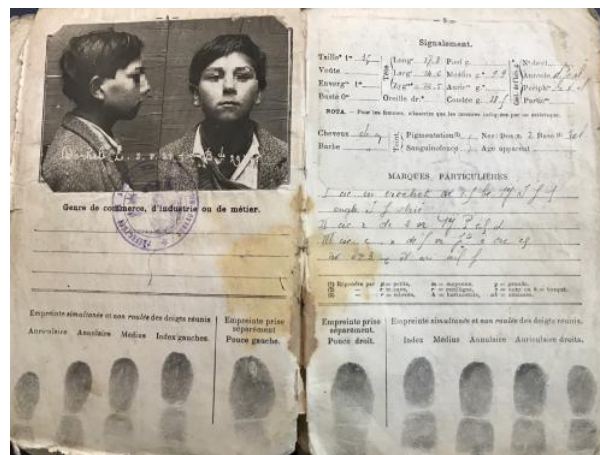


Romani Circulation in Europe: Surveillance and Repression (1860-1950)

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ABSTRACT

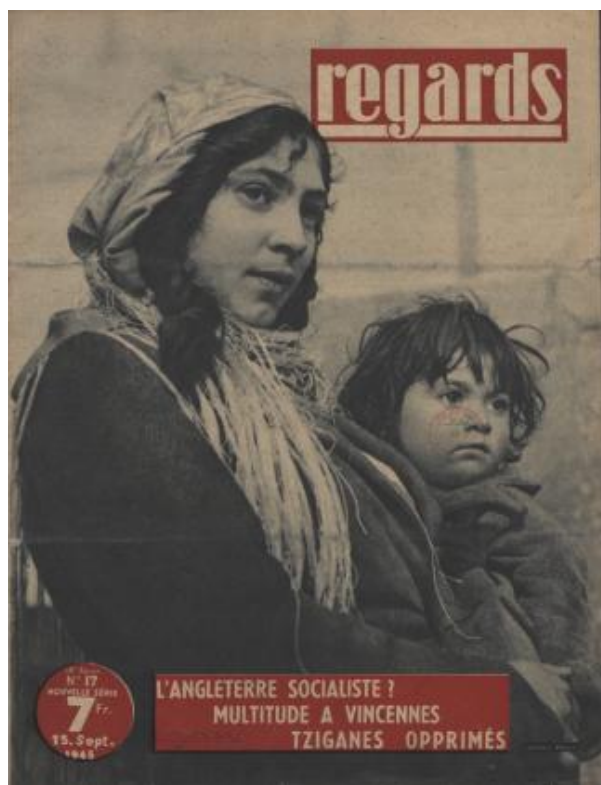
Populations identified as “gypsies” have lived in Europe since the 15th century. Starting in the 19th century, the nomadic minority within that heterogeneous whole was subjected to increased attention from the authorities. The “gypsy question” developed as nations grew stronger, and those populations were disproportionately affected by policies of control and even expulsion. In 1933, that increased control shifted to persecution, deportation and mass extermination, which were responsible for 250,000 deaths among the Romani population.



Page from a Nomadic Individual's Anthropometric Passbook, 1931. Yvelines Departmental Archives, 5M69.



"Gypsies at the Border," *Le Petit Journal*, illustrated supplement, September 8, 1912.



"Oppressed Gypsies," *Regards*, n° 7, September 15, 1945.

The presence of populations identified as “gypsies” has been attested to in Europe since the 15th century. An abundance of archival documentation bears witness not only to their existence, but also to their deep integration into the social, economic and cultural life of the regions where they lived. Historical and anthropological studies shed light on the tremendous diversity of the various groups referred to by a single term, which changes by region and time period: *Egyptians* during France’s Ancien Régime then *Bohemians*, *Tsiganes (Gypsies)* or *Romanichals*. These groups are characterized by a plurality of ways of being and doing, in terms of their mobility and geographic rooting, the economic activities they practice, and their modes of belonging. Above and beyond that diversity, the fact remains that the “gypsy” category is founded on certain shared elements, including, most notably, shared linguistic roots and different but intertwined historical paths.

From the 1860s to World War I: Construction of a “Gypsy Question” in Western Europe

While most Romani populations were sedentary, those with an itinerant lifestyle generally crystallized public attention. From the last third of the 19th century, family groupings based in the Russian, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires broadened their territory of circulation, making noted incursions into western Europe. The visibility of those groups, who seemed to cross Europe’s borders with ease, focused Europe’s gaze on the exotic, mobile minority, and contributed to the emergence of a “gypsy question” by the late 1890s. Many western European countries then began to take the first steps in an unprecedented practice of controlling, identifying and monitoring the movements of populations identified as “gypsies”.

On March 20 1895, for example, France organized a census of all of the “nomads, bohemians, and vagabonds.” The investigation revealed that most of the families had French nationality and had been rooted in one place for generations. Starting in 1908, police brigades were tasked with taking photos of and identifying “vagabonds, nomads and Romanichals,” in accordance with new techniques developed by Alphonse Bertillon. On July 16 1912, a law regulating itinerant professions and nomads’ circulation was passed by Parliament. It required “nomads” to get an individual anthropometric passbook stamped by local authorities whenever they entered or left any town where they wished to stop. A collective passbook recorded the whole family group.

Measures of identification and control went into effect in other European countries as well. In 1886, Bismarck organized a census of all the “*Zigeuner*” in Prussia. In 1899, the head of the Bavarian police created a “Central Bureau” in Munich, which was put in charge of identifying them. In Italy, the authorities carried out multiple expulsions during the 1910s, even of families that had been born on Italian soil. These various initiatives led to transnational cooperation projects. In 1909, Switzerland offered, unsuccessfully, to hold an international conference on the “gypsy question.”

A Movement that Intensified Between the Two World Wars

During World War I, most itinerant families were immobilized, and many of the men were sent to the front. In France, public officials arrested some groups that were seen as suspect and placed them in detention. That was the case, for instance, of the “Alsace-Lorraine Romanichals,” who were detained inside a former Franciscan

convent in Crest, in the Drôme. Internment camps were also used to detain Romani families from countries that France was at war with, especially Austria-Hungary.

After the war, an extension and reinforcement of measures that had begun to be established in the late 19th century could be observed. Those measures reveal a shared process of invention of a “gypsy question” at a national level. To resolve that issue, the measures proposed included reinforced surveillance of individuals, which resulted in both the official registration of their identity and greater monitoring of their movements. Certain groups’ border-crossing mobility captured a lot of attention, consolidating the image of elusive Gypsies, constantly on the move and without ties to any one, given region. Suspicions of their nationality and challenges to their claims of citizenship were also part of the mix. Starting in the mid-1920s, measures taken on a national level in different European countries were completed with bilateral agreements concerning cross-border circulation.

For the families, these repressive measures – which could lead to incessant identify checks, arrests, and constant suspicion and hostility exacerbated by non-stop surveillance – only fueled communities’ mistrust of public authorities and sense of being treated unfairly. While some itinerant families chose to become sedentary in order to escape the pressure, most of them chose to maintain their lifestyle, despite the difficulties.

World War II: Persecution Reaches Its Height

During World War II, populations identified as “gypsies” were placed under house arrest, interned in specific camps or work camps, targeted for mass assassination and deported to [concentration camps or death camps](#). The persecution methods differed depending on the country, the type of political power in place and on how those populations had been registered and monitored before the war.

The repression began in Germany in 1933, with the internment of all persons identified as “*Zigeuner*” in specific camps (called *Zigeunerlager*). After 1938, it spread to other territories controlled by the Reich. In May 1940, there were deportations to the east, particularly Poland. In December 1942, Himmler ordered the deportation of all “*Zigeuner*” from the Greater Reich to death camps. Deportations started in early 1943 and continued until the summer of 1944. Many of the deportees were sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where a “family camp,” reserved for Gypsies was maintained, before being dismantled and the last prisoners assassinated in August 1944.

Romani populations’ fates in Eastern Europe were varied: although the Roma in Rumania were deported to Transnistria in 1942, those in Albania and Greece were relatively spared, while some 30,000 Roma from the Baltic nations and the occupied Soviet Union were executed by the *Einsatzgruppen*. The fates of Roma in western Europe were also quite diverse: there were deportations from the Netherlands, Belgium and northern France. In France, all “Nomads” were placed under house arrest in April 1940, and from October on, nearly 7,000 of them were detained in some 40 or so camps. Individual deportations also took place, like the sixty or so men who were deported in 1943 from the camp in Poitiers to the Sachsenhausen work camp.

Although historians estimate the number of victims at about 250,000, the memory of European Gypsies' fate during World War II only emerged belatedly. Interned French Nomads, for instance, were barely acknowledged in the immediate post-war period, and it wasn't until 2016 that the French government recognized its role in their detention. Even then, neither the harm incurred nor the possibility of reparations were discussed. Nor does that recognition put an end to itinerant populations' current exceptional status. Their status is embodied by the system of authorized stopping places that maintain a powerful socio-spatial segregation by relegating populations now identified as "travelers" to the outskirts of cities and towns.

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