

# The persecution of Rom and Sinti in Fascist Italy

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**Abstract.** The present paper focuses on the relationship between Fascist Italy and those people we conventionally call “Gypsies”. The contradictory aspects of the Fascist anti-Gypsy policy have been analyzed from a wider historical and anthropological perspective on Rom and Sinti communities in Italy. Their persecution during the Fascist regime took different forms and enacted repressive-preventive measures meant for people who the regime considered “dangerous” to both public order and state security. While showing how Rom and Sinti suffered under these measures (such as expulsions “at own risk and peril”, police confinement and internment in camps and special localities), the whole process of categorization of the “Gypsies” has been analyzed - from Unification to the end of WWII. In perfect continuity with the liberal regime, the anti-Gypsy policy of Fascism managed to define “the Gypsy” as an “undesirable foreigner”: this sketched a category of individuals who the police could treat with the utmost discretionary power, without the least reference to the laws in force for foreigners. Even today Rom and Sinti continue to be considered a threat to “security and public order”, possibly making the persecutions they suffered during the Fascist period a topic which is not of particular interest to historians. This is why the testimonies of the Rom and Sinti were hardly noticed by society or Italian academia, also if today there is sufficient documentary evidence.

**Keywords.** Rom and Sinti; Fascist persecution; Civil internment; Police confinement; Italy; Gypsies.

«Le maximalisme revendicatif conçoit le passé comme une légende simplificatrice à usage idéologique. A condition de suivre le travail des historiens et d’écouter les témoins, il n’y a pourtant nul antagonisme entre le respect des spécificité régionales et nationales de la persécution des familles tziganes et de la construction de la mémoire européenne du génocide des Tsiganes Europe. Car quelle qu’ait été la formule politique selon la quelle les Tsiganes furent persécuté, ils le furent en famille et pour ce qu’il était. Notre devoir est d’accorder une véritable place dans la mémoire national à la reconnaissance de l’internement des nomades sur le sol français comme un aspect de l’iniquité du droit national et de ses dérivés» (H. Asséo, 2009, pp. XI-XII).

The reflection the historian Henriette Asséo wrote to accompany the publication of the principal work on the internment of Rom and Sinti in France will also guide the course of this work dedicated to the persecution of Rom and Sinti in fascist Italy. Her reflection in fact, can help to overcome the impasse in which we find ourselves today in research on the persecution of “Gypsies”<sup>1</sup> in Italy, stuck between the lack of academic interest and the “simplifying” choice of some Rom and Sinti organizations. These latter, often, have obscured the specific contours of the fascist persecution of Rom and Sinti in Italy, proposing a parallelism with the persecution suffered by them in Nazi Germany. That choice has unfortunately produced insufficient research and often superficial analyses, and most importantly it has hindered understanding of how the treatment of “Gypsies” under fascism is linked to the administrative treatment of “nomads” in Italy today.

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<sup>1</sup> The term “Gypsies” (similar to “Zingari”, “Zigeuner”, “Tsiganes” or “Cigani”) is always used between inverted commas, reflecting the perspective of the State and mainstream society, whereas Romani is meant to indicate the variety of Rom and Sinti groups as a whole. “Nomads” is the term chosen by the France administration with the law of the 16 July 1912 regarding «L’exercice des professions ambulantes et la réglementation de la circulation des nomads», now substituted by the term “Gens du voyage”. In Italy the administration substituted the term “Zingari” with the term “Nomads” starting from the 1960s.

The first step which should be taken (to remedy this issue) is to begin from the direct testimonies of their persecution under the fascist regime. The voices of the Romani themselves can be heard in testimonies published since the 1970s (B. Z. Levak, 1976; R. Hudorovic, 1983; B. Braidic, 1984; M. Karpati, 1984; G. De Barre, 1998; P. Trevisan, 2005), and recently supplemented by some interesting video interviews<sup>2</sup>. In his autobiography, published in Italy in 1975, the Istrian Rom Giuseppe Lavakovich told the doom of the Rom of Buje (today in Croatia) and Postumia (today in Slovenia) - confined to Sardinia and Calabria from spring 1938, as well as the deportation of other members of his family to Nazi camp by Germans in 1944. Anthropologists Leonardo Piasere (1985) and Jane Dick Zatta (1989) during their fieldwork in the 80s in the city of Verona and Piove di Sacco (PD) respectively, have recorded significant Rom testimonies on Ustaša<sup>3</sup> violence's, on escaping across Italy border and, in some case, internment in fascist camps in South Italy. The two decades that have passed between the publication of the earliest testimonies in the mid-1980s and the first archival researches focusing on the Rom and Sinti persecution show how difficult it has been for Italians - even academics - to perceive them as part of national history (G. Boursier, 1996a, 1996b, 1999; A. Osti Guerrazzi, 2004; R. Corbelletto, 2008).

A turning point was marked by the decision of some Sinti families from Emilia to publish the story of their lives, including their internment in the Apennine village of Prignano sulla Secchia (Modena). They also asked the author of this article to find documentary evidence for the events which have survived in community memory, but of which there is no trace in the historical literature. As a result, it was possible to reconstruct the stories of about eighty Italian Sinti, interned between 1940 and 1943, by putting together the family memories of the internees and documents from the town archives of Prignano sulla Secchia and from the State Archives of Modena (P. Trevisan, 2005, 2010, 2013).

## **1. From Liberal Italy to early Fascism: the “Gypsy” as vagabond and stranger**

Romani groups have been present on the Italian peninsula for many centuries, however censuses conducted both before and after Italian unification (1861) did not envisage the category “Gypsy”, neither during Fascist dictatorship. The Sinti were present primarily in central and northern Italy and worked as itinerant performers as musicians, acrobats, circus performers, and merry-go-round operators (L. Piasere, 2004; E. Tauber, 2014; P. Trevisan, 2008, 2011). Since vagrancy was punishable by law, only families that managed to obtain proper licences to engage in those occupations avoided continuous detainment by police. By the early 1900s, in contrast, the majority of Rom present in the southern part of the peninsula had a place of residence or stable address and worked primarily as brokers or traders of horses and as tinsmiths (E. Novi Chavarria, 2007; S. Pontrandolfo, 2013).

To understand the continuity and breaks in the treatment reserved for “Gypsies” by the fascist State, we will briefly go over the events relating to the Rom and the Sinti after the unification of Italy (1861-1871), paying particular attention to the legislative categories of that time and to the Police's practices of maintaining order. With the unification of Italy, the “Gypsies” of the peninsula were no longer considered a category of their own - subject to banishment (M. Zuccon, 1979; L. Piasere, 1989; A. Campigotto, 2008; B. Fassanelli, 2008, 2011) - but became part of the category of vagabonds and wanderers, and as such punishable by law for begging. There seems to be a lack of specific policies toward the Italian “Gypsies”, which asserts the impossibility that “people like that” were also citizens of the Italian State. Italian policymakers ambivalence was the reason for declining the invitation to the 1909 international conference in Switzerland, which aimed to settle

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<sup>2</sup> See the following web sites: <http://www.romsintimemory.it>, <http://porrajmos.it/?lang=en>, and <https://elleperelle.noblogs.org/> (accessed on May 10, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> *Ustaša (Hrvatski revolucionarni pokret)* was a Croatian fascist, racist, ultranationalist organization, active between 1929 and 1945. Its members murdered hundreds of thousands of Serbs, Jews, and Rom as well as political dissidents in Yugoslavia during World War II.

the nationality of those “Gypsies” who were repeatedly expelled by adjacent countries. In this context, the Home Office stated that there were no Italian “Gypsies”, but just a few hundred families practicing some itinerant trades (I. About, 2008; J. Illuzzi, 2014). The denial of a century long presence permitted the unified Kingdom of Italy to deny that “Gypsies” who had been expelled by the bordering countries belonged to Italy, as well as to continue expelling the supposedly foreign ones (P. Trevisan, 2017).

After the First World War the presence of Rom and Sinti in the peninsula took on a new valence in the light of the acquisition of the former Hapsburg territories: the so called new border provinces of Italy. Particularly the Eastern border province was inhabited by several groups of both Rom and Sinti: the *Krasaria Sinti* of the Carso plateau and the *H(e)rvansko, Slovénsko and Istriansko Roma* who continued their familiar patterns of mobility between the old and the new borders. They were easily classified as “foreigners” both in Italy and in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (the former Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes) and forced into a life of constantly crossing and re-crossing borders. This situation had been created by the post-First World War settlement. Under the terms of the Treaty of Saint Germaine, Italian citizenship was acquired in the new provinces (named Venezia Giulia and Venezia Tridentina) according to what was known in pre-war Austrian legislation as *Heimatrecht* (translated in Italian as *pertinenza* or *indigenato*), which is the link between a person and a definite territory - normally one’s own and one’s father’s birthplace - (E. Capuzzo, 1992). The peace accords do not mention people with no fixed place of residence; in both the Kingdom of Italy and Austria-Hungary (F. Freund, 2013) vagabondage was punishable by law. A very strict interpretation of the citizenship rules for people who had no fixed abode, became a mean for denying citizenship to most of the Rom and Sinti living in those provinces (P. Trevisan, 2019).

The first Fascist circular dealing with the “Gypsies” was issued in August 1924: attention was drawn to the large number of “Gypsies”, mostly coming from the East, who were entering the Kingdom with properly passports with visas. The instruction was to deny visas to the “Gypsies” who presented themselves at the Italian embassies (P. Trevisan, 2017, p. 350). Only two years later, in 1926, two circulars were issued reasserting and reinforcing the 1924 measures; they also included instructions on how to deal with the caravans of Sinti and Rom that had already entered the Kingdom, who were to be directed to the border passes where they would be formally expelled (*ibidem*). As a matter of fact, the two 1926 circulars coincide in many respects with the anti-Gypsy policy implemented elsewhere in interwar Western Europe, which was mainly directed at hindering the cross-border mobility of Rom and Sinti families (I. About, 2014; C. Donert, 2007; T. Huonker & R. Ludi, 2009). The presence of Rom and Sinti in the North-eastern border provinces was “illegally” resolved escorting them to the border “at their own risk and peril”.

In November 1928, a circular was issued which warned against a new danger linked to “Gypsies” entering Italy: the communist propaganda. For this they might *upset or endanger state law and order* [my italics], let alone the safety of the public order. Against their will, Rom thus managed to embody all the fears of the Fascist regime, so that their supposed “dangerousness” significantly increased (P. Trevisan, 2017, p. 351).

For the first time - in May 1930 - Police Chief Arturo Bocchini issued a circular that took in consideration itinerant Italian “Gypsies” ordering them to stay at their place of origin [i.e. the town where their birth was registered]. In October 1932 another circular ordered they had to find permanent employment and to report where they intended to take up residence (*ibidem*).

However, the instructions from the Home Office proved so vague that the municipalities of Northern Italy largely ignored them, since they had no intention of dealing with Sinti and Rom resident. Those municipalities came up with a device to deny them residence: many birth certificates of Rom and Sinti of Northern Italy read «born by chance in this town to itinerant parents» or «born in a caravan», and this allowed municipalities not to enter those babies in the population register.

## 2. The Fascist persecution of Rom and Sinti (1937-1945)

During the 1930s the business of expelling foreign or presumed foreign Rom and Sinti became impracticable, because increasing border controls were provoking international tensions (especially between Italy and Yugoslavia). In this context, Police Chief Arturo Bocchini issued three circulars which focused on the “Gypsies” living along the north-eastern borders and were addressed to the Prefects of Bolzano, Trent, Trieste, Gorizia, Pola, Fiume and Zara (P. Trevisan, 2017, p. 352). A key feature of these is the use for the first time of the phrase “certain or presumed Italian nationality”. It was a phrase that had no referent in the existing legislation, but which created a new category for people whose status had long been undefined.

The common denominator of the three circulars was the necessity to have a fixed residence, though only Rom who were not considered “dangerous” could be settled in the border provinces; the others had to be moved to the Centre and South of Italy, as provided for by the ordinary confinement laws. Police confinement was one of the key features of the Fascist repressive system, designed for various categories of supposedly “dangerous” individuals (C. Ghini & A. Dal Pont, 1971; A. Dal Pont & S. Carolini, 1983; C. Poesio, 2011). This measure was used against political opponents and as a “punishment” for homosexuals, members of a dissenting religious denominations (Evangelical Christians and Jehovah’s Witnesses) and women whose behavior was considered immoral (for example, prostitutes and midwives who practiced abortions). In the province of Pola most Istrian Rom (that is, ninety people) were confined to Sardinia island from February 1938 onwards (D. Dukovski, 1996).

As Italy was preparing for war, the “Gypsy danger” drove the regime to block the mobility of all Rom and Sinti living in the Kingdom of Italy and to move from a policy of “confinement” to one of internment. The day after Italy entered the war (June 11, 1940) Bocchini issued a circular on foreign “Gypsies” coming from Yugoslavia:

«It has come to our attention that several gypsy caravans, some led by foreigners, among them Yugoslav residents, are either anti-national propaganda or espionage vehicles. Some appear to be conducting business, connected to selling objects, either in order to approach citizens of the popular classes, gain their trust, and then speak unfavorably of our politics, or acquiring various news items. Your excellencies, focus your attention on the insidious possibilities of damage to us constituted by these traveling caravans and on the necessity of carefully following each move they make, fully utilizing the opportunities to assign generally suspect gypsies to concentration camps».<sup>4</sup>

On 11 September 1940, Arturo Bocchini issued a further circular which no longer distinguished between Italians and foreigners:

«In view of the fact that they sometimes commit serious crimes because of their innate nature and methods of organization, and in view of the possibility that among them there are elements capable of carrying out anti-national activities, it is indispensable that all Gypsies are controlled, given that in a state of freedom, they can easily escape from police investigation because of their itinerant lifestyle [...] It is ordered that those of Italian nationality, presumed or confirmed, who are still in circulation, are to be rounded up as quickly as possible and concentrated under rigorous surveillance in a suitable locality in every province [...] Apart from the more dangerous or suspicious elements who are to be sent to the islands or regions far from the border provinces».<sup>5</sup>

Under the terms of Bocchini’s circular, all Rom and Sinti were now equally dangerous simply by virtue of being “Gypsies” and itinerants: two features which Fascism regarded as intrinsically

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.michelesarfatti.it/documenti-e-commenti/una-storia-della-normativa-antizigana-nellitalia-fascista-i-testi-delle-circolari>.

<sup>5</sup> Circular 63462.10, 11 September 1940, in Archivio Centrale dello Stato (henceforth ACS), MI, DGPS, Massime, cat. M/4, folder 105, published for the first time by Simonetta Carolini (1987).

linked. The internment of Rom and Sinti came within the wider system of civilian internment that Fascism provided for whoever it regarded as a danger to state security, whatever their nationality<sup>6</sup>. This took two forms: internment in “concentration camps” (especially in the Centre and the South of Italy) and “internment in special localities” (similar to forced residency)<sup>7</sup>. In this latter case the prefect had the task to identify sites suitable for the concentration of Rom and Sinti in the territory under their jurisdiction, excluding the vicinity of factory zones, explosives deposits, or any sort of “work [of] military interest”. Isolated areas and small villages were selected - which made living conditions even harder. From 1940 and 1943 “Gypsies” are subjected to both.

Between September and December 1940, 861 Rom and Sinti (including 477 minors) had been recorded as a result of this circular: of these 534 were interned in special localities. In 1941 and 1942 data were recorded for only a few localities. Note that the economic crisis of winter 1941/42 had dramatically cut the funds available for the internees, so that the smaller municipalities could no longer manage the presence of Rom and Sinti.

Starting in 1940 the Home Office set up also three camps for the internment of Rom and Sinti in the South of Italy: Boiano, Agnone and Tossicia. The first internment camp where Rom were sent was Boiano, in Molise (C.S. Capogreco, 2004, p. 206; S. Carolini, 1987, p. 33; A. Osti Guerrazzi, 2004). Rom from the Eastern border provinces, Croatian and Spanish Rom were sent there. In August 1941 they would be transferred at the Agnone camp, together with French, Belgian and some Italian Sinti<sup>8</sup> (G. Boursier, 1996a; C.S. Capogreco, 2004, pp. 205-6; M. Karpati, 1984, pp. 41-47; B.Z. Levak, 1976; P. Tanzj, 2001). After that, approximately 120 Rom from the province of Ljubljana were interned at Tossicia, in Abruzzo, where food was scarce and the hygienic conditions were deplorable (G. Boursier, 1999; B. Braidic, 1984; R. Hudorovic, 1983; M. Karpati, 1984, pp. 42-43; I. Iacoponi, 1985). For a very short period of time - in summer 1943 - a Rom extended family was interned in Ferramonti di Tarsia (M. Karpati, 1993), the biggest Jews camp in Italy. Among the internment camps that were established by the Italian army - where the living conditions were even worse - was that of Gonars (Udine), where approximately 30 Slovenian and Croatian Rom were interned (A. Kersevan, 2003, pp.129-30), some of them came from the Arbe (Rab) camp<sup>9</sup>. Among the victims of the Arbe (Rab) internment camp three person with a Roma family name are listed (T. Ferenc, 2000, p. 439).

The Rom and Sinti who were interned in camps are quite easily identified through their personal files, whereas those who were interned in special localities can only be detected through the records of expenses incurred by the local authorities for their upkeep: they are not listed by name, so their history needs to be reconstructed by combining the few traces that are available in local archives with the personal testimony of Rom and Sinti themselves<sup>10</sup>.

The analysis of the archival sources clearly shows that the 1940 September circular was unevenly implemented across Italy. In some provinces only Rom and Sinti of confirmed or presumed Italian citizenship were detained, in others Rom and Sinti who were foreign nationals, and in still others none at all.

A preliminary analysis of the documents shows that the main problem for the internees was poverty; more precisely, the scanty allowance of 5.5 Italian *lire* per day per the head of the household and 1 *lira* per day per wife and each minor child. Considering that minors were about 60 to 70% of all internees, and that sustaining a horse cost 7 *lire* per day, one can easily calculate how dramatic food scarcity was. Even in 1943, when the allowance for the other internees was raised

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<sup>6</sup> The internment of Italian and foreign civilians was regulated by the circulars issued on 1 and 8 June 1940 - later included in the Public Security Law of 17 September 1940 (G. Antoniani Persichilli, 1978; C.S. Capogreco, 2004; S. Carolini, 1987; K. Voigt, 1993-1996).

<sup>7</sup> The most obvious difference between confinement and local internment is that the latter was a safety measure due to the state of war, whereas the former was a police measure whose term was set by a special commission.

<sup>8</sup> Up to date we know the name of 150 internees.

<sup>9</sup> The testimonies of Maria and Stanka Braidich - interned in the Gonars camp - are available at: <https://www.ilnarratore.com/it/andrea-giuseppini-le-storie-di-stanka-e-maria-download/>

<sup>10</sup> Internment localities for “Gypsies” in Emilia Romagna are analyzed by Paola Trevisan (2010; 2018).

from 6.5 to 8 *lire*, the Rom continued to receive 6.5 *lire*. Medicines and healthcare were also a problem: the municipalities lacked the funds to pay for them and failed to get any reimbursement from the Home Office, which claimed that all the expenses should be covered by the daily allowance.

While the Fascist regime repeatedly ordered to the border police for blocking the Rom flow from Croatia, some families continued to pass the frontier clandestinely. The final two circulars (September 1942 and March 1943) regarding “Gypsies” issued by the regime demonstrate this.

September 7<sup>th</sup>, 1942: from the Head of the police to the Prefects of the border provinces: «An alert has been issued that caravans of foreign Gypsies with uncertain aims have been clandestinely entering Italy via Venezia Giulia and Istria. They easily move from one location to another, eluding every attempt at identification. It is requested that security measures be undertaken along the frontier to prevent the entrance of said elements into the Kingdom.»<sup>11</sup>

March 5<sup>th</sup>, 1943: The General Inspector of Public Security for Venezia Giulia to the Police Commissioners of Trieste, Gorizia, Fiume and Pola: «The presence of some Gypsies caravans in Venezia Giulia has been signaled. Given the current conditions in the area, the presence of such a category of vagabonds cannot be tolerated, since rebels, communist messengers, and saboteurs may find refuge among them. I request that you take the opportunity to make arrangements so that all components of the caravans are stopped and deported to their country of origin.»<sup>12</sup>

Documents have not yet been uncovered that can ascertain how much the fascist regime knew about the genocide of Rom perpetrated in Independent State of Croatia (NDI) by the Ustaša (A. Korb, 2013).

After the fall of Fascism (July 1943) and the Allied landings, Rom and Sinti managed to leave the internment localities and camps<sup>13</sup>. With the sign of the armistice (September 8, 1943), the North Eastern border region of the Kingdom of Italy came under direct German control, under the name Adriatic Coast Operation Zone (*Operationszone Adriatisches Küstenland*) and pre-Alpine Operation Zone (*Operationszone Alpenvorland*) (Klinkhammer, 2007). During the German occupation of Italy (September 1943 - April 1945) and the concomitant establishment of the new Fascist government - the so called Italian Social Republic - some tens of Sinti and Rom were deported to Nazi lager<sup>14</sup>. We don't know if the German Nazis had received special orders with regard to the persecution of Rom and Sinti present in Italy. Anyway, we can suppose that what severely limited the capture and deportation of Rom and Sinti in the Italian territories under German occupation to Nazi lagers was the choice of the fascist regime to not give a juridical definition to the category of “Gypsy.” For this reason, there was no register of Rom present in every province. In addition, paradoxically, it must be said that the regime had sent many of them to internment camps in South of Italy before the fall of fascism (July 1943), effectively removing them from Venezia Giulia. These circumstances indirectly limited the effects of the anti-Gypsy politics in the Italian territories under the German occupation, explaining the small number of Rom and Sinti deported to Nazi lagers from 1943 and 1945.

Up to day no precise calculation exists about the foreign or supposedly foreign Rom and Sinti expelled from Italy between 1940 and 1943 towards the bordering countries who systematically used to kill them as Austria and the Independent State of Croatia.

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.michelesarfatti.it/documenti-e-commenti/una-storia-della-normativa-antizigana-nellitalia-fascista-i-testi-delle-circolari>.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>13</sup> The only exception was a Sinti family interned in the province of Trento, who escaped in December 1944 (Trevisan, 2016).

<sup>14</sup> The documentation of nine Rom deported to Nazi camps from the Italian territories occupied by the German army is available in the web page: [www.porrajmos.com](http://www.porrajmos.com).

## Conclusions

In Italy, historiography has largely shown no interest in the Fascist anti-Gypsy politics. One motivation certainly derives from the missing of “Gypsies” (as a juridical category) both before and during the Fascist regime - hence, the absence of a specific anti-Gypsies legislation, which may have advised against exploring what happen to the Rom and Sinti in Italy.

I think the reluctance to admit that policies towards “Gypsies” constituted persecution, is closely connected with the marginalization of Sinti and Rom, which still prevents them from being acknowledged as part either to the Italian nation and European history. Even today “Gypsies” continue to be considered a threat to “security and public order”, possibly making the persecutions they suffered during the fascist period a topic which is not of particular interest to historians. This is why the testimonies of the Rom and Sinti were hardly noticed by society or Italian academia, also if today there is sufficient documentary evidence.

As we know, the transformation of suffering into evidence (so, a memory of the fascist violence and prevarication) requires being accepted and recognized by one’s society as a witness. In Italy this has not happened yet. No surprise Rom and Sinti still experience a partial, though everyday experience of exclusion from the nation: and the delay of historiography in considering the persecutions against Rom and Sinti mirrors this situation as both troublesome and unresolved.

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