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Review article

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**FROM THE HISTORY OF THE ROMA SUFFERING IN SOME CENTRAL
EUROPEAN COUNTRIES SHORTLY BEFORE AND DURING WORLD WAR II
(HUNGARY, CROATIA, CZECHOSLOVAKIA, POLAND)**

Abstract

Up to the World War II in most European countries there were no violent assimilation attempts like those that had already been in progress in Nazi Germany. With the beginning of World War II and the spreading of Nazi influence on many European countries, either directly because of occupation, or indirectly as ally countries, some parts of Nazi anti-Roma model started to be implemented. The analysis of this paper deals with Central European governments such as Hungarian, Croatian, Czechoslovak and Polish and their attitude to minority Roma population during World War II. A separate part of analysis focuses on the question whether and to which extent Nazi government had an impact on the attitude of the abovementioned governments to the Roma.

Keywords: the Roma, World War II, Croatia, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland

1. Introduction

The Roma started to inhabit Central Europe in the 14th century when migrating from south-eastern areas. Although they were welcomed at the beginning, in the 15th century the Central European governments' attitude changed, as well as in most other European countries and negative perception of the Roma increased. This repressive relation of the governments to the Roma was aimed at their forced assimilation which was especially perceptible between the two world wars and during World War II. In these circumstances one of the most difficult periods in Roma history in Europe began after World War I and lasted until the end of World War II. In this period European governments' attitude to the Roma changed, and they attempted to deal with the "Roma question" by violently implementing assimilation and extermination. The Roma were a minority that did not have their own state so this consequently led to their marginalisation in these countries. Nazi ideology did not only have an impact in its "host"

countries, Germany and Italy, but it spread across the borders and influenced other countries' attitude to the Roma. One of the questions raised in this paper is the extent of Nazi Germany's influence on the attitude to the Roma in other European countries.

2. Nazi anti-Gypsy model

The research on the position of the Roma in Europe has to start with Germany that was a guiding force in dealing with the "Gypsy question" at that time. Namely, the German authorities, even before the Nazi rule in 1933, were the first to create a system of treatment of the Roma minority population. In these circumstances one can observe the establishing of judicial and repressive-police mechanism to control the Roma and Sinti¹ in the second part of the 19th century. This was supported by the foundation of Gypsy Informative Service (German *Zigeuernachrichtendienst* or *Zigeunerzentrale*) in 1899 within Munich police. This police department systematically collected data on the Roma and their property in order to carry out close surveillance. This resulted in creating the most extensive records of that time containing fingerprints and photographs of a few thousands of the Roma (Heuss, 2006, p. 8 – 9; Fraser, 1995, p. 251- 252; Lucassen & Willems & Cottaar, 1998, p. 85 – 87). This repressive practice of control continued during Weimar Republic marked by stricter control and repression which brought about new rigorous legal restrictions on the Roma positions (Friedlander, 1995, p. 247 – 248). At the same time the influence of racism on science and society was becoming more evident in Germany at the end of the 19th century when racism also became "anti-Gypsy". Most German (racist) scientists considered the Roma "a mixture of more nations (races)" (German *Mischvolk*) (Margalit, 2002, p. 16 – 18). In this way the Nazi authorities adhered to the repressive "anti-Gypsy" policy which was a part of their racist ideology. The Nazi repressive anti-Gypsy model was formed and implemented through politics of prohibition (limitations) of travel and control of the Roma in specific areas in camps, which was all followed by constant raids (Lewy, 2000, 20 – 23; Sparing, 2006, p. 32 – 47; Margalit, 2002, p. 33 – 34). The next level of this model was sterilisation of the Roma which was based on eugenics and racist view of "moral" and "hidden mental retardation" evident in symptoms like Roma resistance and not adapting to social norms and the stereotype view of the Roma as cunning and sly people. Some authors suggest that around 500 Roma people were sterilised as part of the asocial group until 1939 (Browning, 2005, p. 179 – 180; Fraser 1995, p. 256 – 257; Schmuhl, 2008, p. 357). The Nuremberg Laws from 1935, although not explicitly mentioning the Roma, ostracised them legally from German society. Later on, acts (decrees) restricted the Roma people's rights to marrying Germans and acquiring citizenship (Bruneteau, 2005, p. 87). The influence of eugenics and racist scientists on the Nazi authorities was so enormous that the Research centre for studying racial hygiene and biology of people (*Rassenhygienische und bevölkerungsbiologische Forschungsstelle*), was founded in Berlin in 1936. The centre was a part of the Ministry of Health under the authority of Robert Ritter (Friedlander, 1995, p. 249- 250; Schmuhl, 2008, p. 358). One of its aims was to study and collect data on the Roma in order to determine their racial

¹ Only the Sinti, a specific Roma minority named after a region Sind in India, lived in Germany until the mid-19th century. The paper uses the term Roma for both, the Sinti and Roma unless it is different in works cited (Dekanović-Helebrant, 1982, 333 – 334).

classification in German society and help the police and legal institutions to pass specific laws for them. Ritter and his Research centre offered scientific foundations for political and police attempts to deal with this issue on the basis of race (Heuss, 2006, p. 18 – 19; Sparing, 2006, p. 51). Warfare and Nazi (quick) territorial takeover motivated German politicians to consider the need for moving the Roma, “racially impure”, from Germany to the occupied territory serving as “a huge landfill for unwanted elements” (Crowe, 1996, p. 87; Bársony, 2008, pp. 28 – 29; Crowe, 1995, p. 87; Vojak, 2004, pp. 447 – 476). Some Central and East European countries, which took over parts of the Nazi model of treatment of the “Gypsy question”, were to become “landfills” for the Roma.

3. The Roma in Hungary, Croatia, Czechoslovakia and Poland before World War II

Nazi-socialist “project” ‘Endlösung’ (The Final Solution) spread as a wave of aggressive Nazism across the borders of other European countries where the Roma were some of the first victims in World War II. The events that followed can be described as *Porajmos*, a term similar to Holocaust². Thy analysis of the Roma suffering includes countries such as Hungary, Croatia, Czechoslovakia and Poland as exemplary countries of Central and East Europe. The criteria was their geographical position and the number of the Roma. In order to better understand Roma suffering in World War II, we must briefly consider the period between the two world wars.

The number of the Roma in these countries between the wars did not significantly differ. It must be emphasised that the data vary depending on the source, official records or estimate. According to the official records, the greatest number of the Roma lived in Slovakia, around 37,000 (in Bohemia / Protectorate around 6,500), while 15,000 lived in Poland, Hungary and Croatia. At the same time according to the estimate, the greatest number of the Roma lived in Hungary and Slovakia, around 100,000. The estimate suggests that around 50,000 lived in Poland, and more than a half of that number lived in Croatia (Bársony, 2008a, pp. 28 – 29; Crowe, 1996, p. 48, 87, 180; Guy, 2004, p. 24; Vojak, 2004c, pp. 447 – 476). Statistic data are cited from David Crowe who used official records from Census as well as estimates by some scientists later. We should emphasise that the data from Census should be used carefully since the methodology of that time could not include the entire Roma population in a certain region at a specific time. Similarly, another problem is mimicry because the Roma feared society’s negative attitude towards them so they hid their own ethnic identity and identified themselves with the majority in a certain region (Vojak, 2004c, pp. 447 – 476; Vojak, 2004c, pp. 701-728).

² Holocaust in this context refers to Nazi genocide of the Jews, Roma and others. This term has synonyms in other languages (e.g. French *Shoah*, Armenian *Aghet*, Ukraine *Holodomor*, Arabic *Anfal*). Some scientists define holocaust as mass terror and genocide of certain ethnic communities. Some scientists like Ian Hancock, a Romani scholar, emphasise the term *Porraimos* (cutting up, devouring, rape), while other scientists criticise this term as “ethically and linguistically inappropriate” since it primarily refers to sexual violence and is not part of “historical memory” of the Roma. Other scientists use *Samudaripen* (complete destruction / mass killing), whereas German scientists prefer *Zigeunermord* as analogy to *Judenmord* (Weiss – Wendt, 2013, pp. 23 – 24; Hancock, 2012, p. 34).

The economic position of the Roma in these countries was also more or less similar since they were socially and economically marginalised. Most Roma people worked in agriculture, entertainment and trade and were especially skilled in woodwork and metal trade. Some of them were involved in “dirty” work such as cleaning cesspits, digging wells, etc. (Hübschmannová, 2009, pp. 21 - 22; Vojak, 2013, 125 - 138).

Between the two wars Hungarian authorities promoted the policy of repressive assimilation of the Roma and attempted to permanently settle nomadic Roma. A number of them were often under the surveillance of the authorities which included their registration, physical marking and putting some of the “disobedient” into state work camps (Bársony, 2008, pp. 49 - 50). During this period the authorities passed laws whose aim was to regulate the position of the Roma and which prescribed tougher and more restrictive control of nomadic Roma travel and strict measures like preventive arrest since the Roma were presumed to be suspects (Bársony, 2008, pp. 30 - 31; Barany, 2002, p. 100). In 1930s some Hungarian politicians suggested a more radical solution such as concentration camps for the Roma, sterilisation, and racial laws, which were all influenced by the Nazi model (Bársony, 2008, pp. 32; Katz, 2009, pp. 64 - 65; Barany, 2002, p. 100). The Czechoslovakian authorities tried to regulate the position of the Roma in a similar way especially since they were under the influence and pressure of village inhabitants who saw the Roma as “parasites”. These circumstances were the cause of numerous conflicts between villagers and the Roma. A difficult economic situation naturally had a negative impact on the relations between the Roma and the locals so the consequences were bloody riots (Roma “pogrom”) (Crowe, 1996, p. 46; Barany, 2002, p. 98; Guy, 2004, pp. 23 - 24). In 1924 in Košice 19 Moldovan Roma were standing trial for cannibalism. The trial lasted for 5 years and most of the accused were found guilty. Numerous European countries were reporting about that trial (Crowe, 1996, p. 45; Guy, 2004, p. 23).

One of the consequences of this negative public atmosphere against the Roma was the anti-Gypsy pressure on Czechoslovak authorities that in summer 1927 imposed new repressive regulations on the Roma. Also, the new law on the Roma was influenced by a similar law passed a year before in Bavaria. Its aim was to limit and keep under surveillance the travel of nomadic Roma by giving them identity cards, taking fingerprints, taking away their children and putting them into foster families or educational institutions (Heuss, 2006, p. 9; Purcsi Barna, 2008, pp. 51 - 52; Crowe, 1996, p. 45; Guy, 2004, p. 23; Hübschmannová, 2009, pp. 22). Besides these negative examples of local inhabitants’ attitude to the Roma, there are some cases of cooperation especially in education and culture. In mid-1920s in Slovakia a few Roma schools were opened enabling a great number of them to finish primary school and become literate (Hübschmannová, 2009, p. 22). Furthermore, in 1930 in Košice a few Czechoslovak intellectuals founded an association that studied the “Roma question” and organised Roma theatre plays and musical performances (Crowe, 1996, p. 46 - 47; Guy, 2004, p. 24). The Polish authorities did not have a defined policy in dealing with the Roma, which, according to some, enabled them to act politically and organise themselves (Barany, 2002, p. 99). At that time in Poland a Romani family Kwiek was well-known and they established themselves as Roma “royal dynasty” that gathered the Roma and were active economically and socially. They attempted to actively engage in international politics and demanded a foundation of a special Roma state. Thus the “Roma king” Janusz Kwiek got in touch with Mussolini, who, allegedly, supported the idea of creating a special Roma state in Ethiopia (Crowe, 1996, p. 180; Barany, 2002, p. 102 -103;

Kenrick & Bakewell, 1995, p. 20). The Polish authorities did not pass specific laws with regard to the Roma, but they let the Roma leaders make decisions since they were also working towards permanent settling of nomadic Roma. The Roma in Croatia were not as organised as the ones in Poland, neither was there concerted (non-Roma) initiative for their education as the one in Slovakia. It must be emphasised that in 1930s Croatia enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy within the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. In these circumstances Croatia did not have a defined state policy towards the Roma, but treated them as an unrecognised minority group that was not legally protected. Their legal position was not defined by any specific regulations, but the authorities treated them by passing “ad-hoc” decrees and implementing the current regulations (Janjatović, 2005, p. 17; Sobolevski, 2000, p. 395). At the same time village population perceived the Roma as thieves, crooks, disease carriers, child kidnappers and vagrants. Often (over)emphasised cases of Roma thefts, cheating and other illegal activities only contributed to the negative perception of the Roma. A poor economic standard of village population additionally embellished this negative attitude to the Roma who were seen as unemployed people prone to begging. All this contributed to frequent violence between village population and the Roma. In these incidents the Roma people were violently beaten, mistreated and banished from their homes that were plundered and burnt. The cause of conflicts was allegedly the incapacity to prevent Roma crimes while the state and local authorities together with repressive (police) services were unable to prevent them (Vojak, 2004a, pp. 363 - 383; Vojak, 2005, pp. 107 - 124).

4. The Roma in Hungary, Croatia, Czechoslovakia and Poland during World War II

The attitude of these countries’ authorities to the Roma differed, among other things, in the extent of implementation of the Nazi anti-Gypsy model. International political circumstances at the end of 1930s brought about the disintegration of Czechoslovakia and creation of German Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia and establishment of independent Slovak Republic (under Nazi control). At that time the Hungarian authorities annexed Slovak regions Užhorod and Košice where a great number of the Roma lived. In March 1939 the local authorities in the Protectorate started to monitor behaviour and travel of the Roma and prevented them from roaming. The unemployed, among whom there were the Roma as well, were sent to open correctional camps for forced labour. After some time the German authorities banished nomadic Roma to the inner parts of Protectorate and issued the prohibition of their nomadic travel (roaming) in regions near the borders (Crowe, 1996, p. 47 - 48; Necas, 2009, p. 178). From the end of the same year the authorities repeatedly issued regulations on permanent settling of the Roma and imposed punishment of “preventive arrest” or forced labour. One of these measures was introduced at the beginning of February in 1940 when the Roma were forced to permanently settle and choose an (“honest”) job (trade or agriculture). September 1939 marks the beginning of Roma deportations to Nazi concentration camps Léty and Hodonín (Crowe, 1996, p. 48 - 49.; Necas, 2009., p. 178 - 179). In Slovakia the position of the Roma was better and safer than in the Protectorate. In spring 1939 their nomadic roaming and horse trade were restricted and the new Constitution stated that the Roma could, if they showed their loyalty and well-ordered life, acquire citizenship. In the same year they were obliged to serve in special work forces (“chocolate army”) for more months in exchange for army service. At the same time they were

forbidden from entering certain public places and institutions. The new pressure of the Slovak authorities occurred in April 1941 when the Ministry of Interior Affairs passed decrees on sending the Roma to forced labour and at the same time attempted to legally define their position. Thus their travel permits were abolished, they were ordered to return to their home towns or regions (homeland) and their travel was controlled by the police. Besides, the decrees banished them from places near public roads which meant they were forced to move to uninhabited areas resulting in their ghettoization. Later on, regional and local authorities passed other regulations on limiting Roma travel and coming to urban areas (Kollárová, 2003, p. 38; Hübschmannová, 2009, pp. 39 - 44; Crowe, 1996, pp. 51 - 52). The Slovak authorities excluded part of the Roma from education system and the other part was recruited into Slovak armed forces where they were recorded as Slovaks in documents but they also referred to themselves as Slovaks. They fought in Russia, Italy and Slovakia. At the end of 1943 exactly these recruited Roma started a riot in Poprad since they were not allowed to go home after a 2-year army service. Eight of the rebels were sentenced to death, but were pardoned later by Tiso (Hübschmannová, 2009, pp. 26 - 32). Afterwards Tiso paid a visit to “cocoa army” and emphasised that the Roma were “Slovaks” and that there were no Gypsies and on the basis of this policy the Roma did not suffer like Jews (Hübschmannová, 2009, pp. 44 – 45). From 1941 to 1944 in Slovakia there were 11 forced labour camps in which the majority were the Roma. They were in a certain type of quarantine, forced to work due to political, racial and ethical reasons. This work included building roads and tunnels. The camps were controlled by local policemen, members of Hlinka’s guard, and lots of the Roma died because of injuries, diseases, hunger and exhaustion (Hübschmannová, 2009, pp. 32 - 38). Some Roma people joined Partisan movement and participated in Slovak National Uprising (August – October 1944) and a number of them were killed during this rebellion. As revenge for taking part in the Uprising, the Slovak authorities and German army killed and tortured the Roma and burnt their settlements (Kollárová, 2003, pp. 38 - 39; Hübschmannová, 2009, pp. 45 - 56). In November 1944 under the influence of Nazis, the Slovak authorities started to implement the policy “After Jews – Gypsies!” which meant that new camps were established or the old ones were turned into internment camps. Thus the camp in Dubnica was converted and the Roma were forced to work there and some were also executed (Hübschmannová, 2009, pp. 56 - 58).

The Roma had a similar treatment in Croatia. At the beginning of April 1941 Ante Pavelić was the leader of pro-fascist Ustasha movement and with the help of the Axis Power he came into power. They established the Independent State of Croatia (Pavličević, 2007, pp. 399 – 461; Goldstein, 2008, pp. 205 – 349). In April 1941 the arrival of pro-fascist Ustasha government resulted in quick adoption of Nazi anti-Gypsy model in treatment of the Roma. Thus the basis for Roma persecution was supposed to be the passing of anti-Gypsy regulations. On April 30 1941 the Ustasha authorities passed a law “Regulations on racial affiliation” and “Regulations on protection of Aryan blood and honour of the Croatian people” (Lengel Krizman, 1986., pp. 30 - 32). The influence of the Nuremberg Laws is evident in these regulations, especially when defining Aryan race and origin (Biondic, 2004, p. 34). After that the Roma travel was limited as well as their groupings in certain areas in order to precisely record their numbers and belonging to a certain race (Hrečkovski, 1985, p. 35). The next move of the authorities was to consider the issue of colonisation, which was soon abandoned due to warfare and the authorities opted for genocide (Lengel Krizman, 2003, p. 36; Biondic, 2004, p. 35, 42 -

43). Mass and systematic persecution of the Roma in the Independent State of Croatia started in the second part of 1942 when the government deported the Roma to concentration camps, mostly to Jasenovac (Hrečkovski, 1985, p. 36). It is important to emphasise that the Roma, unlike other prisoners, were not officially recorded as individuals, but as parts of a certain “railway carriage”. Upon arrival to Jasenovac all their possessions were taken away (they were actually robbed) (Hrečkovski, 1985, p. 36). A number of them were immediately executed and some were sent to the village Uštica to stay in homes of the Serbs who had left. Soon, due to their great number, some Roma were sent to the village Gradina where extensive mass murders occurred. Some of them had been working on building the embankment, but soon they were also executed. It is considered that from July 1942 there were almost no Roma in Jasenovac except a few who worked as gravediggers and were also killed at the beginning of 1945 (Lengel Krizman, 2003, p. 47 - 53; Biondic, 2004, p. 38 - 39; Hrečkovski, 1985, p. 36 - 37). The position of the Roma in Hungary became worse during World War II. The authorities continued with repressive policy towards them, and some local authorities carried out frequent raids in order to better control the Roma population. Nazi racial and anti-Gypsy model was also considered in Hungary, especially by some politicians. Thus a Hungarian anthropologist and eugenics scientist Ferenc Orsós demanded that the government implement racial laws like Germany and to submit the Roma to sterilisation and internment. This suggestion was not approved by the Hungarian parliament even though there were some other Hungarian politicians and scientists who promoted similar methods. Afterwards the authorities started to record the Roma in order to keep them under control. Despite repressive policies, the Roma were still being recruited and fought together with Nazi soldiers in battlefields in Europe. In 1943 special regulations forced the Roma to work in military and labour camps as well as for army’s needs on farms and in construction (Katz, 2009, 62 – 69; Bársony, 2008a, 23 – 48). But the model was actually implemented when a pro-Nazi party Arrow Cross Party led by Ferenc Szálasi came to power in 1944. At first, the travel of the Roma was restricted and later on they were assembled and imprisoned in special areas like camps or city ghettos. Some of them were deported to a Nazi concentration camp Auschwitz and others to a camp Komáran. The deportations were actually long and exhausting marches that lasted until the end of the war, which was all followed by mass murders. They were also tortured, left to starve and executed. In April 1945 the persecution of the Roma was terminated with the end of Nazi occupation of Hungary and as the consequence there were between 5,000 to 50,000 killed Roma (Katz, 2009, 69 - 97; Barany, 2002, p. 106; Bársony, 2008a, 23 - 48; Bársony, 2008b, 10 - 12; Ury, 2008, pp. 87 - 97; Szita, 2008, pp. 98 - 114). The process of Roma self-organising in Poland was interrupted by the outbreak of war when the German and Soviet authorities invaded Polish territories. One of the first Roma victims was their king Janusz Kwiek, who was succeeded by his cousin Rudolf Kwiek after the war. Soon after the occupation, the German authorities introduced their anti-Gypsy model, which imposed restrictions on their travel and sent them to concentration camps where they were eventually executed. It was precisely in this area that great numbers of the Roma were deported from Nazi Germany, its occupied parts and ally states (satellites). A great number of them were executed in numerous camps (Bełżeca, Chełmno-upon-Ner, Oświęcim/ Auschwitz- Birkenau, Treblinka /Mazowieckie), ghettos (Lodz) and other places of suffering (Bielcza, Żabno). The execution of 3,000 Roma in Auschwitz at the beginning of August 1944 is regarded as a central memorial day with regard to Roma suffering in World War II (Sparing, 2006, p. 54 - 55; Hancock, 2006, p. 59; Bartosz, 2009).

5. Conclusion

Between the two world wars most European countries' attitude to the Roma became more hostile and since they were influenced by Nazi Germany they promoted repressive and assimilation policy towards the Roma. Newly established Slovak and Croatian states as well as Hungary that was a German ally, were under the patronage of Nazis and as such they took over parts of the German model in treatment of the Roma. More than 10 thousand of the Roma resided in those countries even though they were forced to live on the social and economic margins. The Slovak and Hungarian authorities inherited repressive attitude from interwar governments that attempted to curb Roma nomadic way of life in order to control them better and restrict their travel. In such repressive – assimilation circumstances these countries adhered to their policy of forced colonisation under the threat of “preventive arrest” or imprisoned the Roma in camps, while the Slovak and Hungarian authorities used them for forced labour. At the end of 1944 the Slovak and Hungarian authorities, under the influence of Nazis, started to deport the Roma to internment camps where they were forced to work and were later executed. Still, the Roma managed to survive World War II, especially in Slovakia. At the same time Croatian authorities passed racial laws that banished the Roma from society and politics, which was later on followed by the Nazi model of persecution. The first step was made after a few months when the authorities restricted their travel and started to register them. In mid-1942 the Roma were deported mainly to a concentration camp Jasenovac where the “Gypsy question” was quickly dealt with by executions and torture. It is evident that the Ustasha regime followed the Nazi model to a great extent since a lot of Roma were executed, whereas the Slovak authorities subjected the Roma to forced labour. The result is that the Roma were victims of a genocide in the Independent State of Croatia, while in Slovakia most of them survived the war. Still, Polish authorities did not have a specific treatment of the Roma, but Nazis used Poland as a “landfill” for deported Roma from other parts of Europe. A great number of them were executed in camps and other places of suffering. We could say that in the turmoil of World War II it was more advantageous to be a Roma in Slovakia than in Hungary, Croatia or Poland. Yet, the war had economically, socially, morally and psychologically devastating effects on the Roma population and hindered the process of their pre-war social integration.

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