



Persecution of Gypsies and the Porrajmos



Mosaic – Victims
of Nazi Persecution



The Persecution of Gypsies and the Porrajmos

Throughout history, the Romany and Sinti people (commonly referred to as “Gypsies”) have been discriminated against and treated differently in the countries they have settled in. During the period of 1933-1945 the level of persecution was increased considerably, as the prejudice of the Nazi regime and its collaborators led to widespread violence and even murder. This experience is usually referred to by Gypsies as the “porrajmos” – the “devouring” or the “destruction”.

At the time that Hitler became Chancellor in January 1933, there were some 26,000 Gypsies within Germany. While in theory these people were full and equal citizens, they had also been subjected for some time to discriminatory laws in different regions of the country. Since 1929, Gypsies were forbidden from roaming the land in large groups, and were required to register with the authorities. They also faced two years of forced labour if they could not prove that they had been working regularly.

Laws such as these fed in to long-standing preconceptions. As in other countries, Gypsies in Germany were regarded with hostility and suspicion by a significant proportion of the population – they were commonly seen as people who avoided work, were often involved in crime, and behaved in an “asocial” manner. According to the Nazi worldview, Gypsies therefore posed a risk – they were seen not only to threaten Germany’s cultural values and social morals, but also as a danger to the health and purity of the German nation.

It was for these reasons that the Nazis adopted an aggressive attitude in their treatment of Gypsies. In the immediate years after 1933 the 25-30,000 Gypsies within Nazi Germany found that the established laws discriminating against them were upheld with a new enthusiasm. At a local level, a number of regional states implemented new laws and stepped up levels of harassment; Gypsies were increasingly vulnerable to raids and arrests, commonly on the assumption that they were conducting criminal acts or were work-shy.

It was not until November 1935 that national policy towards Gypsies became clearer. The context for this development was the enactment in September 1935 of the Nuremberg Laws: the “Reich Citizenship Law” and the “Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honour”. According to the first of these, only Aryans could be citizens of Germany; this meant that legally Jews were no longer seen as German citizens and subsequently had no political rights. The second made it illegal for Jews to marry or have sexual relations with Germans.

Over the coming months and years, a number of supplementary decrees were issued which added new terms and conditions to the Nuremberg Laws. In November, for example, the ban on marriage and sexual relations between Jews and Germans was extended to include anyone from an ethnic group who it was felt would threaten the purity of German blood. By the end of the month, Gypsies had been explicitly named as one such group. Gypsies were now legally defined as having “alien blood”.

After this development, categorising who according to racial criteria was a Gypsy became all the more important. In keeping with Nazi faith in racial hygiene, the man charged with solving this issue was Robert Ritter – a doctor who was to become head of a research institute within the Government's Health Office. Beginning in 1936, Ritter and his team of assistants toured Germany collecting information on Gypsies living in the countryside or imprisoned in state institutions. In the attempt to try and establish a scientific way of classifying Gypsies, Ritter and his associates took photographs, performed medical examinations and conducted interviews. Anyone refusing to cooperate was threatened with arrest.

By the outbreak of World War Two, Ritter's work had resulted in a database of over 20,000 individuals. According to him, although Gypsies originated from the same area as Aryans, their blood had indeed been corrupted through migration, meaning that they did pose a threat to Germany. His recommendation was that all Gypsies with mixed blood be sterilized – something which had been occurring on an ad hoc basis since 1936.

Following victory over Poland, it was decided that Gypsies within the Reich would be deported to the occupied region known as the General Government in Poland. Deportations were delayed, but began in 1940 and carried on through into 1941. With the invasion of

Soviet Russia in 1941, however, Gypsies in Eastern Europe were no longer subjected to administrative procedures but instead were simply shot where they were found. As war in the East slowed down and the prospect of a swift German victory receded, policy in the occupied territories shifted towards wholesale murder. In the West, Gypsies continued to be treated severely, with many meeting their deaths in the network of concentration camps.

In late September 1942, a few hundred Gypsies were deported from Germany with the specific purpose of constructing a new enclosure within Auschwitz-Birkenau. This sub-camp was to exclusively house Gypsies. On 16 December 1942 Himmler issued a decree ordering the deportation of Gypsies from the German Reich to Auschwitz-Birkenau. While some “pure” Gypsies would be subject to special treatment and exemptions, since they were viewed as valuable for research, all others were to be deported to Birkenau from 1943. Once there, these German Gypsies entered the new enclosure with others from across Europe.

Unlike other arrivals at Birkenau, Gypsies did not experience a “selection”. Living conditions were, however, as atrocious as in the rest of the camp with typhus claiming many of the total 23,000 Gypsies who were deported to Birkenau. Many were also experimented on, with a significant proportion murdered by gas or shooting.

It is not known how many Gypsies lost their lives during the period of the Third Reich. The prospect of survival varied from country to country, but it is estimated that around a quarter of the pre-war Gypsy population were killed by the Nazis and their collaborators; some 220,000. Gypsies have increasingly used the term “porrajmos” in order to distinguish their experience from other groups persecuted and murdered by the Nazi regime.



Further materials will become available through the course of the joint project.

For further information go to
National Education Union
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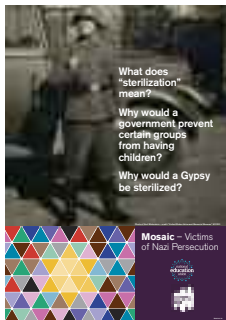


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