



# Introduction

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*European History Quarterly*

2022, Vol. 52(4) 527–531

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DOI: 10.1177/02656914221100097

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This Special Issue is the result of long-term, international collaborative research conducted within the framework of the HERA-funded project *Beyond Stereotypes: Cultural Exchanges and the Romani Contribution to European Spaces (BESTROM)*.<sup>1</sup> Over the course of eight articles, a team of 11 authors from a wide range of academic traditions explore the cultural contributions that Europe's diverse Romani minorities (Roma, Sinti, Manouche, Gitanos and others) have made to European public spaces, considering these groups as agents in the process of building shared European commons and identities.

The authors have followed a largely joint agenda. First, each article seeks to move beyond scholarship that treats Roma people as the passive objects of 'othering' or eternal victims of persecution and to consider them instead as active subjects of cultural production. Second, any analysis of interactions in European public spaces necessarily involves a critical approach to the notion of 'integration'. Cultural exchange between Romani groups and mainstream societies cannot be studied without acknowledging the underlying problem of power asymmetries. Consequently, the articles in this issue are alert to and take into account the inequalities at play in the spaces under analysis. Finally, the articles present case studies in both national and transnational contexts. Even studies with a single local or national focus draw on comparative reflections and include evidence of the transnational circulation of people and practices. Similarly, the articles cover both relatively short and longer periods of time, depending on the aims and methodological options of each study. The objective in each case is to connect the historical past with the current situation of Roma people and their relationship with non-Roma.

One of the main challenges of this project was to find entry points for a study of the agency of a group repeatedly placed in a position of subalternity by majority societies. Previous scholarship in the field has focused on analyzing the policies of population surveillance and mobility control used to manage groups labelled as Nomades, Zigeuner,

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<sup>1</sup> Grant PCI2019-103527 funded by MCIN/AEI/ 10.13039/501100011033 and by the European Union within the framework of the HERA Joint Research Programme 'Public Spaces: Culture and Integration in Europe' (2019–2022).

Zingari or Gypsies in a context of ‘racialized governmentalities’.<sup>2</sup> When nation states constructed their populations in terms of citizenship, Romanies came to be classed as ‘strangers’ and to be perceived not only as foreigners – despite their deep historical roots in Europe – but also as dangerous.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the transformation of European states led to the othering of the ‘Gypsy’, with the result, it has been argued, that, even among minorities, they were subject to a ‘state of exception’.<sup>4</sup> Against this background, research into the so-called ‘Gypsy question’ has revolved around four themes: First, the restrictions on cross-border mobility in Europe from the second half of the nineteenth century, focusing in particular on the expansion of instruments of state identity and repressive policing at national and international levels.<sup>5</sup> Second, the use of criminal law to prosecute social deviance, informed by new ideas about social danger emerging from physical anthropology and medicine. This research approach addresses the links between science and policy making.<sup>6</sup> Third, the genocidal outcomes of governmental and police practices under National Socialism and in Europe more generally between 1930 and 1945, and their aftermath.<sup>7</sup> And, finally, the Romanies’ own internalization of difference, basing identity construction and social and political activism on a historical narrative of marginalization and repression.<sup>8</sup>

In studying the contributions of Romani groups as active agents of cultural production, this Special Issue goes beyond the state-of-the-art in substantive and conceptual terms. Its originality lies in the use of in-depth case studies of particular spaces, both physical and discursive, which illuminate largely unknown aspects of the history of a key social group in European history from the perspective of their own agency. It is innovative in that it suggests that the contribution of Romani groups to European culture was historically significant, challenging the assumption of marginality while acknowledging social

<sup>2</sup> Huub van Baar, ‘Europe’s Romaphobia: Problematisation, Securitization, Nomadization’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, Vol. 29 (2011), 203–12.

<sup>3</sup> Leo Lucassen, Wim Willems and Anne Marie Cottar, *Gypsies and Other Itinerant Groups: A Socio-Historical Approach* (New York 1998); Henriette Asséo, ‘L’invention des “Nomades” en Europe au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle et la nationalisation impossible des Tsiganes’, in Gérard Noiriel, ed., *L’identification des personnes. Genèse d’un travail d’État* (Paris 2007), 161–80; Michael Stewart, ed., *The Gypsy ‘Menace’: Populism and the New Anti-Gypsy Politics* (London 2012).

<sup>4</sup> David Mayall, *Gypsy-Travellers in Nineteenth-Century Society* (Cambridge 1988); Jennifer Illuzzi, *Gypsies in Germany and Italy 1861–1914: Lives Outside the Law* (Basingstoke 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Ilse About, ‘De la libre circulation au contrôle permanent. Les autorités françaises face aux mobilités tsiganes transfrontalières, 1860–1930’, *Cultures & Conflits*, Vol. 76 (2010), 15–37; Ilse About, ‘Underclass Gypsies. An Historical Approach on Categorisation and Exclusion in France, in the Nineteenth and the Twentieth Centuries’, in Michael Stewart, ed., *The Gypsy ‘Menace’: Populism and the New Anti-Gypsy Politics* (London 2012), 95–114.

<sup>6</sup> Wim Willems, *In Search of the True Gypsy: From Enlightenment to Final Solution* (London 1997); Samuel Llano, ‘Public Enemy or National Hero? The Spanish Gypsy and the Rise of Flamenquismo, 1898–1922’, *Bulletin of Spanish Studies*, Vol. 94 (2017), 977–1004.

<sup>7</sup> Anton Weiss-Wendt, *The Nazi Genocide of the Roma: Reassessment and Commemoration* (Oxford 2013); Celia Dornet and Eve Rosenhaft, eds, *The Legacies of the Romani Genocide in Europe Since 1945* (London 2022).

<sup>8</sup> Slawomir Kapralski, ‘The Memory of Genocide and Contemporary Roma Identities’, in Anton Weiss-Wendt, ed., *The Nazi Genocide of the Roma* (New York and Oxford 2013), 229–59; Hub van Baar and Angéla Kóczé, eds, *The Roma and their Struggle for Identity in Contemporary Europe* (Oxford 2020).

asymmetries. A further innovative aspect is that the research project from which these studies arise combines historical research with attention to the experiences of contemporary Romani communities. This is reflected not only in the fact that Roma activists and intellectuals are involved in these activities, but also in the methodological approach, which draws significantly on participatory research, oral history, personal writings, family life stories and biographies.

Our primary tool was the in-depth analysis of practices, discourses and representations in a series of public spaces where encounters and cultural exchange between Roma and non-Roma have historically taken place. Of course, these are areas of contact that have been marked by conflict and power inequalities. Not surprisingly, the upward curve of persecution that culminated in the genocide of the Roma during the Second World War features in several of the case studies examined. Nevertheless, even today, we have still not reached the nadir of the downward curve marking the end of persecution, which should have led society to acknowledge the collective suffering of all victims of the Holocaust during Nazism. The rhetoric and programmes of inclusion and integration as they apply to Romani groups in Europe can function not only as a one-way requirement on the part of majority societies, but can also tend to mask histories of recurrent persecution and backlashes against diversity that should not be ignored. These articles therefore seek to study relations between Roma and non-Roma in a defined set of contact zones and to assess what scope Roma people have to act as cultural agents, even in adverse circumstances. Here, practices such as contestation, resistance, and hybridity can transform conflict into a source of creative force with the potential to enrich particular public spaces.

The eight articles cover a wide range of spaces of cultural contact and creation. While each one starts from the perspective of a specific, usually physical, functionalized space, in reality, the studies as a whole display significant overlap and interchange between the cultural (musical, artistic and literary), sensory (aural and visual), performative, economic and political practices that pervade and define the space in each case.

In 'Romani Berlin: "Gypsy" Presence, the Culture of the Horse Market and the Shaping of Urban Space 1890–1933', Eve Rosenhaft offers us not only a study of the role and significance of the Roma presence in the modern shaping of the city of Berlin, but also illuminates the agency of Sinti and Roma horse-dealing families in the economic space of fairs and markets in the early twentieth century. Anna G. Piotrowska, for her part, analyses the close yet changing relationship between Roma musicians and Russian majority culture in a long historical survey from the nineteenth century to the present day in her article 'Tsyganshchina (*цыганицина*) and Romani Musicians in Tsarist, Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia: Change and Continuity'. In the third article, 'Marginality and Modernity on the South Shore: Blackpool's Fortune Tellers, Authenticity and Belonging', Tamara West focuses on early twentieth-century Britain, showing us the other side of the photographs that documented the famous Blackpool fair and providing some insights into the lives of Romani women fortune tellers, who were, it seems, as much sought after and valued in this activity as they were criminalized and persecuted.

Alongside cases set within well-defined local and national spaces, other articles follow the trail of transcultural flows that are transnational in nature and allow us to highlight the

mirror effect in identity formation processes. In ‘Gypsy Anarchism: Navigating Ethnic and Political Identities’, Juan Pro and María Sierra critically address the stereotype that associates anarchism with the ‘Gypsy’ way of life, in order to point out the diverse forms that this connection could take in the interwar period and their meanings in the context of the rise of fascism. Set in the same historical time frame, Malte Gasche and Laurence Prempain’s article, ‘(Dis)Playing Exotic Otherness in the Circus: The Bouglione Wild West Show’, follows the story of a Sinti family who not only made a successful livelihood from this type of show but also created a space for an attractive representation of exoticism that transcended national borders. Carolina García Sanz’s article, ‘“Gypsy Eroding Liberty is Gorgio Eroding Liberty”: Making Europe More Equal from the British Romani Rights Movement’, offers new documentation and interpretations of British Roma activism in the 1960s and 1970s, which is contextualized within the European political and cultural coordinates of the time.

The case of French *Tsigane* associationism, studied by Begoña Barrera in ‘“Nous, les Artistes Tsiganes”’: Intellectual Networks and Cultural Spaces for Ethnic Assertion in France (1949–1989)’, is similarly framed in a double historical context: national on the one hand, and the simultaneous growth of international Roma activism on the other. The Special Issue closes with an article by Siv B. Lie and Ioanida Costache entitled ‘Staging Genocide: Theatrical Rememberings of the Romani Holocaust’, in which the authors examine and compare two theatrical performances in France and Romania involving the joint participation of Roma and non-Roma cultural actors. The aim is to confront the audience with the limitations of Holocaust historiography and memory and challenge the dominant Romanophobia.

Our main conclusion is that research on the contribution made by Romani minorities to European culture can strengthen coexistence – intranational as well as transnational – in Europe. Furthermore, since many of the historic prejudices against ‘Gypsies’ that persist in national contexts as divisive factors are now also being transferred to new migrant and refugee groups, research-based information about Romani history will help to highlight the positive value of cultural diversity and promote reflection on discriminatory practices, as minorities come to be seen as part of a shared store of human and cultural capital rather than a ‘problem’. At the same time, the case studies provide material for critical reflection on ‘integration’, its problems and limitations. The mixed historical experience of the Roma invites us to critique familiar formulations of the inclusion-exclusion dichotomy.

It is precisely in this latter sense that these case studies can be used as a basis for reflection. Taken together, the articles underline specific characteristics of Roma culture that can be seen, in the light of these contributions, as simultaneously pan-European and also rooted in national and local relations. Romani communities have historically practised their economic and cultural activities across national borders, and there are now family, associational and cultural connections that transcend these borders. The Romani minority is therefore a cultural agent that has made a historical contribution to challenging closed national identities and to generating common European cultural ground. It could be very fruitful to work on the assumption that their contribution demonstrates that it is possible to live a life with multiple identities and that feelings of local or

national belonging and a transnational European identity are therefore not mutually exclusive but can interact productively with each other.

### **Author Biography**

**María Sierra** is a professor at the University of Seville (Spain), in the Department of Contemporary History. She is research leader of the European BESTROM (Beyond Stereotypes: Cultural Exchanges and the Romani Contribution to European Public Spaces) project. Her recent contributions in this field include: 'Creating Romanestan: A Place to be a "Gypsy" in Post-Nazi Europe' (*European History Quarterly*, 2020), 'Uncivilized Emotions: Romantic Images and Marginalization of the Gitanos/Spanish Gypsies' (*Pakistan Journal of Historical Studies*, 2016), *Holocausto gitano. El genocidio romaní bajo el nazismo* (2020). Together with Eve Rosenhaft, she coordinated the recently published book *European Roma: Lives Beyond Stereotypes* (2022). She has also published the memoirs of Holocaust survivor Philomena Franz in Spanish and is preparing a documentary film about her testimony.