The persecution of “Gypsies” which had lasted for centuries culminated in genocide under the NS regime. Defined as a “problem”, “asocials” and “racially inferior”, the Roma were arrested and murdered in the German Reich and in the German-occupied territories.

The central terminology and attitudes, which were later used as reasons for killing “unworthy life” by the Nazis, had been determined long before the latter’s ascent to power. The term “race”, for instance, has been used since the 17th century in order to categorise people. Usually, this was done according to geographic criteria combined with external characteristics, like the skin colour or certain peculiarities. In the 18th century, Carl von Linné, the founder of the modern systematology of all living things, differentiated people according to skin colour (white, red, yellow, black) into four types and attributed certain characteristics to each type. According to him, the Europeans are white, “ruled by laws, sanguine, and muscular”, while the Asians are light yellow, “ruled by opinions, melancholic and stiff”. The term “race” is up to this day inextricably interwoven with judgements on value. The skin colour as a means of differentiation is still common, even if the underlying notion of “races” has lost ground.

In the 19th century several racial theories were circulating. The different nature of – 3 to 11, depending on the individual theory – races was turned into different values. The highest value was attributed to the “Caucasian”, “white”, “Germanic” or “Aryan race”. In the mid-19th century, Arthur de Gobineau also postulated the existence of higher and lower “races” in his “Essai sur l’inégalité des races humaines” (Essay on the inequality of human races). In his opinion, the “Aryans”, and “Nordic peoples” in particular belonged to the higher races; thus, he reflected the general body of thought. What was new, however, was his strict rejection of “mixing” the “races”, which would lead to degeneration and finally to destruction. In connection to this, the Belgian Richard Liebich coined the term “unworthy life” a few years later (1868).
As far as the Roma were concerned, the Nazis could not only use the negative prejudices that were deeply rooted in the population, but also the decades of police experience concerning the "Gypsy" problem. Both in Germany and Austria, the centralization of the traditional police "Gypsy battle" started in the 1920s. At first, the authorities' registration of the Roma aimed at "preventively against the background of scientific biology, which considered hereditary factors as fundamental to human existence, the ideas of superior and inferior, "pure" and "mixed races", "worthy" and "unworthy life" found their way into criminology. In 1876, the Italian Cesare Lombroso, for the first time made "genetic predisposition" responsible for the "Gypsies" alleged criminal acts in his "L'uomo delinquente" (The criminal man).

The idea that races could be made "superior" by controlling procreation, an idea which was widely believed in Europe and the United States, was coupled with the call for "eradicating" "unhereditary (erbuntüchtige) people" in Germany after World War I. The racial hygienist demands ranged from internment, to abortion and sterilisation, to euthanasia. In 1920, Karl Binding and Alfred Hoche demanded that all those who lead a "ballast existence" and who were a "burden to society" be killed (those leading a "ballast existence").

On July 14, 1933, the racial theory was finally adopted by the laws of the Third Reich. The notion of "unworthy life" had a significant influence in the Nazi race policy. On the one hand, "hereditary (erbgesund)" and "Aryan" offspring was supported, and on the other hand mentally and physically challenged people as well as "asocial"s and "foreign races" were persecuted. The "Gypsies", whose place in the system was not easy to determine because of their Aryan descent, were generally considered "asocial" and were consequently seen as an "asocial race", in the absence of a better criterion.

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“[...] 1 (1) Experiences from the fight against the Gypsy plague up to now and the insights of racial-biologic research make it seem only logical to solve the Gypsy question through the nature of their race. Experience has shown that half-breeds make up the biggest share of Gypsy criminality. Additionally, attempts to make the Gypsies settle down have failed particularly with the pure Gypsies because of their strong migratory instinct. It is thus necessary to consider the pure and half-breed Gypsies separately when dealing with the Gypsy question.

(2) To attain our goal, it is at first necessary to ascertain the racial affiliation of every single Gypsy living and travelling about, in the Gypsy way, in the German Reich.”

Ill. 4 (translated from: Ministerialblatt des Reichs- und Preußischen Ministers des Innern, Jg. 99, Nr. 51, 14.12.1938, pp. 2105-2110)

When Robert Ritter, doctor and psychiatrist, took over the leading position in the “Rassenhygienische und erbbiologische Forschungsstelle” (Research Centre for Racial Hygiene) of the Reich’s Department of Public Health, he became a central figure in “Gypsy research” in the Reich. His real goal was proving that criminal and “asocial” behaviour was hereditary. Whereas the Jews had been accused of intellectually “dissolving” the structure of the state, the “Gypsies” were declared “primitives”, “poor in culture” and lacking history, who threatened the moral order by “mixing” and “building a criminal sub-proletariat” because of their race. Already by 1935, the demand was made that “Gypsies” should be interned in labour camps and sterilised by force. Ritter’s main focus were the “Gypsy half-breeds”, the classification being even wider than with the Jews: people were declared a “Gypsy half-breed” when one of their eight great-grandparents was a “Gypsy”. [III. 9]

Late in 1938, Heinrich Himmler announced in a circular that he would “solve the Gypsy question through the nature of that race”. The theories of Nazi scientists and politicians remained, however, contradictory until 1942/43. On the one hand, the Indian descent of Roma classified them as “Aryans”, but on the other hand politicians and scientists wanted to prove their Artfremdheit “foreign race” in order to legitimise their persecution. [Ills. 4, 5]

Because of the ideological contradictions, the persecution of Roma was carried out in a far less coordinated way than that of the Jewish population. For instance, several Roma were still in the army in 1943, even though that very army was involved in the genocide of Roma in the East, and even though thousands had already been killed in concentration camps. These members of the army were deported directly from the front to Auschwitz, sometimes even with medals of honour. [III. 3]
Numerous labour camps were erected in Germany, post-Anschluss Austria and in the German-occupied territories of Central and Eastern Europe. Initially, most of these camps were designed as punitive labour camps for working Romani men only, like the many camps in Austria and in Germany. In Austria, for instance, there were at least 17 camps of different size.

Some of these “labour camps”, like the Lety camp in Southern Bohemia, or the one in the Belzec complex in Poland, were turned into “Gypsy camps” for Romani men, women and children. Many camps were closed in 1943; the inmates were either de-
RACIAL HYGIENIC CATEGORISATION

Until 1944, when the classification of Roma was finally ended, the Rassenhygienische und bevölkerrungs-biologische Forschungsstelle (Research Bureau for Racial Hygiene) under Ritter had “categorised” about 24,000 people; many of whom were no longer alive at that time.

(see Lewy 2001, p. 105)

“Ritter did it coolly, on the streets, in a friendly manner. One after the other was brought forward and sat down on a chair. Then he compared the children’s eyes, asked us all a lot of questions, and Justin wrote it all down. Then he said, “Open your mouth”, and he had some kind of instrument with which he measured the throat, the nostrils, the nose, the bridge, the set of the eyes, the eye colour, the eyebrows, the ears on the inside and outside, the neck, the hands, everything that could be measured.”


KILLINGS OF THE ROMA IN THE WARSAW AREA

The Polish Romani researcher Jerzy Ficowski wrote what is up to today the most complete description of the persecution of Polish Roma by German troops. He speaks about the suburbs and the Warsaw area:

“Often, the result was so total, that only the murderers remained as witnesses. [...] In 1942, Hitler’s fascists murdered many gypsies in the Warsaw suburbs; including 30 people in Grochów, men, women and children and also some families in Targówek. Many where shot in 1943 in the Bem-Fort, in Komorowa near Warsaw women and children were murdered, in the woods near Zyrardów a Gypsy family was shot, in the woods of Brack and Gazyck near Sochaczew more than a dozen families were murdered; similarly Gypsies in Konsk, Sochaczew, Marki; in Sielec in Warsaw seven families were burnt alive in a wooden shed; in Jadów the Gypsies of the area were rounded up and locked up in the local synagogue, all the men were shot. The women managed to flee during the night to Karczewo, where shortly after the German police started murdering the Gypsies, among others throwing the children out of the windows on the streets. Many of the Gypsies had hand guns, and fought the Gendarmerie until they had used their last cartridge. Only in exceptional cases, did people manage to flee. In a village near Milosia more than 20 people, among them more than a dozen children, were shot in January 1943. In October 1944 Gestapo men shot 104 Gypsies near Puszcza Kaminowska; only one single man was able to flee. Murders of that kind occurred far more often. [...]”

Ill. 8 (translated from Ficowski 1992, p. 65f.)

MASS EXECUTIONS

The systematic murder of Roma started in the summer of 1941, caused by the German assault on the USSR. As “accomplices” and “spies” of “Jewish Bolshevism” thousands of Roma fell victim to mass executions by the SS “Einsatzgruppen” (task forces) who, assisted by the army, murdered them behind the front. Contrary to the actions taken in Germany, the police’s main concern in most areas were the travelling, “racially pure” and “endogamous Gypsies” who, as a mobile population, corresponded best to the image of spies. 33,000 Jews, and hundreds of Roma were among the victims of the mass murder in Babi Jar near Kiev, which was committed by the “Einsatzgruppe C” together with the “6. Armee”. As in the Soviet Union, more Roma were killed through mass executions than in the camps in Poland and other territories of Eastern Europe and the Balkans occupied by the Nazis. There are no precise numbers available, but conservative estimates talk about far more than 100,000 people who were murdered outside of the camp system. [Ill. 8]

In Serbia, occupied by the Germans since 1941, the so-called “revenge executions”, to which Jews, Serbs and Roma fell victim, were of equal importance in the extinction of the Romani minority. Contrary to the East, the “Einsatztruppen” chose the victims, and the army carried out the executions. Harald Turner, Head of the German military administration, declared in 1942 that Serbia was the only country in which the “Jewish and Gypsy question” had been “solved”. The “Einsatztruppen” and the armed forces were supported by local fascist organisations. In Croatia the “Ustascha”-militia, and in Hungary, under German rule from 1944 onwards, the “Arrow Cross”-fascists carried out the mass executions, organised the deportations and run the camps.

The internees had to perform hard physical labour: they had to dig feeders, river regulations, or reservoirs, do roadworks, perform field work, and work in companies of all kinds. Mortality was high, due to malnutrition, hard work, and diseases. In Lackenbach, 237 people died during the five years of the camp’s existence, in Lety, at least 326 people died in three years; in Belzec, although there are no exact numbers, the toll is believed to have been similarly high.
On December 16, 1942, Heinrich Himmler gave out the directive that all “Gypsies” still living in the “German Reich” were to be deported to Auschwitz. The “Auschwitz Decree” was the final revelation of a plan which had existed de facto since 1938 and had been partially carried out already, namely the complete extinction of “Gypsies”. Himmler’s deportation order was directed against all “Gypsy half-breeds, Rom-Gypsies and Balkan Gypsies”, the “degree of half-breeding” being no longer of importance. The exception of a small group of “racially pure Gypsies”, who were to be used as “museum exhibits” in Himmler’s open air museum, existed only on paper.

Under Himmler’s orders. The SS, the “Jüdische Ordnungsdienst” (Jewish security force) and a “Gypsy police” set up especially for that task were to block off the quarter from the rest of the ghetto and the outside world. No information about the camps’ condition should reach the outside. Between the 5th and 9th November, 1941, 5 transportations with a total of 5,007 Roma from Austria arrived in the Lodz ghetto. Members of the SS and the “Reichsarbeitsdienste” (Reich work force) guarded the camp and made some of the internees carry out forced labour. The Roma had to sleep on the floor and got neither medication nor enough food. After a short time typhus fever broke out. Those 4,400 people who were still alive in January 1942 were brought in trucks to the extermination camp Chelmno/Kulmhof and murdered in gas wagons. None of the original 5,007 Austrian Roma survived.
It is still unknown how many Roma fell victim to the Nazi persecution. Roma were not always registered as such, and come up in the victim statistics as members of the majority population, as “others” or not at all. Documents from the extinction camps and deportation lists were lost, are scattered in numerous archives or have not yet been analysed. The surviving records from the armed forces and the SS (“Schutzstaffel”, protective squadron) who alternately murdered behind the Eastern front, often at their own discretion, are incomplete and, particularly with reference to the Roma, faulty. Murders of uncountable victims, at mass executions like the gas chambers, were not documented at all. Research has to rely on estimations; whatever their testimony, a number of at least 250,000 victims is considered highly probable.

Public discussion of that topic, if it takes place at all, is often based more on personal motives than facts. On the one hand, Romani organisations, their motive being clear, tend to estimate the numbers of victims at very high numbers. For example, minority activists were of the opinion in the German public that the genocide had had 500,000 or even 750,000 victims – numbers which are not confirmed by researchers. On the other hand, racially motivated historians questioned all research on the topic and, consequently, the genocide of Roma itself. Moreover, serious historical research also tends to deny the persecution of Roma its racist character. The reason for this is often the motive to give justice to the Jew’s fate in its tragic singularity.

One thing is clear: Like the Jewish population, the Roma were deprived of their rights, interned and murdered in the German Reich. The documented proceeding of the persecution and the number of crimes taken from documents alone can lead to no other conclusion but that it was “racially” motivated mass murder. If, as has often been emphasised, the singular, historically new and unheard-of element of the Jews’ extinction was the machine-like precision and industrial
After the war, the surviving Roma were confronted with the same prejudices they had had to endure already before 1933 in the whole of Europe. After 1945, there was no public interest in their fate at all. It was only in the late 1970s that the majority population developed a sense of injustice, the initiative having been started by Romani organisations which were able to establish themselves from that point in time on. Continuing prejudices had effects on the so-called “reparations”. Only a minority of the surviving Germans and Austrian Roma and Sinti were able to assert their claims. The Austrian and German culprits mostly got away without imprisonment or were granted amnesty after a short time. Those few Roma who did not bow to pressure and pressed charges, were in many cases discredited again and cast off as liars. [Ill. 13]

**THE SURVIVORS**

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**Bibliography**