



# Critical Romani Studies



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*Critical Romani Studies* is an international, interdisciplinary, peer-reviewed journal providing a forum for activist-scholars to critically examine racial oppressions, different forms of exclusion, inequalities, and human rights abuses of Roma. Without compromising academic standards of evidence collection and analysis, the Journal seeks to create a platform to critically engage with academic knowledge production, and generate critical academic and policy knowledge targeting – amongst others – scholars, activists, and policymakers.

Scholarly expertise is a tool, rather than an end, for critical analysis of social phenomena affecting Roma, contributing to the fight for social justice. The Journal especially welcomes the cross-fertilization of Romani studies with the fields of critical race studies, gender and sexuality studies, critical policy studies, diaspora studies, colonial studies, postcolonial studies, and studies of decolonization.

The Journal actively solicits papers from critically-minded young Romani scholars who have historically experienced barriers in engaging with academic knowledge production. The Journal considers only unpublished manuscripts which present original, high-quality research. The Journal is committed to the principle of open access, so articles are available free of charge. All published articles undergo rigorous peer review, based on initial editorial screening and refereeing by at least two anonymous scholars. The Journal provides a modest but fair remuneration for authors, editors, and reviewers.

The Journal has grown out of the informal Roma Research and Empowerment Network, and it is founded by the Romani Studies Program of Central European University and the European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture. The Romani Studies Program at CEU organizes conferences annually where draft papers are presented and discussed before selecting them for peer review.

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# Niches of Agency: Romani Voices and Romani Allies in Compensation Procedures after 1945

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## Abstract

The article explores the underrepresentation of Romani perspectives and self-perceptions in historical research. It offers a methodological reflection on the role of petitions in Romani history before unearthing the contents of Germany's compensation files. These state administrative files contain numerous acts of Romani self-assertion in the face of a rigid bureaucratic system. German Sinti and Roma countered majority society's practices of de-individualization through deliberate subjective action that challenged the authorities long before collective action in the late 1970s. The study reveals strategies that Roma developed to be entitled to the compensation due to Nazi victims. For example, they tried to provoke reaction through rhetorical stridency; organized help from third parties, professionals, and laypersons; or escalated to superiors. In doing so, the article reveals the complexity of the administrative practice of compensation for Nazi injustice, including actors such as the lawyers hired by Roma. Their ambivalent role and interests, which are sometimes supportive, sometimes less altruistic, hold potential for further research.

## Keywords

- Compensation for Nazi injustices
- German history
- Romani agency
- Romani history

## Introduction

International law has long supported reparations from defeated states to victorious states to compensate for war damage. But not until after the Second World War did the idea of *Wiedergutmachung* take hold in Germany. Although this term principally can be translated as “reparations” in English, there are two points to distinguish. In this context *Wiedergutmachung* did not mean compensation for general war damage but rather for Nazi persecution: individual victims – and not former enemy states – were to be the beneficiaries (cf. Goschler 2005, 13).<sup>[1]</sup> An unprecedented political program (cf. Torpey 2003, 2–3; cf. Goschler 2005, 8; Frei, Brunner, and Goschler 2009, 12) of *Wiedergutmachung*<sup>[2]</sup> for those persecuted under National Socialism began as a vague mandate under the Allies (cf. Féaux de la Croix 1985, 14) and soon diversified in West Germany<sup>[3]</sup> into the legal areas of restitution (of ascertainable goods looted during the Nazi era), on the one hand, and compensation (of immaterial damage), on the other (cf. *Ibid.*). In the late 1940s it was codified in state law; then, from 1953, in federal law.

In the early days of the Federal Republic of Germany, *Wiedergutmachung* had developed not only into a complex area of law and a controversial field of domestic politics, but also into an administrative branch of its own with ramified structures of superior and subordinated offices, divisions and departments, civil servants, and employees.<sup>[4]</sup> While compensation, which this article focuses on,<sup>[5]</sup> was initially run by local Special Relief Committees<sup>[6]</sup> and Support Agencies<sup>[7]</sup> (cf. Hudemann 1987; Goschler 1992, 76–86; Scholtzky 1994; Scharffenberg 2004, 27–34), which were personally and institutionally linked to persecutees’ associations and characterized by direct contact between former victims and caseworkers (Scharffenberg 2004, 223), the bureaucratic apparatuses became increasingly anonymous. The bureaucracy soon alienated itself from its target group as the distance between the Nazi victims applying for compensation and the responsible agencies grew. By the end of this bureaucratization process, compensation was primarily an abstract

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1 However, Goschler immediately complicates this apparent clear distinction between reparations imposed by the former enemy states for their war damage and *Wiedergutmachung* directed at compensating the internal victims of Nazi persecution by pointing out that the German version of the Versailles Treaty already used the term *Wiedergutmachung* to denote reparation burdens (cf. Goschler 2005, 14).

2 Of course, the sober observation of the absence of a historical precedence does not mean that *Wiedergutmachung* can be written as a “simple success story.” There is “not the slightest reason” for such a perspective (Frei, Brunner, and Goschler 2009, 47).

3 In the other successor states to the German Reich, the GDR, which emerged from the Soviet occupation zone, and the Republic of Austria, there were also laws on individual compensation for victims, but these are not at the focus of this article. For a comparative German-German perspective, cf. Goschler 2003. For the Austrian Victim’s Welfare Act (*Opferfürsorgegesetz*), cf. Bailer 1993; Berger et al. 2004.

4 While the legal and political history of *Wiedergutmachung*, which began to be studied in the 1980s, can be considered largely understood (for example, Goschler 2005), *Wiedergutmachung* as an administrative practice, however, hardly has been studied by historians. Only first attempts at a praxeological history of administration can be found (for example, some contributions in Frei et al. 2009).

5 The by far smaller legal area of *Wiedergutmachung*, restitution, is omitted from this paper.

6 *Sonderhilfsausschüsse*.

7 *Betreuungsstellen*.

administrative act, which made the practices of decision-making appear opaque and, according to historian Heiko Scharffenberg, often led to a “feeling of powerlessness” (*Ibid.*, 224) among former victims, easily generating apathy.

For a history of compensation practices for German Sinti and Romani<sup>[8]</sup> genocide survivors, which is only beginning to be written,<sup>[9]</sup> it will be essential to consider this shift of the decision-making center to the anonymous structures of highly differentiated administrations. Their personnel easily could hide behind paragraphs and competence regulations. This was one of several factors that generated a practice that, due to numerous obstacles, resulted in a perceptible tone of undignified coldness in dealing with genocide survivors. Along with a protracted nature to the proceedings, this hardly could satisfy any claimants.<sup>[10]</sup> The significance that this institutional change from around 1950 had, especially for Romani claimants, is underscored by the finding of Julia von dem Knesebeck: Roma often had a better chance of being recognized as racially persecuted victims and receiving immediate aid in the early phase of compensation when there still had been local competency with a resemblance of personal accountability (2011, 223).

This article chooses to flip on its head the perspective of classical antigypsyism research which tends to embrace the perceptions and actions of majority society and its institutions (Gress and Reuter 2018). How Sinti and Roma reacted will be examined here – not antigypsyist discrimination against Sinti and Roma in the context of the *Wiedergutmachung*, together with their overreaching and material disadvantage at the hands of German state offices for compensation. After all, the “feeling of powerlessness” did not mean that the former victims had been deprived entirely of possibilities for action in the administrative process that was compensation. *A priori*, it may be plausible that the alienation of the compensation bureaucracy from its own clientele had a detrimental effect, especially for Sinti and Roma. Not only were many of them marginalized (Widmann 2001; Reuss 2015), but they also lacked any professional interest representation that was used by other victim groups to lever their compensation (Margalit 2001, 278; cf. in more detail, Woolford and Wolejszo 2006). As a result,

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8 I use, following Joskowicz (2020, 1206) the noun “Roma” as well as the adjective “Romani” to refer to various minority ethnic groups. Sinti were historically the largest Romani group living in Germany. As they often seek to distinguish themselves from Roma, the self-description of Eastern European groups, I speak of “Sinti and Roma,” as is customary in German discussions, when it comes to Romani groups in the country, or simply “Sinti” (singular: Sinto/Sintezza) when I consider it likely that all individuals concerned would have referred to themselves in this manner.

9 Most of the literature on compensation of German Sinti and Roma (Spitta 1989; Margalit 2001, 117–160; Stengel 2004; Woolford and Wolejszo 2006; Feyen 2009; Sparing 2011) essentially deals with the political, legal historical, and societal framework. So far, only the study of von dem Knesebeck (2011) works on the individual case files of Roma, the majority of which still lie dormant in the archives. This instructive work exemplifies the potential of looking behind the facades of bureaucracy and exploring how and why decisions came about. For Austria, such file-based research focusing on compensation practices was done by Berger et al. (2004) and Strutz (2006). Specifically on the Roma and Sinti victim group, cf. Baumgartner, Freund, and Greifeneder (2004, 212–243) and Strutz (2011), with the latter, however, using an extremely narrow source base.

10 Thus, the general dissatisfaction with the course of compensation is a constant element in the memorial literature of Romani genocide survivors. Out of 35 memoirs of surviving Sinti published in Strauß (2000), 20 explicitly referred to their compensation procedure – without exception negatively.

their possibility to extricate themselves from the thicket of administrative procedures and actively influence the course of their compensation to their benefit was limited. Nonetheless, the institutional developments in the background encircling stricter bureaucratization affected the applicants' scope of action, and thus raise the question of how this scope of action can be assessed in concrete terms. To this end, the actions and forms of self-assertions that Roma articulated despite their sense of powerlessness will be uncovered here.

As already recognized by von dem Knesebeck (2011, 222), the sources do provide numerous examples of Roma who expressed a feeling of powerlessness, but at the same time responded by creating small niches of agency in the rigid system of bureaucratism. Roma made their voices heard through petitions, applications, demands, and accusations of all kinds (*Ibid.*, 51–71), and thus made themselves audible as individuals with independent thoughts, hopes, aims, and moving personal stories, which the homogenizing antigypsyist gaze denies (End 2015, 57).

This is by no means the first attempt to trace Romani agency in history. Although the efficacy of antigypsyism with its tradition of de-individualization intentionally has obscured the subjectivity of Roma, and even academic writing on Romani history has long failed to take into account their first-person perspective by mainly having “focused on analysing the policies towards them” (Rosenhaft and Sierra 2022, 1),<sup>[11]</sup> scholars from Critical Romani Studies and German antigypsyism research have made considerable effort to uncover these marginalized, hidden, and overheard voices. A recent example is an anthology edited by Eve Rosenhaft and Maria Sierra that seeks to break the ongoing exclusion of Roma by academia and present members of these groups as “insiders to European societies” (*Ibid.*). Namely, in the context of Nazi persecution, historians have struggled with issues of Romani agency,<sup>[12]</sup> asking how they can be “voiced”<sup>[13]</sup> or how they can be “acknowledged as subjects in a process that treated them universally as objects” (Rosenhaft 2010, 154). By engaging with the concepts of agency and voice (cf., for example, Woodcock 2007, 42), they position themselves within the theoretical tradition of postcolonial studies. Historians of antigypsyism already have demonstrated how fruitful can be the application of postcolonial theory due to similarities in the structures of “Othering” of those oppressed by colonialism as well as “Gypsies” (Robel 2015; cf. Meier 2018). Following theorist Robert J. C. Young, this article conceptualizes the postcolonial as a preoccupation with questions of how individuals' national or racial origin defines their place in society, human experiences that have

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11 This applies to the so-called “tsiganologist” research conducted by ethnologists, who, following the tradition of nineteenth-century “Gypsylorsm,” set out to find the “true” Gypsy (for example, Münzel and Streck 1981) and largely to certain parts of critical research in Germany that regressed into reducing the history of Sinti and Roma to a single sequence of discrimination, persecution, and annihilation (for example, Hohmann 1988; Schenk 1994).

12 Older studies tended to focus on a classical understanding of resistance to National Socialism, cf. very early and rich in material is the study by König (1989), which, however, occasionally lacks a source-critical approach. New studies, in contrast, work with more nuanced notions of nonconformity and self-assertion (cf. in addition to those mentioned in the text, Krokowski (2001, 75–89) regarding scope and autonomy of action in concentration camps).

13 This goal is also served by the section “Voices of the Victims” curated by historian Karola Fings at RomArchive, which presents a range of self-testimonies of Roma in the context of Nazi persecution. Available online: <https://www.romarchive.eu/en/voices-of-the-victims>.

hitherto been silenced, the resistances of oppressed groups against their invisibility, and a concern for the recovery of silenced voices (cf. Young 2009, 13 f.).

Therefore, it seems evident that the tools of postcolonial theory fit the study of a group that has been characterized as “Europe’s most hated” (Stender 2016, 2). Undoubtedly, Roma are subsumed under those subaltern minorities oppressed and marginalized by a dominant society. Rosenhaft put them as “subaltern ‘others’” (2010, 150). More concretely, Gerhard Baumgartner and Éva Kovács speak of an “internal colonialism” with regard to the modern “Gypsy” image and a colonialist view that assigned Roma the role of the “last savages of Europe” (Baumgartner and Kovács 2008, 52). In consequence, the question of how Roma can be “voiced” (Rosenhaft 2010, 154) can be answered in the same way that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, one of the founding mothers of postcolonialism, eventually answered her own question about whether subalterns can speak: they can indeed speak and they do, but – and this is where it often fails: one must listen to them (Chakravorty Spivak 1988).

This article is a plea to listen. Here, I present documents of courageous self-empowerment and self-assertion in a fundamentally asymmetrical power relationship between single applicants and officials entrusted with state authority. As such, this effort intends to be part of a common search for Romani voices in twentieth-century history (cf. Rosenhaft 2010; Joskowicz 2020; Donert and Rosenhaft 2021). Moreover, I will illustrate some of the opportunities that existed for Romani applicants to organize external support – from lawyers, family members, acquaintances, or later social organizations – to improve their chances for compensation payments. Thereby, I will also point out the ambivalent roles of these sometimes-feigned allies. As one important way of coalition building, some considerations will be made of the role of lawyers for Sinti and Roma, contributing to a broader research discussion on allyship and its significance to Romani history. Not only should the indispensability of the Society for Endangered Peoples in the recognition process of the civil rights movement of Sinti and Roma in Germany, as shown by Daniela Gress (2020), be mentioned here. The importance of non-Romani supporters like Otto Pankok, Franz Calvelli-Adorno, or Kurt May for the enforcement of claims and in the overall context of compensation itself is also emphasized (von dem Knesebeck 2011, 223; Lotto-Kusche 2022, 63). Finally, I will reflect on the notion of agency from postcolonial theory, by now accepted as a commonplace analytical tool, and consider the extent to which the voices discussed here were also expressions of agency.

Before doing so, I will delve further into the sources and place them within a rough typology of self-testimonies and other documents found in compensation files. I also will discuss the perils that arise from combining an intended empowering reading with a proper source-critical analysis.

Generally, the primary sources in this article are from single case files from the holdings of the State Compensation Offices in Freiburg and Tübingen that are stored in the State Archives of Freiburg and Sigmaringen. The cases presented here were selected from a corpus of nearly 360 compensation files on Sinti and Roma from the federal state Baden-Württemberg as part of my dissertation research. At this point, it must be emphasized that this case study does not claim to be absolute: it is only a regional study and the case files identified – despite their number – presumably are incongruent with the totality of all Sinti and Roma who survived Nazi persecution in this region, as an indeterminable number of individuals may not have applied for compensation (c.f. Frei, Brunner, and Goschler 2009, 28 f.). Whether this was due to a refusal to

relieve traumatic experiences in front of alien, possibly insensitive bureaucrats or due to a refusal to undergo a transformation from persecutee to applicant, which the compensation procedure entailed and which was perhaps seen as degrading, we can only hazard a guess. In any case, this act of refusal of the state's offer of compensation also contains a momentum of Romani individual expression of will which is unavailable in the primary sources of this article. The decisive factor for the selection of the exact twelve cases presented in the following text was that Romani actions and reactions to bureaucracy are not isolated but rather repeated when reading the files, so that the focus is on more or less common practices rather than on single actions.

## 1. Compensation Files as Historical Sources

Compensation files – here understood as individual case files produced by the regional compensation office for each respective applicant according to the *Bundesentschädigungsgesetz* (Federal Compensation Law)<sup>[14]</sup> – are a valuable source that can shed light on a variety of research questions. First, the files provide information on the matter of compensation itself. How an individual victim of Nazi injustice was compensated, whether their experience of persecution was recognized as entitling compensation payments in the sense of the law, how much money was paid out, and how the proceedings were conducted – all these questions can be clarified by examining the personal case file. Thinking of future research – against a background of comprehensive digitization projects<sup>[15]</sup> in archives and the increasing elimination of retention periods<sup>[16]</sup> – it will be possible to perform quantitative research on the practice of compensation and to make statements about the handling of entire collective groups of victims by German compensation bureaucracy, whereas until now compensation files have been used primarily for illustrative purposes (for example, Hesse 2021, 168–174) and for the reconstruction of individual fates of Nazi victims before and after 1945 (for example, Haumann 2016, 193–223).

This leads to the second topic that can be explored in the compensation files: the actual history of National Socialist persecution. Using the case of the Alsatian Sinti, the French historian Théophile Leroy has shown how fruitful the attempt can be to trace the social history of Roma during the interwar period as well as the persecution trajectories in the compensation files (Leroy 2023), for compensation offices often undertook extensive investigations to verify the legitimacy of an application. Here, *administrative cooperation*<sup>[17]</sup> enabled the gathering of documents and obtaining of information from other authorities, while applicants and witnesses who shared their fate were questioned and their statements about their

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14 Topic-related subject files and the personnel files of the staff were also created by the compensation offices. They were not used for this article.

15 The German Federal Ministry of Finance is working with other project partners to set up a “Thematic Portal on Reparations for National Socialist Injustice” to make the entire “document heritage of reparations files” digitally accessible. Available online: <https://www.archivportal-d.de/content/themenportale/wiedergutmachung/vorhaben>.

16 In most state archives laws, retention periods of around 100 years after birth apply to personal files. For the Baden-Württemberg state archive law, see:

<https://www.landesrecht-bw.de/jportal/?quelle=jlink&query=ArchivG+BW&psml=bsbawueprod.psml&max=true&aiz=true>.

17 *Amtshilfe*.

own individual paths of persecution were added to the files. In this way, early self-testimonies about the Romani genocide were created, hundreds of which remain in the archives unprocessed and unnoticed by historical scholarship on the Holocaust.

This article, however, focuses on another sort of hitherto unheard voice of the victims. Unlike testimonies on the past, which the applicants were compelled to give in the context of their legal duty to cooperate, these Sinti and Romani petitions, demands, and accusations commented on the ongoing compensation process and served the purpose of accelerating or otherwise influencing the outcome. These self-testimonies, which can be found scattered in the files – unlike the structurally alienated (cf. Jaskowicz 2020, 1212) minutes and affidavits – were written on the initiative of the authors themselves. They must be understood as unsolicited voices because they were not foreseen in the administrative procedure. Hence, they also speak more directly to readers, as they tend to come directly from the survivors’ pens and do not represent extraneous summaries by a notary, police, or compensation official (in some cases the claimants do appear to have had writing assistance from non-Roma). This does not mean, however, that these voices do not need to be treated with source criticism and explained in their context.

## 2. Methodological Reflections on Petitions in a Postcolonial Perspective

Just as the outdated search for the so-called “true Gypsy” that stands in the tradition of nineteenth-century “Gypsyism” (cf. Bogdal 2014, 242) is based on essentialist misconceptions, the petitions, requests, and complaints displayed here do not reveal any kind of “unadulterated voice” of Roma. As the Dutch historian Lex Heerma van Voss stated for the analysis of petitions in general, these documents require the “usual critical attitude towards argumentative historical sources” (2001, 9).

This appeal leads to a fundamental fact: the writing of petitions as “demands for a favor, or for the redressing of an injustice, directed to some established authority” (*Ibid.*, 1) is a “global phenomenon, stretching back in time almost as far as writing” (*Ibid.*, 2). Consequently, both the practice of petitioning as part of political culture and the petition as a specific source genre consistently have attracted the attention of historians (cf., for example, Boyens 1944; Heerma van Voss 2001; Wettengel 2022; Miller 2023). Thereby, it was precisely the middle and lower social classes that made frequent use of the right to petition (Heerma van Voss 2001, 10; Würzler 2001). Even colonial subjects in India uttered protest in this way (Swarnalatha 2001). If the petition was a means of making oneself heard even in fundamentally asymmetrical power relations such as colonialism, and of testing residual agency, it cannot be surprising that the victims of National Socialism also resorted to this method to respond to the pressure of persecution, to seek clemency, and to formulate objections to their treatment. For the Jewish victims, Isaiah Trunk pointed out this phenomenon more than 50 years ago in his seminal work on the Jewish Councils (cf. Trunk 1996, 388–394). Historians of Romani genocide have also noted a brisk petitioning as a desperate reaction to persecution (for Austria, Baumgartner and Brettl 2020, 281 f. cf. for Germany, Zimmermann 1996, 88, 91, 181 f. 339; Fings and Sparing 2005, 62 f. 102 f., 232 f. for Romania, Rose 2003, 187; Woodcock 2007). In more recent works, a detailed reappraisal also began of the petitions for

clemency and release that the relatives of deportees addressed en masse to the persecution authorities (cf. for Estonia, Weiss-Wendt 2023; for Germany, Meier 2024; for Romania, Matei 2024). In doing so, many of the persecuted Roma took up a practice of action that their ancestors already had adopted a century earlier, as a study by the Romanian historian Viorel Achim was able to show for Moldavian and Wallachian Roma in the period around their liberation from slavery in the mid-nineteenth century (cf. Woodcock 2007, 30–32; Achim 2016).

This historicizing insert refers to the fact that the petitions from the compensation files, which are at issue here, form part of a long tradition within Romani communities. At the time they pursued their compensation, German Sinti and Roma were marked by the fresh experience of sending petitions to state authorities. This is part of the larger contemporary historical context of these letters, and this revisits Heerma van Voss's plea for a critical reading of petitions, which is, of course, also applicable to the Romani petitions analyzed here. For this sort of personal material from compensation files, it must be recognized that it is confined to its legal and administrative context of origin. Von dem Knesebeck has shown how this influenced the content of these letters and ensured the omission of certain topics that were central for surviving Sinti and Roma after the war (cf. 2011, 222). Thus, even if it is possible to determine the actual appeals written by the Romani petitioner and to filter out foreign influences by writing assistants (cf. Heerma van Voss 2001, 8 f.), to understand the texts and its narrative strategies, it is necessary to consider the background and the concrete communicative situation (cf. Meier 2024, 2 f.). Otherwise, one would risk achieving the opposite goal and would step into the trap that Chakravorty Spivak warned about: if the voices of Roma are taken out of their genesis and presented in isolation without critical appreciation of their contexts in order to serve a particular narrative or thesis, the historical voices are deprived of their agency – even if this is done in the name of a historiography that wants to emphasize Romani agency (cf. Lindner 2011, 5). Historians have drawn attention to the fact that Voice and Agency may well diverge in Romani history. Ari Joskowicz has pointed out, for example, that the silence of many Roma after the war was often not so much imposed as a deliberate strategy of dealing with the past (Joskowicz 2020, 1210, 1217). Conversely, Eve Rosenhaft has shown that the speaking of Roma in oral history interviews has not always been an expression of free speech: the German recognition policy field of the 1980s produced an institutionalized Holocaust memory of Sinti that was fixated on certain aspects such as the “absolute [...] identity with the Shoa” and prevented individuals from speaking “openly to outsiders about the specifics and details of their experience” (Rosenhaft 2010, 153) and thus exerting voice.

Keeping these pitfalls in mind, the petitions from the compensation proceedings of German Sinti and Roma can provide valuable insights with regard to a Romani history inspired by postcolonial theory, as they can provide information about the ways in which Roma perceived their situation and the state administrative measures acting upon them – a perspective generally underrepresented in historiography (cf., for example, Rosenhaft 2010, 151, 154) – and are thus valuable sources of an experience history of compensation “from below.” At the same time, these documents provide evidence of Romani individuality and agency, as they show how Roma stood up for their cause on their own initiative, and thus counteract simplistic victim and object narratives of Romani history.

### 3. Unsolicited Romani Voices and Agency Strategies in Compensation Procedures

Out of an emotional state that vacillates between despair and courage, Bernhard Heinrich Pfisterer, a Sinto living in the Black Forest, created a prototype of a complaint to compensation offices. Even before the Office for Compensation in Rottweil<sup>[18]</sup> had decided on Pfisterer's application, he resorted to the ultimate threat of taking his own life if he did not receive help. "I am," he stated, "already being led by my nose for four years, and so far to no avail. No one can understand what a bitter life I live. Which I am not used to. Five years of torture with strokes and a broken leg, unable to work due to mistreatment, now helplessly abandoned" (Zimmermann 2009, 100). After the application was rejected in 1950 because of the assumption that he had not been persecuted for "racial" reasons (*Ibid.*), Pfisterer once again protested vigorously against his treatment: he complained that his statements had been discarded as "laughable."<sup>[19]</sup> But he will show "that I have spoken the truth to you. [...] The truth as it was." Finally, he went on to make a general accusation against what he saw as an aloof bureaucratic class: "You take it so easy when a person has lost his health, suffered under hard labor for five and a half years because you are a Gypsy. [...] We are not mass murderers! Like the Hitlerian party. We fight for truth and justice."<sup>[20]</sup> With this, Pfisterer even implied an intimacy between the staff of the compensation office and the National Socialist persecutors.<sup>[21]</sup> This shows how deep the mistrust of German state authorities ran after recent experiences of genocidal persecution. The perceived common front of German state representatives before and after 1945, characterized by continuity, was opposed by what Pfisterer conceived as "We" – the persecuted, surviving and now again discriminated Roma, whose fight for "truth and justice," thus for reappraisal, and the recognition and compensation that he invoked.

Indeed, this proclaimed fight was underway. Many Sinti and Roma drew attention to themselves through repeated inquiries and urged that their cases be processed more quickly. Some remained emphatically polite or imitated the pale officialese of their correspondence partners. This represents, so to speak, the standard case of a relatively modest way of Romani self-efficacy in the context of compensation proceedings. This approach, as diachronic comparison shows, also reflects the general appearance of petitions in history, which usually took humble and deferential forms, which could lead to an adoption of the jargon of the appealed instances (Heerma van Voss 2001, 2 f.). Sinto Johann Reinhardt from Kempten in Allgäu, for example, turned

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18 *Amt für Wiedergutmachung Rottweil*.

19 Letter from Heinrich Pfisterer to the *Amt für Wiedergutmachung Rottweil*, 18 February 1951, in: Staatsarchiv Sigmaringen Wü 33 T 1 No. 2568, Heinrich Pfisterer, fol. 114.

20 *Ibid.*, fol. 113.

21 The question raised by Pfisterer here in the mode of accusation about the degree of infiltration of the compensation authorities with former NSDAP members and old Nazi cadres hardly has been pursued by historical research so far. Initial data indicate that from the early 1950s onward, former party members could be hired in a few instances. At the same time, however, former persecutees were also employed in the compensation offices, often in leading positions. For most of those employed in the compensation administration, neither the one nor the other applied (cf. Volmer-Naumann 2009, 569).

to the Office for Property Control and Reparations<sup>[22]</sup> – later the State Office for Compensation Freiburg.<sup>[23]</sup> The anger speaking from Pfisterer’s letter is a feeling that he apparently could suppress at first. “I politely ask the Compensation Office to [...] inform me immediately how things stand with my compensation, because all these people who were in the same situation with me have already received a partial payment.” Although he showed a less offensive tact toward compensation officials, he also took his fate into his own hands after the processing of his application seemed to take too long. After an ostensibly polite opening, Reinhardt then made his dissatisfaction unmistakable: “I believe that the law must not make any exceptions. I have lost my wife and a son. I myself am ill. I have not received anything to this day.”<sup>[24]</sup> When Reinhardt received no reply to this letter for more than half a year, he repeated his concern in March 1953. Now, however, he concluded with a poorly veiled threat of escalation: “I believe that you [...] will settle this matter without further ado. Otherwise, I would unfortunately see myself forced to go on to a higher authority.”<sup>[25]</sup> Reinhardt thus performed a rapid strategy change from a more restrained approach.

This threat was not uncommon among Sinti and Roma,<sup>[26]</sup> and occasionally it was carried out. In November 1960, Arthur Trollmann received mail from the Ministry of Justice of Baden-Württemberg, to which a previous letter from Trollmann to the Federal Chancellery had been forwarded for reasons of competence. To be sure, the Ministry of Justice did nothing more than repeat the reasoning of the negative report of the subordinate State Office for Compensation Karlsruhe.<sup>[27]</sup> But Trollmann’s initiative does mark a remarkable self-confidence. After all, Trollmann was an Auschwitz survivor who, 15 years after his liberation, had not yet received any recognition as a persecutee of National Socialism worthy of compensation. Instead, he had served three prison sentences for minor offenses in the same time span.<sup>[28]</sup> He would have had every reason to lose faith in the capability of a German state exercising justice. Still, Trollmann did not despair and continued to hope that the letter to Adenauer’s office might solve his problem. And, as if that were not enough, eight years later he even used the same technique again. After years of writing letters to the compensation authorities had not led to them agreeing with his standpoint, which Trollmann strikingly described as “the law must remain the law,”<sup>[29]</sup> he asked Chancellor Kiesinger in January 1968 “to help me settle my case,” because he had been “trying for so long and was only ever put off.”<sup>[30]</sup>

22 Dienststelle für Vermögenskontrolle und Wiedergutmachung.

23 Landesamt für die Wiedergutmachung Freiburg.

24 Petition of Johann Reinhardt to the *Landesamt für Vermögenskontrolle und Wiedergutmachung Freiburg*, 20 August 1952, in: Staatsarchiv Freiburg F 196/1 No. 2807, Johann Reinhardt, fol. 97.

25 Johann Reinhardt to the *Landesamt für die Wiedergutmachung Freiburg*, 17 February 1953, in: *Ibid.*, fol. 113 revers.

26 Bernhard Birkenfelder from Emmendingen threatened the State Office for Compensation Freiburg in December 1954 to appeal to the Ministry of the Interior of Baden-Württemberg, and again in March 1955 to the Federal Constitutional Court, cf. Staatsarchiv Freiburg F 196/1 No. 2945, Veronika Geschwind, fol. 259, 263.

27 *Landesamt für die Wiedergutmachung Karlsruhe*; Ministry of Justice of Baden-Württemberg to Arthur Trollmann, 19 November 1960, in: Staatsarchiv Freiburg F 196/1 No. 5846 Arthur Trollmann, fol. 171.

28 Information from the criminal records of the Braunschweig public prosecutor’s office, 10 September 1958, in: *Ibid.*, fol. 77.

29 Arthur Trollmann to the *Landesamt für die Wiedergutmachung Karlsruhe*, 28 May 1966, in: *Ibid.*, unpag.

30 Arthur Trollmann to Chancellor Kiesinger, 29 January 1968, in: *Ibid.*, fol. 289. Kurt Georg Kiesinger was the third Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany from 1966 to 1969.

Sintezzas and Romani women also contributed their clear and urgent appeals in the correspondence to the clerks. Perhaps the female applicants at large were less threatening and more subtle in their approach. But this does not mean that they did not also find reproachful formulations at times. Take the case of Elvira Bühler, mother of 17-year-old Anton Reinhardt who was executed at the end of March 1945 in a typical *Endphaseverbrechen* (final phase crime) by Wehrmacht and SS officers (Herden 2012). In one of her many letters to the authorities, Bühler bluntly expressed her plight: “I have submitted the papers properly and yet I am only put off from one month to the next. I am now old and sick and without income, because I need the money now for my last years. If I must bite the dust then I won’t need it anymore.”<sup>[31]</sup> With that, she listed the problems that arose from the often extraordinarily long processing times for older persons. Also worth mentioning is the case of Rosa Winter as she showed admirable endurance with the grindstone of administration. Between 1957 and 1977, she made repeated personal contact with the Compensation Office. Even when, in the mid-1970s, a rethink took place and the office informed Winter that it was ready to pay out a lump-sum of 6,000 German marks, the Sintezza was unable to switch from the hostile mode that had been forced upon her and had by now become a habit. She likely expected only bad things from the authorities that stalled and disappointed her for decades. In the granting of the Emergency Aid for Repatriates<sup>[32]</sup> to the maximum amount of 6,000 German marks, which annulled an already legally valid conclusion of the proceedings as a gesture of goodwill,<sup>[33]</sup> she sensed another move by the authority to put her at a disadvantage. Irreconcilable, she explained that she did “not agree that I am only entitled to 6,000 DM for all that time.”<sup>[34]</sup> Her position, beyond the legal point of view, certainly is morally convincing.

Rosa Winter, like Elvira Bühler, must have had help with her correspondence with the authorities. Both stated that they were unable to read and write because of the persecution that occurred during their school years.<sup>[35]</sup> It is nearly impossible to determine whether the actual writer was dictated to or also influenced the contents and formulations. It would be reasonable to assume that an illiterate person at least sought some advice on phrasing matters. Beyond widespread writing assistance by family, friends, or acquaintances, there were more opportunities for Roma to get their claims supported by others. To substantiate a damage to education, the Sintezza Paula Reinhardt, among others, countered the antigypsyist authorities’ skepticism about the basic proficiency for academic success by having her former teacher assure<sup>[36]</sup> that she once had been a promising student.<sup>[36]</sup> The same woman organized help from a local Caritas worker, who assured that “not only migrating Gypsies were persecuted by National Socialism, but also longtime resident and good middle-class families were suddenly marked as Gypsies

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31 Elvira Bühler to the *Landesamt für die Wiedergutmachung Freiburg*, 11 October 1958, in: Staatsarchiv Freiburg F 196/1 No. 11111 Anton Reinhardt, fol. 39.

32 *Soforthilfe für Rückwanderer*.

33 *Landesamt für die Wiedergutmachung Baden-Württemberg* to Rosa Winter, 17 May 1977, in: Staatsarchiv Freiburg F 196/1 No. 1741, Rosa Winter, unpag.

34 Rosa Winter to the *Landesamt für die Wiedergutmachung Baden-Württemberg*, n.d., in: *Ibid.*, fol. 456.

35 Rosa Winter to the *Landesamt für die Wiedergutmachung Freiburg*, 5.3.1957, in: *Ibid.*, fol. 59.

36 Retired teacher Frieda Schumann (illegible) to the *Landesamt für die Wiedergutmachung Freiburg*, 8 October 1955, in: Staatsarchiv Freiburg F 196/1 No. 2591 Paula Reinhardt, fol. 72.

by the National Socialist Regime.”<sup>[37]</sup> Others, like Veronika Birkenfelder, mobilized former employers who vouched for their upright character to prove that the applicants’ detention had to be the result of “racial” policies.<sup>[38]</sup> This signals that at least some Roma were involved in social networks beyond their own community, and that in emergency situations they had support from the majority society who were willing to stand up for them. These relationships and social contacts put into perspective the idea that Germany’s Sinti and Roma lived largely in isolation and formed a parallel society until the emancipation movement evolved (cf. Meier 2024, 9). In the case of several Sintezzas, fathers or husbands appeared in the offices, insisting on payments.<sup>[39]</sup> In most of these cases, it is unclear and impossible to decide from the sources whether the interests of the men coincided with those of the daughters and wives for whom they spoke. Especially when the assignment of claims to male relatives was declared,<sup>[40]</sup> there is the strong possibility that these females had to contend with patriarchal family structures on top of their struggle for compensation.

Paternalistic tendencies among supposed or actual advocates of Sinti and Roma also can be observed much later. The civil society association *Nachbarschaftswerk Freiburg e.V.*, which in its own terms “takes care of the social fringe groups on the western edge of Freiburg,”<sup>[41]</sup> in 1976 asked the Compensation Office, which had recently awarded the Sinto Albert Wagner a sum of 12,000 German marks, “to examine whether the amount could be paid to him on a monthly pension basis.” This way, they said, the money could be used “for the longer-term improvement of his living conditions.” However, the client should be explicitly bypassed in this process: “We ask, however, not to mention [...] that this proposal comes from us, as otherwise our good relationship with Mr. Wagner would be jeopardized.”<sup>[42]</sup> This statement reflects a “philogypsyist” attitude typical of the 1970s when large sections of social work, social science, and social policymakers reproduced and codified notions of alterity with the intention of helping the “Gypsies” (cf. Stender 2016, 10–21).

A similar problem exists with an important and widespread strategy for coalition building in the struggle for compensation: the engagement of legal representatives. In principle, it should be noted that – as first evaluations have pointed out – the advocacy services of a lawyer were a huge advantage.<sup>[43]</sup> Nevertheless,

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37 *Deutscher Caritasverband e.V. – Verfolgtenfürsorge* to the Öffentlicher Anwalt beim Amtsgericht Freiburg, 1 September 1955, in: *Ibid.*, fol. 68.

38 Affidavit of Gertrud Krautschneider (illegible) to the *Dienststelle für Vermögenskontrolle und Wiedergutmachung Lörrach*, 1 March 1952, in: Staatsarchiv Freiburg F 196/1 No. 2945 Veronika Geschwind, fol. 115.

39 *Landesamt für die Wiedergutmachung Freiburg*, file note, 27 April 1954, in: Staatsarchiv Freiburg F 196/1 No. 2841 Johanna Patay, fol. 87.

40 Bernard Birkenfelder to the Chairman of the *Wiedergutmachungsausschuss beim Badischen Amtsgericht*, 9 January 1952, in: *Ibid.*, fol. 95a.

41 *Nachbarschaftswerk Freiburg e.V.* to the *Landesamt für die Wiedergutmachung Baden-Württemberg*, 14 September 1975, in: Staatsarchiv Freiburg F 196/1 No. 8064 Albert Wagner, unpaginated.

42 *Nachbarschaftswerk Freiburg e.V.* to the *Landesamt für die Wiedergutmachung Baden-Württemberg*, 6 September 1976, in: *Ibid.*, fol. 392.

43 This fits with the initial findings on the impact of lawyers in compensation proceedings for non-Roma victims (cf. Winstel 2009, 552 f.).

a closer inspection of the individual cases reveals that their work was not always beneficial. The spectrum ranged from dedicated fighters for the just cause of their clients to representatives who believed that they could earn an easy paycheck from clueless Sinti and Roma and only had to do the most necessary work in return.<sup>[44]</sup>

After the adoption of the Final Federal Compensation Act (BEG-Final Act)<sup>[45]</sup> in 1965, and the resulting improvements for Romani survivors,<sup>[46]</sup> numerous rejected applications were re-filed. The Compensation Offices, in consequence, were overwhelmed as many lawyers tried to speed up the process for their clients by pestering officials with constant streams of letters. In 1966/67, the Cologne law practice of Dr. Stoffel and Dr. Latz appealed almost monthly for the Compensation Office to decide on Maria Reinhardt's case. Increasingly indignant formulations – “We are of the opinion that now, in view of the simple facts, a decision on the matter can be made”;<sup>[47]</sup> “[t]o this day, you have not made a decision on this request despite repeated reminders”;<sup>[48]</sup> “[i]n the matter described above, we have heard nothing from you since 24.2.1966. Our various letters remained unanswered”;<sup>[49]</sup> “we have to note with consternation that no decision has yet been made on our application”;<sup>[50]</sup> or “it is incomprehensible to us that no decision has yet been made”<sup>[51]</sup> – suggest that these lawyers were ready to stir up trouble to achieve the best outcomes for Romani clients. In numerous individual cases, lawyers challenged the settlements reached in previous years and negotiated higher amounts of compensation because they realized that these settlements had taken advantage of their clients.<sup>[52]</sup>

Many a lawyer has also overshot the mark, even with the best of intentions. For instance, a lawyer from same Cologne firm, who could not be identified by name,<sup>[53]</sup> allegedly influenced a distant relative of his

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44 Which, in reverse, corresponds to the contemporary mockery of the legal profession as the actual beneficiary of *Wiedergutmachung* (cf. Hockerts 1989, 250).

45 *Zweites Gesetz zur Änderung des Bundesentschädigungsgesetzes (BEG-Schlußgesetz)*.

46 BEG-SG, Article IV, Paragraph 1 (2), in: *Bundesgesetzblatt*, Vol. 1965, Part 1, 1335.

47 Dr. iur. Michael Stoffel/ Dr. iur. Hans Latz to the *Landesamt für die Wiedergutmachung Karlsruhe*, 3 October 1966, in: Staatsarchiv Freiburg F 196/1 No. 1009 Maria Reinhardt, fol. 151.

48 Dr. iur. Michael Stoffel/ Dr. iur. Hans Latz to the *Landesamt für die Wiedergutmachung Karlsruhe*, 7 October 1966, in: *Ibid.*, fol. 153.

49 Dr. iur. Michael Stoffel/ Dr. iur. Hans Latz to the *Landesamt für die Wiedergutmachung Karlsruhe*, 2 December 1966, in: *Ibid.*, fol. 155.

50 Dr. iur. Michael Stoffel/ Dr. iur. Hans Latz to the *Landesamt für die Wiedergutmachung Karlsruhe*, 11 January 1967, in: *Ibid.*, fol. 157.

51 Dr. iur. Michael Stoffel/ Dr. iur. Hans Latz/ Axel Jurna to the *Landesamt für die Wiedergutmachung Karlsruhe*, 17 June 1967, in: *Ibid.*, fol. 161.

52 Cf. e.g. Staatsarchiv Freiburg F 196/1 No. 3567 Oskar Birkenfelder, fol. 97 ff.; *Ibid.*, No. 7147 Adolf Reinhardt, fol. 53 ff.; *Ibid.*, No. 7144 Christian Reinhardt, fol. 35 ff.; *Ibid.*, No. 1594 Laurentius Spindler, fol. 157 ff.

53 *Oberlandesgericht Karlsruhe*, 12. *Zivilsenat* to the Senior Public Prosecutor at the Cologne Higher Regional Court, 27 March 1969, in: Staatsarchiv Freiburg F 196/1 No. 1447 Anton Reinhardt, fol. 109: “Which attorney is responsible cannot be judged from here due to the illegibility of the signatures in the individual pleadings.”

client, who had been called to the Compensation Senate of the Higher District Court Karlsruhe<sup>[54]</sup> as a witness. The lawyer, in coaching the witness, had asked him to call into question whether “I had not been mistaken in my earlier statement [...] and had held out the prospect that I would then also have a chance” with his own application.<sup>[55]</sup> Beyond any unrecorded personal consequences,<sup>[56]</sup> this example of legal counsel did more harm than good for his client with his clumsy witness tampering that was exposed in court.

While the intention might have been altruistic here, lawyers for Sinti and Roma played a dubious role in other cases. In 1966, under the new provisions of the BEG-Final Act, the lawyer Fritz Hlavka from Karlsruhe wanted to challenge a 1963 court settlement, which had awarded his client a pittance. However, Hlavka did little more than pen a letter with the content: “With reference to my power of attorney, I hereby register claims under the BEG-Final Act.”<sup>[57]</sup> Some five years later, long since the deadline for new applications had expired, he bothered to ask for an update. Hlavka then was instructed by the Compensation Office in 1971 that such an unspecific letter could not be seen as a proper challenge to a settlement, with the sharp remark, “You as a lawyer [...] will also have been aware of.”<sup>[58]</sup> Due to his lawyer’s inaction, Emil Reinhardt could not be compensated for the sum of 7,500 German marks, and only one and a half years later was the needy applicant granted 2,500 German marks from funds of the Hardship Allowance.<sup>[59]</sup>

Such mistakes are all the more dramatic when one considers that hiring a lawyer may have been risky for Sinti and Roma who often lived on the breadline as a consequence of their persecution. A letter written by Maria Kobi in 1971 to the Compensation Office reminds us so. She explains why she turned to the authorities personally instead of her former legal representative: “Unfortunately, I was not quite in a position to continue financing the matter, because I needed the money for my children and to live again, and you will probably know yourself what a lawyer demands in the long run.”<sup>[60]</sup>

Kobi herself had no luck either, when she, despite the high costs, hired another lawyer a short time later. After the Ravensburg lawyer Peter Graf Prashma presented a power of attorney and asked to take an earlier letter by Kobi as a formal application for Hardship Allowance, the Compensation Office informed

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54 *Wiedergutmachungssenat des Oberlandesgerichts Karlsruhe*.

55 *Oberlandesgericht Karlsruhe, 12. Zivilsenat*: Attachment to the minutes of 20 December 1968, p. 3, in: *Ibid.*, fol. 88.

56 In the compensation file, the documentation breaks off with the handover of the case from Karlsruhe to the Cologne Higher Regional Court, see: *Oberlandesgericht Karlsruhe, 12. Zivilsenat* to the Senior Public Prosecutor at the Cologne Higher Regional Court, 27 March 1969, in: *Ibid.*, fol. 109.

57 *Landesamt für die Wiedergutmachung Baden-Württemberg* to Fritz Hlavka, Reasons for the decision of 25 May 1971, p. 2, in: Staatsarchiv Freiburg F 196/1 No. 302 Emil Reinhardt, fol. 107.

58 Letter to lawyer Fritz Hlavka, 5 May 1971, in: *Ibid.*, fol. 102.

59 Letter to lawyer Fritz Hlavka, 27 November 1971, in: *Ibid.*, fol. 125.

60 Maria Kobi to the *Landesamt für die Wiedergutmachung Baden-Württemberg*, 21 May 1971, in: Staatsarchiv Freiburg F 196/1 No. 1743 Maria Kobi, fol. 90.

him that his “way of working now astonishes us somewhat.” Contrary to the guidelines, the lawyer waived the submission of all the necessary certificates and evidence. An odd constellation emerged where, instead of a lawyer soliciting empathy for an applicant, the competent official expressed their concern about an applicant’s disadvantage at the hands of a tardy lawyer, to whom he advised “that you provide the necessary information and obtain medical certificates as soon as possible. We would not like to have to issue a refusal due to a lack of cooperation.”<sup>[61]</sup>

Despite the adversity of unprofessional legal representation, Sinti and Roma mustered the courage to act. Anita Wagner, for example, also faced the fate of an unmotivated lawyer. Unlike Kobi, however, Wagner actively pushed her lawyer to act. In June 1968, a visibly annoyed attorney Richard Pallmert asked the Compensation Office in a plaintive tone for information on “when a decision [...] can be expected, so that I can inform the applicant [...] in response to her constant inquiries.”<sup>[62]</sup>

Maria Kobi, in turn, later tried on her own to achieve improvements in her case. Her last attempt to obtain further compensation for physical damage in 1986 failed because she already was receiving the same benefits from the Hardship Allowance that she would have been entitled to if she had filed an application in due time in the legal procedure. Despite the hopelessness of her case, which was legally unquestionable, Kobi can be credited with having a sense of inappropriate German official terminology, when she uttered her irritation at the term “aid.” “You always speak of aiding and abetting. Why? I hereby apply once again for compensation for bodily injury and damage to health as well as a pension (not aid!)”<sup>[63]</sup> Legally, it was correct to speak of aid, since Kobi’s pension was granted as a gesture of goodwill. Still for those affected it was disastrous, because it made them feel patronized. Kobi did not accept the message though that she could be thankful to receive some charity. Instead, she insisted on the compensation to which she was legally entitled as a Nazi persecutee.

## Conclusion

A new chapter of Sinti and Roma self-assertion in its relationship with the majority opened in Germany in the mid-1980s. With the formation of the civil rights movement and its breakthrough to political recognition, Sinti and Roma organized around their collective concerns and rights (cf. Gress 2021; Gress 2022; Lotto-Kusche 2022). This article stresses that this breakthrough in Romani collective action in Germany has its roots in individual action dating to the early postwar period, if not earlier.<sup>[64]</sup> What an irony that the compensation files, which at first glance only document and reproduce the objectifying

61 Letter to the lawyer Peter Graf Praschma, 31 August 1971, in: *Ibid.*, fol. 107.

62 Lawyer Richard Pallmert to the *Landesamt für die Wiedergutmachung Baden-Württemberg – Außenstelle Karlsruhe*, 26 June 1968, in: Staatsarchiv Freiburg F 196/1 No. 2116 Anita Wagner, fol. 299.

63 Maria Kobi to the *Landesamt für die Wiedergutmachung Baden-Württemberg*, 3 April 1986, in: Staatsarchiv Freiburg F 196/1 No. 1743 Maria Kobi, fol. 291.

64 It should not be concealed that there have also been recurring attempts at collective action and the formation of influential and persistent self-organizations by Sinti and Roma since the late 1940s, but all of them have failed to achieve sustained success (see Hancock 2021, 237–243; Gress 2022, 440–445).

perspective of state organizations, now help to bring to light the hidden unsolicited voices of pioneers of Romani self-empowerment. In the sources here, there is no doubt that Roma made their voices heard. They had courage to present their views on the deficits of the compensation process. Often, they vented their anger. Less clear is the question of whether these voices are also an expression of agency. After all, agency and voice do not necessarily coincide in Romani history (Rosenhaft 2010, 153; Joskowicz 2020, 1210, 1217). The question thus depends on how the concept of agency is defined, which often remains vague in historical scholarship, and of which different concepts circulate, even in the generally more theory-affine social sciences (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 963). Martin Hewson lists three conditions of agency: intentionality, power, and rationality (2010). Philosopher David Weissmann ties agency to autonomy, and autonomy in turn requires “power, opportunities, partners, and a voice” (2020, 10). In more detail he states: agency “signifies purpose, cause, and appraisal in agents who control circumstances and themselves to some degree. Fire and wind are also controlling, but their actions lack intention, inhibition, and credit or blame. Agency implies those qualifiers.” (Weissmann 2020, 11). Did the various Romani claimants find all this in the described communicative situations? This is certainly open to interpretation. Regardless, Romani applicants regularly uttered a voice, and they had a clear intention (or purpose) of increasing their chances of receiving compensation payments. In some cases, Roma are seen to have consciously concealed (inhibited) their inner feelings, which adds on their degree of agency since it shows a rational consideration. In the context of compensation proceedings, Roma had voice, they acted intentionally, even strategically, thus rationally. They made distinct their very own appraisals of the events that were happening around and affecting them. But have they been powerful, too? Have Romani applicants for compensation been in control of circumstances and themselves? Have they been autonomous? This may be partly the case. With their petitions, Sinti and Roma rather reacted to the official behavior than acted autonomously. But to determine the power that they had in the administrative process, it would be crucial to know the consequences of their unsolicited interventions. However, fathoming the concrete impact of unheard Romani voices showcased here and whether it impacted ongoing compensation procedures at the time must be reserved for further research and cannot be accomplished here. This investigation has shown that during compensation proceedings – understood as a clash of extremely unequal actors – Sinti and Roma worked in a remarkable way to improve their position of power which they acknowledged as precarious from the start.

Finally, one aspect of agency should be highlighted in particular: the importance of “partners” mentioned by Weissmann. Sinti and Roma writing these petitions have been aware of the advantage that such partners meant and thus tried to mobilize existing allies from outside the Romani community or to find new ones. This observation reinforces recent findings on the importance of allies in enforcing change and improvement in Romani individual and collective struggles for equality (cf. Gress 2020; Lotto-Kusche 2022). In this respect, they are a plea for a stronger examination of the entanglements between majority and minority in Romani history, because Roma always have been part of society. Thus, Romani history should not be pursued as an exotic niche subject, but it is part of general history, namely the history of democracy, equality, and human rights. Admittedly, the involvement of certain supporters, namely lawyers, could be a double-edged sword for Sinti and Roma. Some genuinely were uninterested in helping marginalized clients obtain justice in the face of overwhelming state power, and they sensed an opportunity to obtain easy money at the expense of their clients’ perceived weaknesses. A worthwhile target of future research would be to illuminate how exactly the triangle among Romani survivors of genocide, their multiple advocates, and compensation offices was shaped.

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# Decontextualizing a Ban on Begging: A Multimodal Critical Analysis of Media and Political Discourse in Sweden

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## Abstract

This article examines the representation of Romani migrants in the context of the 2016 debates to ban begging in Sweden, highlighting the ways in which media and political discourse misrepresented, simplified, or omitted the complexities surrounding this controversial policy. Drawing on Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) of media reports from two leading Swedish newspapers, this article reveals that media and political discourse often decontextualize the ban by employing three key strategies: (1) generalization and polarization, (2) victimizing the general public, and (3) concealing the historical and global context of marginalization and poverty. By portraying begging as an undignified and harmful practice, media and political discourse deflect attention away from the systemic inequalities and socio-economic conditions that lead to begging. This article argues that this decontextualization serves to legitimize and reinforce the ban on begging, creating a self-perpetuating cycle that obstructs meaningful dialogue and prevents the implementation of more effective and compassionate policy solutions that address the root causes of begging in Sweden.

## Keywords

- Anti-Romani racism
- Ban on begging
- Colourblind racism
- Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA)
- Romaphobia
- Swedish media

## Introduction

Roma, an ethnic minority group with origins across Europe, have faced a long history of persecution and discrimination on the continent (Hancock 2002; McGarry 2017). Since their arrival in Europe over 600 years ago, Roma have been portrayed through harmful stereotypes that persist today (Clark 2004; Liégeois 2007). European media frequently has represented Roma as exotic outsiders, depicting them as primitive, unclean, and inclined toward criminal behaviour (End 2017; Breazu 2020). Common stereotypes have included portrayals of Roma as nomads, unable or unwilling to settle into mainstream society, as beggars or involved in petty theft (Breazu and McGarry 2023; Hansson 2023). These harmful narratives have served to marginalize Roma, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and social exclusion. EU reports have documented that, as of today, Roma continue to be the poorest and most marginalized ethnic group in Europe, with 80 per cent of Roma being at poverty risk compared to the EU average of 17 per cent (FRA 2020). These socio-economic inequalities are absent or infrequently articulated in contemporary media and political discourse, which often acquaint the public with a Romani community that is reluctant to progress and resistant to social inclusion (Breazu and Machin 2022).

Research on the representation of Roma in the Swedish media is sparse. In mainstream media and political discourse, Roma are predominantly represented in association with begging and as undesirable EU citizens (Svan 2019; Arasu 2022; Breazu and Machin 2024). Studies on social media have found that Roma often face hate speech and discrimination (Enarsson and Lindgren 2019). Mostowska (2021) reveals that, despite Sweden's egalitarian self-image, Romani migrants are frequently depicted as inferior, passive, vulnerable, and undeserving citizens, which justifies dismissive policy attitudes. These well-trodden discourses also have contributed to their misrepresentation in public policy, which often displays a recurrent narrative: Roma as isolated, deprived, and in dire need of education (Vesterberg 2016). Mulinari and Neergaard (2017) interpreted these persistent negative stereotypes as institutional racism, which exacerbates the stigmatization and marginalization of Roma communities.

This article focuses on Sweden's media, examining how two influential Swedish newspapers construct the discourse around the 2016 controversial ban, which sought to criminalize begging and targeted Romani migrants living in Sweden. Drawing on MCDA, it shows how Romani migrants are represented in relation to this controversial proposal and reveals the discursive strategies used in Swedish media to camouflage the systemic inequalities and socio-economic conditions that lead to begging.

Sweden has long been considered to have progressive legislation to safeguard the human rights of immigrants and ethnic minorities. However, the arrival of Eastern European Romani migrants, especially Romani beggars, following the accession of Bulgaria and Romania to the European Union in 2007, was met with resistance from both politicians and the general public (Wigerfelt and Wigerfelt 2015; Hansson 2023). Some of these migrants struggled to secure stable employment and housing and, at times, resorted to begging or busking for income while residing in improvised settlements (Barker 2017; Hansson and Mitchel 2018). The widespread visibility of Romani beggars throughout Sweden rapidly sparked significant debates and led to considerable frustration among the Swedish public, who largely perceived it as an unSwedish phenomenon (Hansson 2023).

The 2015 European refugee crisis, when large numbers of asylum seekers from the Middle East and North Africa sought safety and better living conditions in Europe, triggered a new wave of xenophobia and anti-immigration sentiments across the continent (Ekman 2019; Hagelund 2020). Research has shown that these anti-immigration sentiments have also extended to other groups, such as Roma, Eastern Europeans, or Muslims (Brljavac 2017; Breazu and McGarry 2023). Populist politicians and far-right political parties have exploited these fears, often promoting explicit racist and xenophobic agendas. They used the refugee crisis and the situation of Romani migrants as opportunities to advocate anti-immigrant measures (Persdotter 2019; Teodorescu and Molina 2021). In Sweden, the Sweden Democrats (SD),<sup>[1]</sup> capitalized on people's fears and concerns, and were able to gain significant support in Swedish general elections (Rydgren and Van der Meiden 2019). SD campaigned against the presence of Roma in the country, attributing increased crime rates and social problems to Roma (Bolton 2015). During this period, Romani migrants in Sweden experienced violent attacks by extreme right-wing groups and were vilified by right-wing populist rhetoric. They were often blamed for disturbing social order, posing threats to public security, or causing economic insecurity (Djuve et al. 2015; Ciulinaru 2017; Persdotter 2019).

This article examines how debates on banning begging in Sweden have been framed by different political actors with various political views. It highlights the nature of anti-Romani racism in two leading Swedish newspapers (*Expressen* and *Svenska Dagbladet*), especially during the 2016 debates on the begging ban, one year after the European refugee crisis and before Swedish elections.

## 1. Racism in Sweden: From Scientific to Colourblind Racism

Sweden has an international image as a humanitarian, progressive, and liberal state that is regarded as having the best integration policies and anti-discrimination legislation in the West (Hübinette and Lundström 2014). Despite this, statistics show that many immigrants, especially those with a non-Western background, live in the poorest and most vulnerable neighbourhoods, are being discriminated against in the job markets, and are at greater risk of experiencing racism (Carlsson 2010; Hübinette et al 2012).

Sweden's contemporary racism problem has been cultivated for a long time, which is evident in its history of slave trading, colonialism, and scientific racism (Hübinette et al. 2012; Antoine 2022). These parts of Swedish history have received little visibility in public discourse, whether nationally or internationally, and are in stark contrast to Sweden's global reputation as a champion of human rights (Antoine 2022). In 1922, Sweden established the State Institute for Racial Biology (*Statens Institut för rasbiologi*) which was the first government research centre dedicated to race science (Broberg and Tydén 1991; Hübinette et al. 2012). The Institute, which emerged from a collective decision by all political parties in parliament, promoted Nordic race supremacy. Some of its aims were to collect data

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<sup>1</sup> The party's origins are in a white nationalist and neo-Nazi movement, but in the early 2000s, the party underwent a transformation to become more politically mainstream.

on ancestry, social status, and phenotypical traits, especially from races of non-Germanic origin, such as Roma, Tornedalians, and Sámi, which were regarded as inferior (Kotljarchuk 2020; Antoine 2022).

Despite Sweden's significant involvement in the historical development of eugenics in Europe, the concept of 'race' has become largely invisible in contemporary Swedish public discourse (Hübinette 2013; Mulinari and Neergaard 2017). In fact, since 1996, the Swedish government has attempted to remove the term 'race' from all official documents, making discussions of 'racial discrimination' more challenging (Atak 2022; Osanami Törngren 2022). Instead, in 2001, the term 'ethnic discrimination' was introduced, referring to various forms of injustice that do not seem to be based on an individual's biological race. In Sweden, there is a prevailing assumption that human rights are upheld for everyone, and that the legal structures in place prevent racism from manifesting, rendering 'race' an irrelevant concept for examining discrimination or social inequalities (Mulinari and Neergaard 2017). By disregarding the category of race, a 'discourse of sameness' is created in which distinctions between black, brown, or white people are erased. As Antoine (2022) argues, this approach serves as a strategic method for dismissing racism and concealing white privilege.

In contemporary Swedish public discourse, race is often approached from a colour-blind perspective (Mulinari and Neergaard 2017; Breazu and Machin 2024), suggesting that race is not a significant factor in discussing socio-economic inequalities or discrimination (Bonilla-Silva 2013). This reluctance to engage in discussions about race has made it increasingly challenging to address pressing social issues related to systemic racism, segregation, and discrimination in Sweden (Hübinette et al. 2012; Krifors 2022). Scholars argue that despite being portrayed as a model of tolerance in the West, colour-blind racism persists in Swedish society. Colour-blind racism manifests through the myth of Swedish exceptionalism, which refers to Sweden's self-perception as an egalitarian, inclusive, and morally superior society (Hübinette and Lundström 2014). In reality, 'race' does matter in contemporary Sweden (Wigerfelt et al. 2014) and being classified as 'white' or 'non-white' largely defines one's socio-economic success and well-being. Krifors (2022) underlines that whiteness is a crucial element in the critical examination of racism and anti-racism in Sweden, and the exclusion of 'non-whites' results from racial hierarchical thinking and institutional racism (Hällgren 2005; Carlsson 2010).

The in-depth MCDA analysis is instrumental in revealing how colour-blind racism operates subtly in Sweden's media and political discourse. The focus on the 2016 debates on criminalizing begging is important for various reasons. This period, following the 2015 European refugee crisis, was marked by a significant escalation in anti-immigrant sentiments in Sweden, affecting refugees as well as Muslims, Roma, and Eastern European migrants (Ekman 2019; Wernesjö 2020). Furthermore, 2016 stands out due to the heightened public debate regarding the criminalization of begging in Sweden (Barker 2017), a discourse that gained momentum in the lead up to the 2017 Swedish elections.

## 2. A Ban on Begging in Sweden

In Sweden, begging is not prohibited by law; rather, it is viewed as a form of free expression and is protected under the Swedish Constitution (Hansson 2023). Although begging was decriminalized in Sweden in 1964, discrimination against Roma continued (Selling 2019). Since then, various proposals

have been made to ban begging. For instance, in 2010, minister Tobias Billström from the Moderate Party advocated for the removal of Romani beggars from Stockholm, under the pretext of dishonesty, a stance later criticized by human rights organizations. The 2015 refugee crisis captured significant media, public, and political attention, leading to a change in the discourse surrounding vulnerable Romani migrants begging in Sweden (Baker 2017; Mostowska 2021; Enroth 2022). Increasingly, more political parties that were once vehemently against prohibiting begging began to entertain the possibility of implementing either a local or a national ban. This shift was influenced by then recent polls that showed major political parties in Sweden losing popularity to parties like the Sweden Democrats, which held strong anti-immigration and anti-Romani views.

In 2016 the situation of Romani beggars and the possibility of banning begging in specific municipalities became significant topics on the Swedish political agenda (Barker 2017; Zelano 2019). The proposed ban was introduced by the Moderate Party, a centre-right political party and was backed by Christian Democrats and Sweden Democrats. These parties contended that the ban was necessary to address the concerns of local residents and business owners, who believed that begging had become problematic in their communities (Ciulinaru 2017; Zelano 2019). However, the proposal faced opposition from other political parties and human rights organizations, who asserted that such a ban would violate the constitutional right to free speech and freedom of expression (Åberg et al. 2023). Critics have also argued that a ban on begging would not address the underlying issues that lead individuals to beg in the first place, such as poverty and homelessness.

The impoverished Roma begging on street corners and their improvised settlements throughout the country were an unfamiliar and disconcerting sight for Swedes (Djuve et al. 2015; Hansson and Mitchell 2018). On one hand, the visibility of these 'EU migrants' evoked sympathy and solidarity from various citizens and organizations concerned with the well-being and social inequalities faced by Roma. On the other hand, it gave rise to strong negative anti-immigration attitudes, which often manifested as violent physical assault against Roma by extremist groups, evictions, and even deportations (*The Irish Times* 2015; Ciulinaru 2017; Hansson and Mitchell 2018). Hanson and Michell (2018) describe this treatment of Romani migrants as an exception to the rule of 'the equality of all human beings' that characterizes Swedish society. Sweden Democrats fuelled anti-Romani sentiments, particularly through their provocative anti-begging campaign in Stockholm's subway stations (Bolton 2015; Baker 2017). However, the anti-Romani sentiments linked to begging in Sweden were not exclusively propagated by the far-right (Selling 2019). In this paper, I highlight three primary strategies employed by *Expressen* and *Svenska Dagbladet* to play down the underlying social, economic, and political factors contributing to begging in Sweden.

### 3. Data and Method

The data presented in this article is part of a larger project on anti-Romani racism in Swedish media and political discourse which focused on four leading Swedish newspapers (*Aftonbladet*, *Dagens Nyheter*, *Expressen*, and *Svenska Dagbladet*), which are well-known framers of Swedish public opinion. In this article, I examine the discourses we find in *Expressen* and *Svenska Dagbladet*, two Swedish newspapers with different styles of journalism and with slightly different readership. *Expressen's* editorial positions

moderately favour the right, although the outlet states its political orientation as liberal. Historically, *Svenska Dagbladet* was a right-wing publication but now maintains an independently moderate stance, aligning with the liberal conservatism of the Moderate Party. This approach complements our previous analysis of *Aftonbladet* and *Dagens Nyheter* (Breazu and Machin 2024), ensuring a well-rounded understanding of the media landscape and various perspectives on the begging ban in Sweden.

The empirical data for this analysis was gathered from the Svenska Dagstidningar databases: *Expressen* (53) and *Svenska Dagbladet* (30).

Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) is an interdisciplinary approach for studying social, political, and cultural phenomena through the examination of various forms of communication, such as language, texts, images, videos, and other multimedia (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001; Breazu 2020). MCDA is built upon the foundations of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which seeks to understand the ways in which language and other semiotic resources are used to construct and maintain power dynamics, inequalities, and social issues. Drawing from Foucault's (2013) perspective, 'discourse' is understood as social models shaping perceptions of the world. These discourses, often ideological, reflect the ideas and interests of dominant groups and influence societal actions, priorities, institutions, and moral judgments (Fairclough 2013).

While CDA focuses primarily on the analysis of written or spoken language, MCDA expands the scope of analysis to other modes of communication, such as visual, audio, and spatial elements (Breazu 2020). The term *multimodal* acknowledges that meaning is created through the interaction of different modes of communication (for example, textual, visual, audio, and spatial), which together contribute to the construction of meaning (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001). MCDA draws on the social semiotic theory of communication, which emphasizes that various semiotic resources (language, visuals, typography and so on) used to create meaning in social contexts are active choices for those who seek to produce and disseminate discourse (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001; Breazu 2020). Social semiotics also recognizes that meaning-making is a dynamic process, shaped by the social, cultural, and historical context in which it occurs (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001). Following Van Leeuwen's (2008) concept of 'discursive scripts', this analysis identifies the elements that constitute a discourse, including participants, actions, performance modes, causality, evaluations, time, place, and resources. This means identifying the key elements of a discourse, including who is involved (participants), what is happening (actions), how it is presented (performance modes), and where and when it takes place (time and place). This approach allows us to understand how these scripts modify or add new elements to the representation of events, thus recontextualizing/decontextualizing them.

The analysis in this article focuses on the examination and language and news photography to reveal how the ban on begging was represented in the two newspapers. Van Leeuwen (2008) also has emphasized that critical discourse analysis transcends the mere examination of words and phrases present in a text, as it also considers the significant impact of what is absent, omitted, or implied. This holistic approach explores an intricate web of meaning, social context, and power dynamics that shape communication. By identifying the underlying assumptions, ideologies, and silences that inform a text, MCDA reveals the subtle interplay between what is explicitly stated or concealed beneath the surface (Van Leeuwen 2008; Breazu 2020).

## 4. Analysis

The thorough coding of the data found in *Expressen* and *Svenska Dagbladet* point to three common strategies through which the 2016 debates about banning begging become decontextualized in Swedish media: (1) generalization and polarization of the phenomenon of begging, (2) victimizing the general public, and (3) concealing the historical and global context of poverty and social exclusion of Roma.

### 4.1 Generalization and polarization

Sweden's press has focused increasingly on reducing the complexity of issues surrounding the proposed legislation to ban begging, subsequently presenting the topic in a polarized fashion. This has led to the portrayal of the begging ban as an endeavour to either curtail an undignified practice or maintain public order (Barker 2017; Hansson 2023), while neglecting to address the wider socio-economic factors contributing to begging. In contrast to other European media that ascribe a collective image of criminality to the Romani community (Kroon et al. 2003; Breazu and McGarry 2023), Swedish media demonstrates greater subtlety in its representation of minorities (Breazu and Machin 2024). As will be demonstrated, the narrative within the two newspapers focuses on 'begging' as a distinct phenomenon rather than on the individuals partaking in such activities, implying that the proposed prohibition targets a 'phenomenon' rather than the people involved.

#### **Extract 1 (SvD 12 March 2016)**

*It [begging] does not create good societies. A ban on begging, a faster tightening of refugee policy and perhaps a cap on how many asylum seekers Sweden accepts. This is how the S policy could have looked like if Göran Persson had continued to decide. It does not create freedom for a person to kneel in the street and beg, says Persson in an SvD interview.*

#### **Extract 2 (Expressen 25 August 2016)**

*The problems surrounding EU citizens begging around Sweden are extensive. Estimates show that it is about 4,000–5,000 vulnerable people. It is a regrettable and worrying development that often means difficult conditions for the people involved. The fact that they came to Sweden is usually due to the social vulnerability, discrimination and lack of work, education, and housing that they suffer from in their home countries, above all Romania and Bulgaria.*

#### **Extract 3 (Expressen 25 August 2016)**

*Begging in Sweden is neither a way out of poverty nor exclusion, write Tomas Tobé and Beatrice Ask.*

The aforementioned excerpts underscore the notion that the prevalence of begging and the significant influx of asylum seekers have negative consequences on Swedish society, thereby legitimizing the need for more restrictive measures. The stance for the prohibition of begging is evident in the lexical choices used: 'it does not create good societies' (*det skapar inte goda samhällen*), 'the problems surrounding EU citizens begging throughout Sweden are extensive' (*problematiken kring EU-medborgare som tigger*

*runtom i Sverige är omfattande*), ‘it is a regrettable and worrying development’ (det är en beklaglig och oroväckande utveckling), suggesting that begging is detrimental to Swedish society and, consequently, undesirable. However, the nature of the issue, or how the ban will enhance Swedish society, as well as the experiences of those engaged in begging, remain ambiguously defined. It is subtly suggested that begging and the escalation of immigration following the 2015 refugee crisis pose threats to the welfare of Swedish society, potentially fuelling anti-immigration sentiments (Hansson and Michell 2018).

The prohibition of begging is framed in terms of concern for individual dignity: ‘It does not create freedom for a person to kneel in the street and beg’ (*det skapar ingen frihet för en människa att stå på knä på gatan och tigga*); ‘it is neither a way out of poverty nor exclusion’ (*är varken en väg ur fattigdom eller utanförskap*). References to the ‘lack of freedom for those begging in the streets’ or ‘begging is not the solution to poverty’ can be interpreted as paternalistic, suggesting that the government possesses both empathy and superior knowledge regarding what is most beneficial for these individuals. Yet, such statements disregard Romani agency and the intricate factors that have driven people to resort to begging. Notably, the language used in reference to Romani migrants is characterized by positive terminology such as ‘EU citizens’ and ‘4,000–5,000 vulnerable people’, implying that they need support. However, by emphasizing the structural factors in their countries of origin – ‘they came to Sweden due to the social vulnerability, discrimination, and lack of work, education, and housing that they suffer from in their home countries’ – the responsibility of Sweden, as an EU member, to address the issue is deflected, thus playing down the need for local actions to alleviate the situation. The fact that these statements originate from politicians who previously opposed the ban on begging indicates that Swedish society has become increasingly conservative regarding immigration and social matters (Jylhä et al. 2019; Zelano 2019; Hellström 2021). These politicians, representing a spectrum of affiliations from left to right, position themselves as experts on the subject, collectively adopting a critical stance toward begging and portraying it as an ineffective and detrimental social practice, as evidenced by their linguistic choices: ‘[begging] is not the solution to poverty’, ‘is neither a way out of poverty nor exclusion’, and ‘does not create good societies’. It becomes clear that all featured politicians emphasize the same issue, namely, that begging does not alleviate poverty or social exclusion, and their statements imply the consideration of alternative policy measures or social programmes to tackle these problems. Nevertheless, these statements remain vague, failing to offer explicit information regarding potential alternatives, except for the assertion that solutions lie within Roma migrants’ countries of origin – a common discourse when it comes to social responsibility (Carrera 2013; Breazu and Machin 2018). By refraining from proposing alternative resolutions, such statements exacerbate the marginalization of those who depend on begging for survival. These statements serve to legitimize policy measures and social attitudes that discourage begging without providing sufficient context to thoroughly evaluate the implications.

The visual elements accompanying these news reports appear to represent begging as an undesirable and negative phenomenon. While Swedish news consumers may readily associate such imagery with Romani beggars, within these reports the visuals primarily serve to illustrate the issues associated with begging. In figure 1, a woman wearing heavy clothing is depicted kneeling on the street and clutching a cup. A headline, occupying more than half of the image, poses the question of whether Löfven (the then prime minister) is ready to act against begging: (*Är Löfven beredd att agera mot tiggeriet?*). The image presents a faceless woman engaging in the act of begging, suggesting that it does not target a specific group, as

race or ethnicity are not immediately discernible. Similarly, other images symbolically portray the act of begging through the depiction of two outstretched hands holding coins, with no visual cues about the identity of those engaged in begging.<sup>[2]</sup> This manner of representation aligns with Sweden's colour-blind discourse on race (Mulinari and Neergaard 2017). The textual references in the visual design also suggest that the ban is not aimed at criminalizing individuals from a particular community but rather the act of begging itself. Concentrating on the 'phenomenon of begging' diverts attention from the experiences and motivations of those who resort to begging. Although these visuals may evoke a range of emotions and reactions, such as sympathy, compassion, or discomfort, the overarching discourse emphasizes the detrimental impact of begging on both the individuals involved and society at large. In this context, the ban may appear to be a sensible, even beneficial, solution for Romani migrants, though this assertion remains ambiguous.



Figure 1. Is Löfven prepared to act against begging?  
(*Expressen* 25 August 2016. Copyright: Lars Kastilan.)

In the following extracts it becomes apparent that the discourse around the ban on begging shifts towards indirectly criminalizing Romani migrants:

**Extract 4 (*Expressen* 20 August 2016)**

*It is true. But a ban, on the other hand, could alleviate and in some cases also solve many of the social problems and crime that follows in the wake of begging in Sweden, such as illegal settlements, environmental crime and trafficking. This is not an insignificant task for Swedish politicians.*

**Extract 5 (*Expressen* 25 August 2016)**

*But begging in Sweden is neither a way out of poverty nor exclusion. Instead, it leads to continuing poor living conditions and risks of exposure to violence, pressure, and exploitation. It is undignified and unacceptable.*

<sup>2</sup> "The Government Is Considering a Begging Ban in Sweden." *Expressen* (Stockholm). 19 August 2016. <https://www.expressen.se/nyheter/regeringen-overvager-tiggeriforbud-i-sverige>.

**Extract 6 (SvD 20 April 2016)**

*The law does not allow for the prohibition of begging. We cannot, in our regulations, single out begging and say that it is not permitted. Only when it is disturbing or creates insecurity. Therefore, we use our toolbox to address the problem, says the Moderate Party's chairman of the traffic committee, Kristoffer Tamsons to Dagens Nyheter.*

The debate surrounding the criminalization of Roma beggars in Sweden has gained considerable attention in recent years (Barker 2017; Hansson and Mitchell 2018; Zelano 2019). The portrayal of begging as a detrimental practice connected to criminality and the disruption of social order instils a sense of urgency, prompting Sweden's politicians to address the issue. As evidenced in the above extracts, advocates of the ban rely primarily on two arguments: exploitation and trafficking, and public order and security. It is important to discern the primary social actors and their roles in Extract 4: Swedish politicians, who bear the responsibility of tackling the issue, and individuals engaged in begging, who are represented as sources of social problems and crime in the country. The text frames begging as a problem in need of a solution, with various adverse consequences such as crime, illegal settlements, environmental offences, and trafficking, implying that a ban on begging could mitigate or even resolve these problems. In Extract 5, those engaged in begging are not directly associated with criminal activities but are instead portrayed as victims of violence and exploitation. The contention is that by outlawing begging, the government could potentially dismantle trafficking networks and allow individuals to break free from the cycles of exploitation and poverty. However, it remains unclear who the exploiters or perpetrators of violence are, and it is even more uncertain how the prohibition will improve the lives of impoverished Roma. In Extract 6, the emphasis is not on the broader issues leading to begging but on the legal constraints related to the prohibition of begging in Sweden. In Extract 6, begging is characterized as a matter of public order and security, which can be addressed through accessible 'tools' when necessary. The chairman of the traffic committee implies that a direct prohibition of begging is not legally viable in Sweden and that regulations must be justified by 'disturbance' or 'insecurity'.

While concerns regarding public order, security, and exploitation are legitimate, the criminalization of begging raises questions about discrimination, marginalization, and personal liberties. In this section, we observed how the discourse concentrates on the undignified and harmful practice of begging, shifting the focus away from the vulnerable individuals who may resort to this activity due to a lack of viable alternatives for survival.

## 4.2 Victimizing the general public

The visibility of Eastern European migrants begging in major cities throughout Sweden has emerged as a novel and unsettling phenomenon for Swedish society (Djuve et al. 2015; Hansson and Michell 2018). As illustrated above, one argument favouring the criminalization of begging is the enhancement of public order and security. Advocates contend that the presence of beggars on the streets creates an unsafe and disorderly environment, impacting the overall quality of life for residents and tourists alike.

**Extract 7 (SvD, 12 March 2016)**

*But Göran Persson disapproves of the government's position. Many feel cornered by the beggars, according to Persson.*

**Extract 8 (SvD 3 May 2016)**

*I know many people are very concerned about the situation. I think the numbers reflect a frustration with the situation (Åsa Regnér, S).*

**Extract 9 (SvD 20 April 2016)**

*The occurrence of begging has completely exploded in recent years. It is a rapidly growing source of insecurity among travellers and one of the most common questions, says Kristoffer Tamsons (M).*

**Extract 10 (SvD 20 April 2016)**

*I also want to open up for a ban on begging in public transport. 'It is meant for travel, not for living or begging there,' says Kristoffer Tamsons.*

The issue of banning begging has gained traction in Sweden, especially in the context of the 2015 refugee crisis and subsequent general elections (Barker 2017; Teodorescu and Molina 2021; Hansson 2023). Political parties and candidates frequently employ this topic within their platforms to address social issues and appeal to voters. Right-wing parties, such as the Sweden Democrats and the Moderate Party, openly support a ban on begging, arguing that it is necessary to maintain public order, protect vulnerable individuals from exploitation, and preserve the country's social welfare system. In contrast, left-wing parties, including the Social Democrats and the Green Party, oppose the ban, contending that it would criminalize poverty and infringe human rights.

The extracts above capture the political discourse on the issue, emphasizing that its motivation stems from public perception and dissatisfaction around the unresolved nature of the matter. Intriguingly, both newspapers feature an interview with Göran Persson, the former prime minister, who is presented as a politician who appears to endorse the ban on begging. As a member of the Social Democrat party, his statement is controversial, inviting readers to question the government's and his own political party's stance. The statement in extract 7 refers to 'tiggarna' (the beggars) as a social group causing discomfort for numerous individuals, a term which for the Swedish public is synonymous with Roma. The term 'trängda' (cornered) implies that Romani beggars create pressure and unease for the general public. This representation contributes to negative perceptions of beggars, thus exacerbating existing social divisions and marginalization.

Similarly, Kristoffer Tamsons (Moderate Party) shares his perspective on issues surrounding begging. He positions himself as an advocate of the concerns of the general Swedish public, highlighting that the increase in begging has caused insecurity among travellers. The statement in extract 9 juxtaposes the social group of beggars with a group of travellers (*resenärerna*). Beggars are portrayed as a source of insecurity for travellers, which contributes to the negative perceptions of this group and reinforces existing social divisions. In extract 9, the use of 'fullständigt exploderat' (completely exploded) to describe the increase in begging also suggests a sense of urgency or crisis surrounding the impact of begging on public safety and travellers' well-being. Tamsons differentiates between the 'us' (the general public) and 'them' (those who misuse public transport) by employing the 'inclusive we' in both cases (Breazu 2020): 'It is meant for travel, not for living or begging there.' This suggests that the race or ethnic background

of those begging is irrelevant to the proposed measures or policymaking (Hübinette 2013; Mulinari and Neergaard 2017) and that such measures are in the interest of the Swedish people, who are depicted as a vulnerable group experiencing insecurity due to the presence of beggars. Therefore, more stringent decisions, such as altering rules on public transport, appear to reflect the desires of Swedish people.

The perceived inconvenience posed by Roma to the general public is also evident in news photography.

The images circulated in these news outlets capture some of the adverse consequences associated with begging. One such image in the print version of an article published by *Expressen*<sup>[3]</sup> displays a split screen of the then prime minister, Stefan Löfven, who was hesitant to prohibit begging, juxtaposed with an improvised settlement. The visual composition is noteworthy. A close-up of the prime minister, looking off-camera, is an 'offer image' as described by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2020) since Löfven does not directly interact with the viewers. In this specific context, considering the prime minister's stance on the proposed ban, the image serves to contrast his position with the reality of illegal settlements inhabited by Romani migrants. His pensive expression conveys concern, uncertainty, and perhaps pressure from the public, signified in the headline: 'Begging must be stopped, Löfven.' The image of the makeshift camp serves as evidence for the broader negative environmental, humanitarian, and socio-economic impact that 'begging' has on Swedish society. Litter-strewn fields in news photographs, particularly in the context of large-scale migration, are indicators of negative environmental consequences, such as waste and pollution in transit areas (Breazu and Machin 2018). They are also associated with health risks for both migrants and the wider population due to the lack of proper waste management and sanitation facilities. Viewers are invited to evaluate the situation and question Löfven's stance, especially since the arrival of Romani migrants appears to have altered the physical appearance and environmental quality of certain locations. It is implied that Romani migrants are the active agents of change, while the Swedish people are the passive recipients of these transformations.

Aesthetic concerns about changes in public spaces are also evident in visual representations of begging. This is exemplified by visuals of individuals, either men or women, kneeling and begging on various busy streets in Stockholm. This is illustrated by a newspaper photograph published by *Svenska Dagbladet*.<sup>[4]</sup> The photograph in question captures a poignant scene on the streets of Stockholm which showcases the stark reality of begging within the urban landscape. In the image, a man is seen kneeling on the pavement and praying – a pose which provokes a mix of empathy and discomfort for the viewers. On the one hand, the visibility of beggars in public places challenges the belief that the system is functioning effectively, leading to feelings of unease or disappointment. On the other hand, it contests the self-reliance and self-sufficiency culture in Sweden, with beggars perceived as violating these norms. More importantly, the presence of beggars raises aesthetic concerns, as they are regarded as a disruption to the orderly and clean appearance of public spaces, which has become a daily reality for those living in Sweden.

3 "Begging must stop, Löfven." *Expressen* (Stockholm). 6 October 2016. <https://www.expressen.se/ledare/tiggeriet-maste-upphora-lofven>.

4 "Professors: 'For whom is begging a problem?'" *Svenska Dagbladet* (Stockholm). 23 August 2016. <https://www.svd.se/a/5yr76/professorer-for-vem-ar-tiggeri-ett-problem>.

### 4.3 Concealing the historical and global context of marginalization and poverty

The discourse surrounding the proposed ban on begging in Sweden tends to overlook the historical and global context of marginalization and poverty faced by Romani migrants (Breazu 2020; Friberg 2020). The textual and visual representations of begging and beggars tend to focus on the immediate consequences of begging, such as public order, aesthetics, and security concerns, disregarding the broader socio-economic factors that have contributed to the vulnerability and displacement of the Romani population. Van Leeuwen (2008) highlighted that discourse does not account for only what is expressed in words or images but also for what is absent, omitted, or suppressed. The discussions about banning begging in Swedish media often lack historical and global context, resulting in a limited understanding of the issue. For instance, the long history of poverty of Roma in Europe, individual experiences of racism, and the rationale that led to begging in Sweden received little attention in the mediated debates on the prohibition of begging (Djuve et al. 2015; Teodorescu and Molina 2021). In a sense, Swedish media employs a strategy of objectivization, as the entire debate is framed around the phenomenon of begging, with people being left out of the conversation, except when discussing the negative impacts on the environment, public spaces, and society. In such instances, Romani migrants are portrayed as active agents of negative change in Swedish society.

In extracts 7-10, we catch a glimpse into the public perception and the internal feelings of ordinary Swedes who appear to be concerned and dissatisfied with the unresolved issue of begging in their cities. However, there are no stories that showcase the experiences of Roma with begging, whether they feel ‘concerned’, ‘cornered’, or ‘unsafe’. Swedish media coverage often neglects to report on the violence suffered by Romani beggars at the hands of extreme far-right groups (*The Irish Times* 2015; Ciulinaru 2017; Hansson and Mitchell 2018). Such stories frequently remain untold in the mainstream media, as they do not serve to legitimize the prohibition of begging, or the mistreatment of Roma migrants witnessed across Europe.

Historically, Romani communities have faced significant discrimination, social exclusion, and economic hardship across Europe (McGarry 2017). Reports from the Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) show that Roma has the lowest life expectancy in Europe, and face intense discrimination within health care services, labour and housing markets. Yet, such reports are excluded from debates on the prohibition of begging. This long-standing marginalization has resulted in perpetuating the cycle of poverty and social exclusion for Romani people (Kócze and Rövid 2017). As with other European media, these discourses are little or infrequently articulated in Swedish media (Breazu and Machin 2018; Breazu and McGarry 2023), with few references to the historical marginalization and social exclusion experienced by Romani communities in Romania and Bulgaria. References to the ill-treatment Roma face in their home countries is no way to understand why people resort to begging: rather, it serves to divert responsibility elsewhere. The argument that begging is not the solution to poverty is often emphasized, while actual solutions are presented as the responsibility of the Roma’s home countries, rather than being addressed in a broader, more comprehensive manner. This neglects the complex interplay of historical marginalization, global migration trends, and socio-economic disparities that shape the experiences of Romani migrants in Sweden, as discussed in previous sections.

Additionally, Romani migrants often face negative stereotypes and prejudices, which hinder their integration into society and exacerbate their marginalization (Matache 2017; McGarry 2017). The media play a critical role in shaping these perceptions about Roma, and this representation has a profound impact on how they are viewed by a broader public (Breazu 2020). Despite the fact that many Romani migrants in Sweden, who are often seen begging, are indeed European citizens – entitled to reside anywhere within the EU – their true status frequently is overlooked. They are often perceived as ‘the other Europeans’, with their lifestyle that appears at odds with contemporary societal norms.

The immediate focus on the concerns of ordinary Swedes and the exclusion of Romani voices in this discourse also reinforces prevailing social divisions (Roma and non-Roma) and stereotypes. It is difficult for the casual reader to sympathise with Roma or understand the complex circumstances that lead Roma to beg in Sweden. A shift in this narrative must acknowledge the systemic barriers and discrimination that Roma face in contemporary Europe.

## Conclusions

This article highlights the problematic nature of the decontextualization of the 2016 debates to ban begging in Sweden, demonstrating how media and political discourse often gloss over systemic anti-Roma racism. Compared to other European media, Swedish media carry more subtle representations of Roma, especially since racial characteristics are removed from both language and visuals. Yet the ideology is obvious. The focus on immediate concerns in relation to begging, such as public order, security, and aesthetics, overlooks the historical and global context of marginalization and poverty experienced by Romani communities. The debate surrounding the proposed ban tends to reinforce existing social divisions and stereotypes, as the focus on begging as a problem to be solved diverts attention from the experiences and rationales of those who resort to begging because of a lack of viable alternatives for survival. Additionally, visual representations associated with news reports on begging contribute to the negative perceptions of Romani migrants, further exacerbating social division and marginalization. By neglecting the broader socio-economic factors and historical marginalization that have shaped the experiences of Roma migrants in Sweden, the discourse surrounding the proposed ban conceals the responsibility of both the countries of origin, and the host nations to address the underlying issues that contribute to poverty and social exclusion.

Such a manner of representation creates a self-perpetuating cycle that obstructs meaningful dialogue and prevents the implementation of more compassionate policy solutions. In light of these findings, this research calls for more contextualized reporting on the Romani issue and urges stakeholders to engage in constructive debates that address the root causes of begging in Sweden.

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Ari Joskowicz. 2023. *Rain of Ash: Roma, Jews, and the Holocaust*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.

Book review by

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Who will tell the stories of the Roma Holocaust? For individuals to be able to tell these stories, they need to hear them. As a Bulgarian Roma, Romani genocide was one of the untold stories for me. The topic of the Holocaust appears in Bulgarian textbooks only in the context of Bulgaria as one of a few countries that saved their Jewish population during the Second World War. There is not a single word about Roma being part of the Holocaust or the position of the Bulgarian authorities about the deportations of Roma. Even if approximately 50,000 Bulgarian Jews were saved from the death camps, thousands of people across the old administrative territories of Bulgaria were sent to the camps. Since Bulgaria has yet to reflect critically on its history and the events of the Holocaust, as a result we do not know fully Bulgaria's historic position towards Roma or the objective reasoning behind the noble act of preventing some deportations.

Growing up Roma in Bulgaria, I only learned from informal education and activist work with Romani youth organizations that Roma were persecuted across Europe and that Romani genocide happened during the Holocaust. As a young scholar and an activist, delving into Romani experiences of the Holocaust is a way to connect with the collective history of Roma in Europe and learn about their untold stories.

Ari Joskowicz's book – *Rain of Ash: Roma, Jews, and the Holocaust* – reveals the untold stories of Romani and Jewish experiences during the Holocaust and discusses the tangled relationship between them within the timeframe of the Holocaust. Although Holocaust sufferings are incomparable, it is unavoidable, according to Joskowicz, that Romani and Jewish historical experiences are juxtaposed.

To begin, I approached this book with curiosity and a critical lens that focused on the historical position of Roma, their representation, and Romani knowledge production. Additionally, I highlighted the narratives and depictions of Roma that are still present in our societies – antigypsyism or anti-Romani racism lurking from the Holocaust until the present.

Joskowicz's book starts with the poem "Encamped Gypsies," written by Yiddish poet Avrom Sutzkever. The poem places a crucial question about the historic memory of Roma: "Who will tell the stories of the Roma Holocaust?" First, the poem serves as a reminder that Roma have been subject to persecution and atrocities, or as Sutzkever addresses "Encamped" and murdered. Second, the poem asks a question about the memorialization of Romani history and sufferings: "Will another memorialize the Gypsy extermination in song..." capturing the two main topics which I choose to focus on: memorialization of historical injustices committed during the Holocaust and Romani knowledge production.

Touching upon the question of racial persecution and a broader debate if Romani persecution were racially motivated, some Holocaust scholars argue that the persecution of Roma was not racially motivated. *Rain of Ash* in this regard leads to a different understanding. One might ask, if Roma deportations and killings were not racially motivated, what were they then? Those arguing against the idea of Romani racial deportation argue that Romani persecutions were based on Romani "asocial" behavior. Hence, Roma were labelled as "savages," unable to integrate and socialize among society. Here, it is crucial to understand that constructing the categories of the "criminal" and "savage" Gypsy or labelling Roma as "antisocial" contains and constructs racial perceptions of inferiority. The constructed categories and perceptions

about Roma are a result of historic antigypsyism or anti-Romani racism, a thread sewn throughout the Holocaust's history before the deportations, in postwar times and even today.

Romani communities across Europe have been a subject of racial hatred, facing similar policies of persecution and segregation as Jewish communities. However, there is a lack of critical reflection about the shared experiences of Roma and Jews. *Rain of Ash* reflects on these common experiences and highlights Romani stories of being “Encamped” and murdered, similar to Jews.

Joskowicz discusses postwar reconstruction and acknowledges the unequal position of Romani survivors in comparison to Jewish survivors. While recognized as victims of Nazism, their economic hardship was not taken into consideration, their cases were treated unequally, and they were left with no acknowledgement from the Nuremberg courtrooms. Consequently, the creation of a single Jewish narrative regarding the victims of the Holocaust has negatively affected not only Romani cultural and political memory but also knowledge production for future generations. Additionally, the courts at Nuremberg found it more important to devote time to debate racial questions rather than pursue justice for Romani victims – the legacy of which left Romani survivors in a position where they have been denied justice because of a racial debate.

Furthermore, during postwar reconstruction, Joskowicz narrates the stories of Roma seeking assistance and connections with Jewish organizations and Jewish survivors. Therefore, we need to recognize the help and the fact that the recognition of Jewish experiences during the Holocaust created a basis for Roma to pursue their cases and fight for justice for Romani genocide. Although crucial assistance was contributed by activists and individuals such as Kurt May in helping Roma recognition, in other cases, despite good intentions, activists held stereotypical views of Roma.

One of the important figures in the postwar reconstruction period – Philipp Auerbach – a Jewish-German patriot who worked on cases of Jewish survivors also fought for the recognition of Romani cases. Yet Auerbach's thought about Roma that “Germans should ‘approach them with love,’ because thus will it be possible to turn the few remaining Gypsies into full members of our human society”; “in doing so, they would ‘have to distinguish in this task between those Gypsies who were persecuted for racial reasons and those who were demonstrably imprisoned for asocial behavior.’” Hence, Roma were stereotyped even by those who helped them to build their cases and seek justice.

Nevertheless – and seen as unproblematic by historians and scholars – labelling a group as “asocial” and unable to integrate not only denies the acknowledgement of racially motivated Romani persecution but also confirms and perpetuates stereotypes. The belief that Roma need to be civilized and turned into full members of the society reveals dehumanizing and discriminatory perspectives on Roma. These stereotypical narratives of the “asocial” or “criminal Gypsy” still exist and shape broader debates and discourses today, transforming into institutional racism and underrepresentation – historical, cultural, and political.

The lack of resources, structures, and individuals to create a network of support for Romani activists within the early Romani movement resulted in asymmetrical justice in comparison to Jewish survivors.

Hence, in many cases, personal and collective struggles went unacknowledged, and justice for Romani survivors was not received. Awareness about the Roma Holocaust and memorialization appeared years later, the consequences of which victims' families and Romani activists are still fighting today. Reflecting on history and postwar justice, and witnessing later recognition by states, institutions and museums, it appears that Romani victims were forgotten and hence still needed to demand justice. Both communities had common experiences but not common acknowledgement and visibility; the unfair position of Roma before, during and after the Holocaust limited their opportunities to demand recognition and visibility.

Joskowicz also touches upon the struggles faced by the early Romani movement and activists such as Grattan Paxton and their efforts for Roma Holocaust representation. From the early Romani movement until the present, Roma demands have not changed and remain a salient topic. Positively, today the Romani movement has expanded to include Romani youths. Together with Romani NGOs, they organize annual Holocaust remembrance events, especially on the second of August, visiting Auschwitz, paying tribute to Romani victims and passing on these untold stories.

*Rain of Ash* also sheds light on early documentation efforts on the Holocaust, where Romani testimonies and stories appeared in the margins of Jewish archives. Hence, Roma Holocaust history and testimonials still exist in Jewish archives. After the Holocaust, these early efforts at knowledge production by Jewish individuals and institutions also led to the rise of Roma Holocaust scholarship, created primarily by non-Romani experts.

Holocaust scholarship needs to be scrutinized critically about types of knowledge production produced in and inherited from the past. It needs to be questioned about who creates knowledge and what are the historical narratives and perceptions that this knowledge builds for future research and activism. In some cases, different scholars, anthropologists, and folklorists had a romanticizing approach to Romani-related scholarly materials, and Joskowicz looks at the produced knowledge with a necessary critical lens.

Knowledge production from the past serves and assists us in a quest for justice, quenches our curiosity, and allows for research, but it also needs to be filtered and critically approached. Although knowledge produced about Roma may appear to be respected, contemporary expectations about Romani memorialization and knowledge production have changed. Hence, it is unacceptable for experts and scholars to come unequipped with a basic understanding or intentionally build a single Holocaust narrative and perpetuate racial stereotypes.

Joskowicz's book about Jewish and Romani experiences and victimhood contributes to Romani scholarship and creates more awareness about the Holocaust. Recognizing the historic position of Roma Holocaust survivors, the author elucidates that they were unable to tell their stories. Sutzkever reminds us of the importance of asking: "Who *will* tell the stories of the Roma Holocaust?" Joskowicz then responds and provokes us to ask: "Who *can* tell the stories of the Roma Holocaust?" Joskowicz's question inherently acknowledges Roma's sufferings and highlights the uneven position of Roma in their pursuit of justice, as well as a lack of recognition, unequal resources, and uneven memorialization. Changing Sutzkever's question means to reflect on who is able to tell the stories while considering structural challenges and obstacles that need to be overcome in order for one to be able to "tell." For instance, position, social status,

knowledge, and cultural capital are all crucial for knowledge production. In short, intersectionality is crucial to the telling and understanding of these stories.

Reflecting more deeply on the relations between Jews and Roma, *Rain of Ash* does not provide much knowledge about the relationship between Roma and Jews before the persecution. Although some solidarity between them exists because of a common experience, common knowledge is missing despite Joskowicz's effort to uncover untold stories of shared experiences and victimhood. Additionally, the book reflects on the attitudes and narratives that are still being shared about Roma across Europe.

Joskowicz acknowledges that scholars, activists, and lobbyists recognized Romani genocide but also critically approaches Romani scholarship by questioning positionality and early scholarly work about Roma. *Rain of Ash* is an essential contribution to Romani knowledge production and an invitation for Romani scholars and activists to engage further and question the past.



# Their Skin Was their Only Sin: Anti-Roma Murders in Hungary and Austria

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In recent decades, there have been many hate crimes targeting Romani people in Europe, and the most recent example is the murder of a Romani boy by Greek police (Rorke 2024). These crimes rarely are linked together at the international level but rather viewed as one-off events. Due to this de-linkage, hate crimes against and murder of Roma go unpublicised among different countries and are forgotten quickly by media, state, and society.

Máté Fuchs' documentary *Feldolgozatlanul* (Unprocessed) focuses on the actual events of racist serial killings committed in 2008 and 2009 in Hungary and a subsequent play, *A gyűlölet mosolya* (Smile of hatred), created by Romano Teatro and based on these horrible events. Shortly after the online premiere on 6 March 2023, the Romani Studies Program organized a screening at the Central European University. It was followed by a topical discussion with the director and a panel composed of Angéla Kócze, CEU Romani Studies Program; Aladár Horváth, Roma Parliament – *Polgárjogi Mozgalom* (Civil Rights Movement), and Manuela Horvath, *Stadtgemeinde Oberwart; Roma-Pastoraller Dienst in der Diözese Eisenstadt* (Oberwart City Council; Roma pastoral services in the Diocese of Eisenstadt).

The documentary follows the creation of a play by the Romano Teatro drama company that works with Romani and non-Romani children. By focusing on the story of the play, *A gyűlölet mosolya* (Smile of hatred), Fuchs shows how some Romani communities have dealt with the trauma after the killings. As we listen to the actors, director, and Romani activists, it becomes clear that the wounds inflicted by the racist serial killings have not yet healed. Zsolt Horváth, director of the theatre company, explains in the film how sadness, fear, empathy, and shock combine, when he states: “It was like they killed us too. [...] They killed people who did not have any sins, they were killed merely because they were Roma.” Later, János Joka Daróczi, a Romani activist, explains why some Roma do not like commemorating the attacks. He tells Fuchs that he is reluctant to give interviews because he finds it too painful to recall how easily Roma lives were destroyed. However, we also see how art allows a new generation to learn and talk openly about the events in 2008–2009.

The movie ends with a dilemma: while Romano Teatro was given the opportunity to perform at the National Theatre, a far-right politician, Előd Novák, protested in front of the building. But he is alone, and by the time the child actors leave the building he has already departed. The kids wave to the camera and seem empowered by the applause they received after the show, not knowing anything about the protest.

During the discussion afterwards, the panelists pointed out the connection between bombings in Oberwart<sup>1</sup> in Austria in 1995 and the racist serial killings in 2008–2009 in Hungary.

1 In the worst racially motivated crime in Austria since 1945, four Roma were murdered in a bomb attack on the night of 4 February 1995. The bombings in Oberwart were soon linked to other bombings and letter bombs in Austria

## Keywords

- Art
- Austria
- Healing
- Hungary
- Institutional racism
- Trauma

Manuela Horvath, who is a member of Oberwart city council, as well as related to the murder victims there, told the audience that the situation in Oberwart was tense before the attack in February 1995. People already felt threatened some days before the bombing in their Romani neighborhood, and that's why the four male victims went out at night to scout for signs of danger. On the night of the attack, they found a sign that said: "Roma zurück nach Indien" (Roma go back to India). When they tried to remove it, they were killed by a bomb. They were not found by family members until the next day.

When discussing how hard it was to deal with this traumatic event as a community, Manuela Horvath made it clear that, even though there was political interest in the bombings, neither family members, friends of the murder victims in Oberwart, nor the Romani community in the town, were supported. They were alone in 1995 and are alone now, Horvath added.

In Hungary, the racist serial killings in 2008–2009 were politically motivated, said Aladár Horváth: Nazi terrorists wanted to start a civil war, and by killing innocent Roma they hoped to provoke riots by Romani sections of society. Despite the political motivation of the crimes, there was no acknowledgment of any responsibility by the state. He described the reaction of society as not shocked "enough" as there was far too much silence. He also wondered why there was not more outreach by Romani communities themselves. Angéla Kócze took a different perspective on silence by raising some important questions. Could the trauma itself be the reason why affected communities remained silent – as they first must cope with the trauma inside themselves? Was there anyone who helped? Was there any discussion at the societal level about the murders? Aladár Horváth and Angéla Kócze agreed that there is a need for open discussion and to share common experiences of Roma and non-Roma to increase empathy, break the silence around anti-Roma hate crimes and heal the wounds of those carrying the trauma within themselves.

Lastly, the audience questioned the role of state violence and racism linked to mistakes in the investigation, in both Hungary and Austria, because in both cases the police regarded the prime suspects to live within the affected communities or even live among the victims' families, instead of treating the violence as racist in itself. The question of how society reacted to the news was also asked. Participants raised questions about how the murders in Oberwart and the racist serial killings in Hungary were processed both by Roma and non-Roma, by other minorities, and also on an international level. Some of the participants reacted to Maté Fuchs, who was not optimistic about the future of Hungary. They pointed out that the film was very poignant, and that they viewed art as a good tool to heal trauma or to prompt society realise primarily that there is trauma underneath the surface that should be dealt with. In the view of some of the participants, the documentary should be distributed widely, because the film promotes greater understanding in cases of racist murders and better understanding of each other.

The event "Their Skin Was their Only Sin: Anti-Roma Murders in Hungary and Austria" opened up an important discussion about hate crimes against Romani people in Europe. Racist murder cases in

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targeting minorities and politicians. They were carried out by a right-wing extremist group. One of the members was Franz Fuchs, who was arrested in 1997 as a prime suspect in the Oberwart bombing (Sinti und Roma 2024).

Hungary and Austria were compared and their similarities discussed, despite temporal and geographical differences. The event offered space to talk about these and other hate crimes in an international environment and start a conversation with Roma and non-Roma from different countries. Another topic that came up was around healing trauma, and how it was possible. Art was seen as an important tool in the healing process, as long as it is produced alongside, or with the agreement of, affected individuals and communities.

## References

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## **ARTICLES**

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*Joey Rauschenberger*

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## **BOOK REVIEW**

Ari Joskowitz. 2023. *Rain of Ash: Roma, Jews, and the Holocaust*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.  
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## **ARTS AND CULTURE**

Their Skin Was their Only Sin: Anti-Roma Murders in Hungary and Austria  
*Blanka Szilasi and Lavinia Laluna Lucie Seidel*