and Mihura's propaganda work in *La ametralladora* can be understood as a strategic move to ingratiate himself with the Movement authorities, some of whom, particularly among the Falangists, believed him to be an upstart (Llera 2007: 40-41). But it still seems to be 'sincere' propaganda, since Mihura did not overstate his Francoist credentials and focused on the points that he could endorse: that 'red Madrid' was a mess, there was little food available, the Russians seemed to be in control, and all such nonsense stemmed from the communist ideological pipe-dream of an impossible (and undesirable) social equality. Mihura did not pump imperial ambitions up, nor eulogised the Spanish nation: he simply pointed how absurd Spanish communists pretending to be Russian seemed to him. He abstained from alluding to Catholicism (in a 1969 interview he would say he was "hardly a believer"; Mihura 2004: 1442), in either a positive or a negative way. He had not much to write about Franco beyond the certainty that he and his army were coming and would eventually put an end to what Mihura deemed the republican nonsense.

Mihura's war writings conceivably stem from his social and ideological position: that of a middle-class writer with a sceptical attitude towards collective solutions and egalitarian social

projects that, regardless of their viability, could endanger his welfare, and who hence preferred the option that he felt granted a minimum of order and personal freedom, at least for himself. And by the same token, Mihura's war writings conceivably reinforced a similar outlook in readers in a similar position: those who did not subscribe to the full ideology of National Catholicism, who could not be wholeheartedly enthusiastic about the 'National Crusade', but who nonetheless believed in the distorted picture of the Republic as a communist regime, and felt more comfortable in the Francoist side, as long as their social position was not jeopardised. In that sense, Mihura and Tono's war humour may have worked as an "ideological supplement" for those who could not completely buy into the official ideology that was then taking shape.

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