

European history of the Roma, its research and possibilities of conceptualisation

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Structure of the session

- approaches to the writing of Romani history
- important chapters in the history of European Roma
- character of sources
- victimisation – heroization – agency
- discussion

the aim of the session:

- to outline the discussions that are connected to the research into the history of the Roma
- to inspire deeper readings of texts written on the different parts of the history of the Roma with respect to: the sources used, their limits and interpretations, interpretative frames the author uses, and contextualization of the particular case studies from Romani history
- to point out the complex effects of structural and power hierarchies in the production of knowledge on (the history) of the Roma

What do you study
and how much have you read/studied
on the history of the Roma?

[The Roma being] a small and vulnerable minority, it was far more likely that their history would be more a tale of **what was done to them** than of **what they themselves had done**. Even the tale of what was done to them must be seen in a broader context, for most authorities had far more pressing problems to deal with than complaints against a few Roma, so when they did act against the Roma perhaps they were playing a deeper game. The possibility is worth bearing in mind.
(Will Guy, 1998)

- ❖ how to approach the history of the Roma (state approaches to the Roma, history of the Roma) (part one of the session)
- ❖ character of the sources available for the research on the history of the Roma (part two of the session)

Which periods/developments would you name as important for the history of the Roma in Europe?
(labels/dates/regions)

Some important chapters in the European history of the Roma

- 11th century: arrival on the European continent, and sojourn in the Byzantine Empire/Greek speaking territory
- up to the 14th century: spread over the Balkan peninsula
- 15th century: 1st Romani migration: arrival of the Roma into western Europe and Scandinavia
- 16th century: beginning of the period of persecutions and expulsions of the Roma from Western European States and the Holy Roman Empire (harshest measures employed during early 18th century)
- varried approach to Romani populations: „Gypsy“ specific policies of expulsion/assimilation/control vs ethnicaly neutral policies
- mid 19th century: 2nd Romani („Vlach“) migration, connected with developments in Romania (abolition of Gypsy slavery)
- interwar period: Romani emancipation movements in different European states
- the Holocaust and its aftermath, birth of the international Romani movement (1971 First World Romani Congress in Orpington)
- Cold War: Romani marginalization in the West vs attempts at the transformation of the Gypsies into socialist citizens (of Gypsy origin)
- 1960s/70s: Romani gastarbeiters from the Balkans in „Western“ Europe
- fall of communism: Roma in the transformation years, migrations inducted by eruption of racial violence and discrimination (political asylum seekers), war in Yugoslavia, and socio-economic motives

What can be understood under the term Romani history

- history of approaches to the Roma by state authorities (and reactions by the Roma to them)
- history of the Roma as a group/as group(s) defined regionally (internal histories in the context of general social and political developments)
- dominance of state policies approaches in the writing on the history of the Roma:
positivist vs problem oriented texts; history of the Roma as an annex to the „big history“ vs analytical lens through which the existing big historical narratives are revisited
- a risk: Roma as a strawman, homogenised figure of objects of policies other (non-Romani) actors

Two examples from recent writings on the Roma in communist Czechoslovakia: revision of the totalitarian narrative via an analysis of the genesis/implementation of regulations targeting the Roma

- Spurný (2011) 1958 Law on permanent settlement of travelling individuals:
- traditionally interpreted as the first evidence of the turn of the communist régime from the emphasis on the possibility of reeducation of the „gypsies“ to repressive assimilative measures
- vs is a step back from the ideals of the possibilities of reeducation in the face of local functionaries and officials who call for a more radical approach towards the „gypsy menace“
- Sokolová (2008) and her analysis of the sterilization policies in communist Czechoslovakia from 1970's:
- ethnically neutral legal norm interpreted in social practice as ethnically specific, targeting Romani women in disproportionately high numbers
- via the agency of local administrative officials, social workers and doctors who interpreted the socially coded parts of the central documents as ethnically specific

Where/who are the Roma in these accounts?

Interest in Romani perspectives > choice of sources

Types of historical sources, their relevance and use in historical writing on the Roma

- distinction of different types of historical sources, according to different criteria:
 - form/type (written, non-written, oral);
 - structure of information (referring directly, mediated reports);
 - provenance (institutional, private)
 - for the history of the Roma as a marginalized group: non-Romani vs Romani provenance
- dominant use of written institutional sources of non-Romani provenance (as most directly and easily accessible via the archival structures)
 - possibility of compensation of these type of sources: oral history research among the Roma (when possible)
 - what imbalancies does this approach create?

Challenges of the use of sources from the non-Romani provenance

- refer on the Roma from the outside perspective
 - selectivity connected to historical visibility of the Roma (and the structure and system of archiving priorities): when do the Roma come into the focus of local/regional/central authorities? Which documents get archived? How illustrative are these sources for the normality of relations and interactions?
- references to the Roma in these documents are partial, sporadic
- intentionality of the documents (written with a purpose)
- reflect the thinking about the Roma – to what extent do they refer about the author/ the Roma?
- the labellings under which the Roma appear in these sources differ and might have different denominations, i.e. might include other groups as Roma, or only part of the Romani population, or might not refer to the Roma at all

Examples of these challenges

- Gronemeyer (1987) – revision of first sources referring on the presence of Roma in German speaking territories (15-18th century): “blindspot of humanism” – construction of “gypsies” as dangerous others
- typically “first sightings” of the Roma in a specific territory (1050, the life of St. George the Athonite: adsincani/athinganoi/atzicano in Constantinopolis; 1242, chronicle of the so-called Dalimil, presence of travelling groups of people of exotic origin trying to get alms saying “kartas boh” in Czech lands)
- interwar institutional sources on the gypsies (fusion of ethnic and social categories) – local institutional/police reports and documents on the Romani presence
- which parts of the Romani population are not visible and not referred to?

Possibility of compensation of the limits of non-Romani sources

Recently, Romani historiographic sources start to appear, sources of different kinds. Among these, the testimonies of Romani eyewitnesses are of utmost importance and deserve our appreciation. They refer to the „history“ of family groups, community, locality where they lived together with their non-Romani neighbours. The testimonies by the Roma reveal to us **unprecedented details and facts that are so far unknown and also unusual**, which we would not expect to appear in the life and history of the Roma. [...] The question of course is, to what extent these can be used to formulate more general statements. In this sense the **confrontation with other archival sources as well as numerous other oral histories** is needed. [...]

(Milena Hübschmannová, 2003)

Complementarity of the sources

Triangulation/confrontation of the sources and data

Are the oral sources the only sources of Romani provenance?

Challenges of the use of sources of the Romani provenance

oral history

- used (where possible) to balance the recognized omissions of the Romani perspective in collected historical sources: however, what kind of new imbalances does this approach create?;
- time consuming preparation of the source
- a source co-created by the interviewer, and the interaction with Romani interview partners
- a source created ex post, often the distance from the events recalled is already quite big
- “subjectivity of the source, limited reliability” (memory limits, interference of following events but also personal interpretations) as limits mentioned in the debate on the possibility of using such sources by certain historians (are written sources free of these limits?)
- often history students are not trained to use these type of sources
- facts vs interpretations (ways of making sense of the past, specific narrative frames)

written sources

- presupposed scarcity of Romani writings due to illiteracy (vs scholarization as a historic fact)
- abundant for specific periods and topics
- difficult to search for (whose papers survive and get archived? Who organizes the archives?)
- not only limited to personal communication with institutions, colleagues, members of the community:
communication in (Romani) media, Romani representatives in public life and debate, staff employed by state authorities, autobiographies... but also witnesses in judicial proceedings, statements in police documents, etc.

Examples of research making extensive use of Romani sources

interwar and post-war emancipation movements of the Roma in Europe

examples of topics which offer a large array of available written sources of Romani provenance

- **Brigid O'Keeffe (2013)** Romani emancipation movement in early Soviet Russia (1920's – 1930's)
„korenizacia“: support of the development of ethnic awareness, national consciousness and cultural identity of ethnic minorities while insisting on their integration into the body of the state as new Soviet citizens: transformation of the old „Gypsy“ identity into the identity of „new Soviet Gypsies“ - and the public performance of the identity by the Roma
- **Interbellum: Roma Voices (Marushikova and Popov eds.), RomArchive**

Holocaust as an example of topic in which the question of the use of sources from the perpetrator side plays a crucial role

- Development in the research on the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti: perpetrators documents / oral history collections / written sources by the Roma („Voice of the Victims“ - RomArchive)

history of approaches to the Roma by state authorities (and reactions by the Roma to them) merging with history of the Roma as a group?
multiple perspectives

Victims – heroes – actors in negotiation?

„‘Voices of the Victims’ is a pilot project. For the first time, the story of the genocide committed against the Romani minority is told exclusively from the perspective of the victims. The project focuses on sources from the time of the persecution or shortly afterwards. Here, too, ‘Voices of the Victims’ is venturing into uncharted territory. These early sources are very rare, but due to their proximity in time to the experienced persecution, they possess a particularly vivid and intense quality that conveys an impression of the suffering endured in a way still poignant today. The voices of the victims are a powerful testimony to self-assertion in the face of extermination.“

(Karola Fings, 2019)

Victims – heroes: shifting perception of heroism?

Victims – heroes – actors in negotiation?

„If we were to generalize on the history of the Roma during the Slovak state only on the basis of the quantity and content of the antigypsy provisions stored in the archives, we could not understand how could the Roma survive – and represent a population of 100.000 individuals in 1946 Slovakia. It is the testimonies of the eyewitness that show that the Roma could have survived the persecution because of their integration into the structures of the pre-war Slovak society and thanks to the solidarity of ‚their‘ local gadje.“

(Milena Hübschmannová 2003)

Negotiation of the individual situation in everyday social practice

Thank you for your attention and feedback.

Please see:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdyWbhgwji0S1wIC14zIJdoPfpS4k37RQuwUg8yCtpujuSLQw/viewform?usp=sf_link

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