

## Historical Briefings

### Roma and Travellers Communities Histories

<b>How to Use the Historical Briefings? .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The History of Roma and Traveller Communities in Europe.....</b>	<b>3</b>
A short introduction to the Roma .....	3
Arrival in Europe .....	3
Middle Ages and Modern History.....	4
Life in industrial capitalism .....	4
The Travellers .....	5
Discussion Questions:.....	6
<b>The Impact of Roma and Travellers on European Culture and Society .....</b>	<b>8</b>
Roma and Travellers in pictorial art.....	8
“Gypsy” jazz and Flamenco: Roma musical influence.....	9
From Time of the Gypsies (1998) to Peaky Blinders (2013): Roma and Travellers in Theatre and Films.....	10
Discussion Questions:.....	11
<b>Roma and Travellers Today: Politics and Strategies of Resistance .....</b>	<b>11</b>
Discrimination and Persecution in the 20th Century .....	12
Political developments and the the situation today .....	13
Discussion Questions:.....	14
<b>Online Resources on Roma and Travellers' History.....</b>	<b>14</b>
Archives and Repositories with Testimonies, Biographies and Photographs .....	14
Readings to Strengthen Historical Knowledge.....	15
Bibliographies and Life Stories .....	16
Anti-racist Guidelines to Prevent Antigypsyism .....	16

## **How to Use the Historical Briefings?**

It may be challenging to collect the necessary information to teach about the history of the Roma and Traveller communities. To make this easier, we have created a series of historical briefings focusing on different aspects of the history, culture and impact of Roma and Traveller communities for teachers and educators to start from. At the end of each historical briefing, you will find some discussion questions that will help to start reflecting on their experiences. Scrolling further down all the briefings, you will also find additional online resources of images, testimonies and archives you can implement in the classroom, and also some additional resources to deepen your understanding and knowledge of the history and culture of the Roma and Traveller communities in Europe, as well as some online guidelines on how to ensure an antiracist and antigypsyism approach in the classroom. In that regard it is important to note that this document contains a plethora of cultural depictions of the Roma and Travellers. These depictions are included to brief teachers on how Roma/Travellers traditionally have been and often still are portrayed. It is not our intent that teachers reproduce these depictions in the classroom. Rather, it is hoped that they will serve as an important starting point for discussions on the nature of prejudice in general, and antigypsyism in particular.

Keep in mind that the historical briefings are only a starting point – they do not cover all information about the history of the Roma and Travellers community, nor do they cover the local history of one specific country or a set of countries across Europe. Each one serves as an initial source for historical background information about the history, culture and impact of the Roma and Travellers communities in Europe. Thus, they will not answer all your questions but serve as an inspiration on what to focus on and where to start.

## The History of Roma and Traveller Communities in Europe

### A short introduction to the Roma

The Roma people are the largest ethnic minority in Europe. Based on linguistic evidence, it has been demonstrated that they originated from North-Western India, where they share similarities with other Indo-Aryan languages. It is difficult to assign hard dates, but the linguistic and written evidence seem to suggest that they left India at the latest around the turn of the first millennium, spending time in both Persian and Armenian areas before eventually reaching the Byzantine empire and from there Europe, where they, by the 16th century at the latest, had spread throughout the continent.

Currently, there are several distinct Roma subgroups living in Europe, among them the *Romanichals* in England, *Kalé* in Wales and Finland, *Manouche* in France, *Gitano* in Spain, *Sinti* in Germany, Austria, and Italy, and *Beyash* in Croatia. While each of these subgroups differ from one another, they are generally referred to as “Roma,” due to their common roots and shared history of discrimination. Unlike the word *gypsy* and its variants, Roma is an endonym, native to Romani, chosen as a term to refer to the various Roma subgroups at the First World Romani Congress in 1971. The term ultimately comes from Sanskrit *doma*, and consequently has no link to either Rome or the Romanians.

### Arrival in Europe

The historical reconstruction of the Roma’s travels from North-Western India to the European continent poses a great challenge: the lack of written evidence left by the Roma people themselves. Unlike many other historical narratives, based on detailed records left behind by the communities in question, Roma’s early history is essentially built on accounts provided by external observers, oral traditions, and the linguistics-based reconstruction of their migration from the Indian subcontinent. Given this historiographical challenge, writing the history of the Roma is an ongoing endeavour, one that increasingly also includes Roma scholars, researchers and historians themselves. Linguists played a key role in this development by studying the similarities between the Romani language and the Indo-Aryan languages of Northern India and analysing the influences of local languages on Romani throughout the travel from Northern India to all corners of the European continent. This linguistic analysis and the written accounts of those who encountered the Roma during their westward journey confirm that they left the Indian subcontinent in different waves and reached Europe around the 13th century, migrating via Persia, Armenia, and Asia Minor. Furthermore, several genetic studies seem to confirm these theories.

The first written accounts of the Roma’s presence in Europe date back to the 13th century in the Byzantine Empire, in the area of today’s Greece. The primary sources from that time describe the encounters between locals and groups of people believed to be Roma, who both fascinated and frightened the local populations with their foreign religion and culture. In other words, the Roma have been subject to stereotypes, prejudices and negative perceptions, of antigypsyism, which is a specific form of racism, since as early as the first written sources can tell. This period also seems to be the origin of the many exonyms used to describe the Roma. In several sources, the Roma are referred to as “*atsigani*”, a derogatory Greek term that is the origin of many exonyms used to describe Roma today in various languages, such as the Hungarian Cigány, Romanian Tigan, German Zigeuner and Norwegian Sigøyner, associated with stereotypes, prejudices and negative perceptions of the Roma people.

Likewise, Roma were especially linked to a region of the Southwestern Peloponnese often called “little Egypt”, which likely served as the origin of the believed link between Roma and Egypt and thus

the exonym “gypsy”.

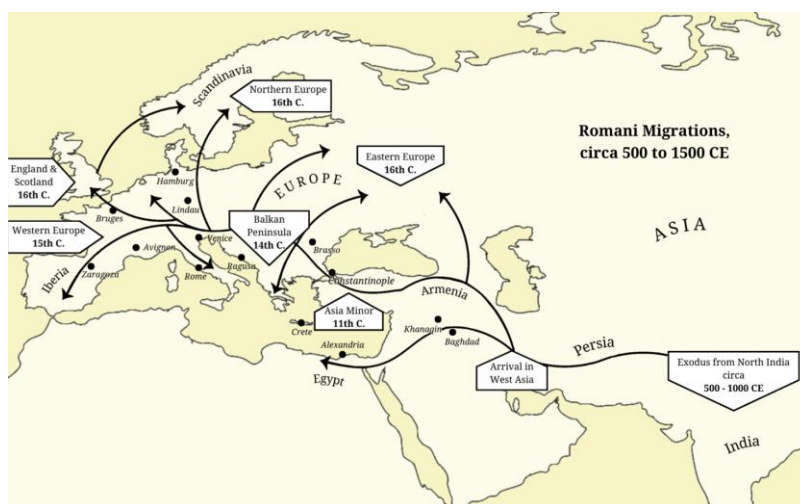
From the area of today’s Greece, they seem to have travelled to other regions of Europe.

From 1385 onwards, there is reliable evidence about the Roma in the rest of South-Eastern Europe. The oldest accounts originated from Serbia, Wallachia, and Moldavia, where groups of enslaved Roma were handed over and given as gifts to monasteries. A fact that is often overlooked is that the Roma people were the last to be liberated from slavery on the European continent. The official abolition of this dehumanising practice took place as late as 1856 in Wallachia, making it the longest recorded uninterrupted period of slavery in the world.

### Middle Ages and Modern History

By 1450, the Roma people had reached most European cities. From the Balkan Peninsula, groups of Roma continued their travel, reaching Western Europe in the 15th century and Eastern and Northern Europe, England and Scotland in the 16th century. This is also the period when groups of Roma, not always voluntarily, significantly reduced their travels or gave them up altogether. In Western Europe, this led to a degree of cultural osmosis between the Roma and the local populations or sometimes forced assimilation, with some Roma reducing their nomadism. However, apart from exceptional cases, the majority of the Roma people continued to be marginalised and persecuted. One of those exceptional cases was the first anti-discriminatory law for Roma issued by Sigismund of Luxembourg on April 18, 1423.

The presence of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans in the 14th-15th centuries and onwards highly influenced the history of this region. The majority of Roma became part of the Ottoman administrative, military, and economic systems, while a smaller group continued to travel within and outside the borders of the Empire despite the authorities’ attempts to settle and register them. Another part of the Roma population in the Balkans began to establish themselves in villages, primarily as craftsmen. In the 16th and 17th centuries, some Roma also became involved in agriculture, leading to the development of Roma villages.



Roma have historically experienced widespread poverty, exclusion, discrimination and violence. From the 16th century, the development and intensification of negative stereotypes gave rise to a wave of persecution which included policies of assimilation and expulsion throughout Europe. The newly established modern nation-states were aiming to be represented by some particular features of national identity, and Roma were seen as not having

these (as will be discussed more further, this labelling as Roma as the 'other' is the key of antigypsyism).<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, strict citizenship laws left many Roma stateless, while new vagrancy laws prevented them from pursuing a nomadic lifestyle. This determined two ways in which Roma came to be seen: at best as exotic deniers of modern civilisation and, at worst, dirty, lazy social parasites. These stereotypical views of Roma were reinforced by travelogues and reports from various European ethnographers and travellers.<sup>2</sup>

### Life in industrial capitalism

In the middle of the nineteenth century, industrial capitalism and eugenics ideology influenced nation-states to act even more oppressive towards minorities. In this context, local Roma organisations were being established worldwide, aiming to advocate towards protection of Roma from discrimination and from the adverse impact of industrial capitalism on their lives.<sup>3</sup> However, it was also then that race theorists such as Arthur de Gobineau and Houston Stewart Chamberlain started to divide humans into 'superior' and 'inferior' races. This led some governments to attempt to define Roma as a "race," as a group defined by shared biological characteristics. An example is the Bavarian government, which created a "Central Office for Gypsy Affairs" in 1899 to survey and gather information about the local Roma communities. Over four decades, authorities in Bavaria devised an entire system for identifying, documenting, regulating, and intervening in the lives of the Romani people.<sup>4</sup> Thus, when the National Socialists took power in Germany in 1933, these discriminatory practices were continued and strengthened, laying the groundwork for a systematic genocide during WWII.

### The Travellers

Another group that is often confused with the Roma are the Travellers. The Travellers are a general term for various other historically nomadic groups in Europe such as the Yenish in Germany and neighbouring countries, *Tatere/Fanter* (derogatory) in Norway and Travellers in Ireland. Though generally unrelated, these groups are categorised together due to their similar way of life and living conditions.

In general, most of these groups seem to have split up from the majority of settled society in the early modern period, and rarely intermarried with them. Likewise, they all developed a distinct language, Shelta for the Irish travellers, Scandoromani and Rodi for the Norwegian Travellers and Yenish for the Yenish. Some of these languages seem to have developed out of cants - deliberately convoluted speech designed to confuse outside listeners. Often, they also contain some influence from Roma as their similar ways of life put these groups into close contact with each other. In the case of Yenish, there is also a sizeable influence of Yiddish, while Shelta contains both Irish and English. In general, the distinction between various Roma groups and Travellers has historically been quite fluid, both because of similar lifestyles and intermarriages, and because both have been the targets of antigypsyism.

Like the Roma, the Travellers also share a history of discrimination. From the very beginning, like the Roma, the Travellers were seen as somewhat suspect, travelling around outside the bounds of settled society. However, at the same time, they served important functions in society, as merchants and specialised labourers.

---

<sup>1</sup> Dimitris Zachos, "How Europe Gets Roma Culture And Identity Wrong", Social Europe, 2018

<sup>2</sup> Zachos, cited above

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Acton, Beginnings and Growth of transnational Movements of Roma to achieve Civil Rights after the Holocaust, <https://www.romarchive.eu/>

<sup>4</sup> Jason Dawsey, The Bavarian Precedent: The Roma in European Culture, The National WWII Museum, New Orleans, 2021

This changed in the 19th century where Travellers, like Roma, increasingly were seen as uncivilised others. In Norway at the time, internal travel required a passport, and increasingly the Travellers were forced into workshops, poor houses and other institutions designed to discipline them. Like with other minority groups in Norway such as the Saami, there were attempts to bring Romani/Tater and Roma (in Norway different terms are used to distinguish the minority groups of Roma heritage arriving in the middle ages and more recent arrivals in the second half of the 19th century) into the fold of the national community and the mould of “civilised behaviour”, by force if necessary. Travellers in other countries were the target of similar treatment. An example is Switzerland where, between the 1920s and 1970s, Yenish children were taken from their parents in order to forcefully assimilate them into the rest of society. Like the Roma, the Travellers were considered “undesirables” in the Third Reich and attempts were made to register them (though the extent of their persecution remains unclear).

**Discussion Questions:**

1. What sources are available in your country to learn the history of the Roma and Traveller communities? Who has written them? Do they include the voices of the community?
2. Can you make a timeline of the history of the Roma and Traveller communities in your country? You can find an example below:

### 13th Century

Accounts of Roma communities in other parts of Europe (Serbia, Wallachia and Moldavia). Also the likely start of Roma enslavement in the latter two.

### 16th Century

Accounts of Roma in England, Scotland and Ireland.

Several countries start passing anti-Roma laws (Bohemia, Poland and Lithuania) and others try to expel or stop the entry of Roma in the country (England, Sweden and Trent)

### 19th Century

Eugenics ideologies drive nation-states to establish more oppressive regulation over minorities.

### 1899

Bavarian Government creates the 'Central Office for Gypsy Affairs' to monitor and collect information on the local Roma communities.

### 1944

Roma prisoners in the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp resist their planned mass murder.

### 1970s

Roma women are sterilised to reduce their reproduction rate in Czechoslovakia.

### 1979

Association of German Sinti and the Society for Threatened People organise the first large-scale international remembrance ceremony for Roma victims at former Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp.

### 2012

The Memorial to Roma victims is inaugurated in Berlin.

### 11th Century

First written accounts of Roma in the Byzantine Empire, current Greece.

### 1423

Sigismund of Luxembourg, king of Bohemia, first anti-discrimination law for Roma.

### 17th Century

Countries move to politics of assimilation, allowing Roma communities to stay but banning their cultural practices

### 1856

Banning of Roma slavery in Wallachia, current Romania, meaning the end of Roma slavery in the world.

### 1933

National Socialists take power in Germany leading to a systematic persecution, discrimination, and extermination of Roma communities.

### 1956

German Federal Court of Justice denies any racial persecution of Roma before the 1942 Auschwitz Decree.

### 1971

First World Roma Congress held outside London. The term "Roma" declared as the official self-designation.

### 1999

During NATO intervention in Kosovo\*, Albania forcefully expels two thirds of Kosovo's Roma population.

### 2015

The European Parliament establishes August 2 as the European Roma Holocaust Memorial Day.

## The Impact of Roma and Travellers on European Culture and Society

Roma and Travellers have influenced European art in a myriad of ways. On the one hand, there are various cultural representations of the Roma, often in ways that reflect their marginalisation, portraying them as stereotyped “others”. Think of depictions of Roma and Travellers in paintings. What comes to mind? Looking at traditional art history, Roma are largely depicted with a fascination for “exotic” costumes, hoop earrings, makeshift encampments, fortune-telling or crystal balls. The depictions that cemented the subaltern position of Roma in Europe first emerged during the 15th and 16th centuries. These would continue to be reproduced in subsequent centuries. While the politics of representation evolves throughout time, their oppressive nature remains shifting only between more or less pronounced forms. While we can assume that some of these images were not made to establish prejudices against Roma, these early representations still influence today’s Europe and continue to harm the understanding and public presentation of Romani and Traveller culture.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, however, there are also the cultural productions of the Roma themselves, much of which, such as music, folklore, fashion and crafts, has entered the mainstream canon of European culture.

### Roma and Travellers in pictorial art

Since art historians began to study Roma communities, many representations of women in pictorial art formerly thought to be Oriental have been reclassified as Roma. The first depiction of a Roma is a German drawing from the last quarter of the fifteenth century, now archived at the National Gallery in Prague.<sup>6</sup> It shows a mother holding her child, accompanied by the inscription “Ziginer” over her head, wearing a turban and a long cloak. Different versions of the cloak will continue to appear in artworks until the nineteenth century.

There are also several representations in which Jews appear in “Roma clothes,” for instance, the Gathering of the Manna scene in the *Altarpiece of the Holy Sacrament* by Dieric Bouts in Leuven. The Roma became one of many “stock characters” together with Saracens (Muslims) and Jews, serving as the antithesis of Christian Europe. Several sources trace the Roma back to the condemned or denied characters of the Bible<sup>7</sup>. It is thus hardly surprising that the dark-skinned Roma came to signify morally questionable types in the iconography of Christianity. However, some artists, such as Jan van de Venne, depicted Roma characters in his paintings, often in daily activities and in a realistic manner – which gained him the nickname “Master of the Gypsies.”

From the sixteenth until the eighteenth century, few artworks depicted real Roma individuals; the vast majority were purely fictional stock characters. Around this time, they started to be demonised and criminalised, cast in barbaric, evil, ugly and thieving roles<sup>8</sup>. Their poverty and supposed wretchedness were often accentuated, such as in the 1621 work *Bohemians on the March* by the French painter Jacques Callot. However, this poverty could also be portrayed in a more “positive” light, as the Roma were often given much of the same treatment as the native people of European colonies cast in the role of the “noble savage” - simple and primitive people untouched by the corruption of civilization. During the Enlightenment, we find several detailed drawings and genre woodcuts of traditional Roma costumes and occupations,<sup>9</sup> for example, Roma figures appearing as musicians and performers.

---

<sup>5</sup> Timea Junghaus, “Towards a New Art History – The Image of Roma in Western Art”, <https://www.romarchive.eu/>

<sup>6</sup> Junghaus, cited above

<sup>7</sup> Junghaus, cited above

<sup>8</sup> Junghaus, cited above

<sup>9</sup> Junghaus, cited above



Thus, the lifestyle of Roma and Travellers becomes the emblem of what it is to be “bohemian” (in France, the term *bohémien* was traditionally used to describe the Roma since the 15th century, as they were believed to have come from Bohemia), living for momentary pleasures and art. Bohemianism – a way of life embraced by artists and others in the early nineteenth century – was a counterculture.<sup>10</sup>

This traditional exoticizing way of representing Roma in art continued in the 20th century. An example is Otto Mueller, also known as “Gypsy Mueller,” whose art often depicted naked Roma women and Pablo Picasso who drew indoor scenes of Roma musicians.

However, perhaps more importantly than art *about* Roma, there is also a plethora of art *by* Roma. In the world of painting, several Roma artists were popularised by the so-called naïve wave (originally art painted by people not formally trained, but it developed over time into a genre of its own). An example is Ceija Stojka, an Austrian Roma, who was deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau, Ravensbrück, and Bergen-Belsen concentration camps during World War II at just ten years of age. Later in life, she started to paint and write about her experiences, being active as a spokeswoman for the recognition of the Roma and Sinti genocides until she died in 2013. Another is the painter Micaela Flores Amaya, “La Chunga,” who in addition to being a talented flamenco dancer and muse of artists like Picasso and Dali, was a talented naïve painter herself. Lastly, a more recent example is the Polish Romani painter Małgorzata Mirga-Tas whose art often features Roma and Roma history. An example is her 2011 wooden *Monument to the Memory of the Holocaust of the Romani* another her more recent embroidery *Out of Egypt* which reclaims Callot’s *Bohemians on the March* (often also called *The Egyptians*), using contemporary Roma clothing as material.

### “Gypsy” jazz and Flamenco: Roma musical influence

Although some talk of “Romani music,” no musicological genre encompasses all Romani music. Many different styles such as flamenco, jazz manouche, Russian “romances”, Balkan music, and Hungarian czardas as well as variants of jazz, hip hop, Western art music (classical music) and various “folk” genres have all been influenced by Roma to some extent, but there are no unifying “Roma” traits linking them. Nonetheless, there are pan-Romani songs, like “Gelem, Gelem”, which was institutionalised as the national or international Romani anthem in 1971 at the First World Roma Congress. Until then, the song had been known as a folk song to many Roma, primarily in the Balkans.<sup>11</sup> Along with the Romani flag, which usually accompanies the anthem in political contexts, these two symbols launched a set of discourses collectively known as Romani nationalism.

Some features are present in several Romani musical styles. Percussive vocables (nonsense syllables) can be traced back to the Indian subcontinent. The dances also have commonalities, like swirls, footwork and stomping, hip and shoulder movements and arm-work. Even some Roma groups that seem to have had no contact with one another, in view of their different dialect, music and beliefs, have common dance movements and song lyrics.<sup>12</sup>

János Bihari, Panna Czinka, Pista Dankó and Riccardo Sahiti are a few Romani composers and orchestral conductors who have highly influenced European classical music since the 18th century all the way to today. Romani instrument-makers have also contributed to orchestras and chamber groups in many countries. While it may be uncommon for women in many societies to play musical instruments, girls in Romani families have

---

<sup>10</sup> Junghaus, cited above

<sup>11</sup> Petra Gelbart, “The Romani Anthem as a Microcosm of Diversity”, <https://www.romarchive.eu/>

<sup>12</sup> Petra Gelbart, “Initiative for Romani music at NYU”, 2012

not been excluded from formal instruction in the violin<sup>13</sup> (The Girls of the Rajkó Ensemble), guitar, cimbalom or other instruments.

“Gypsy jazz” is the name of a genre based mainly on the recorded work of guitarist Django Reinhardt. Reinhardt became internationally famous with the Quintette du Hot Club de France in the mid-1930s. He became the backbone of the Parisian jazz scene, even under Nazi occupation, and toured in Europe and the United States. His legacy extends well beyond jazz as he has been a key influence for guitarists worldwide; for example, he pioneered techniques for solo guitar improvisation and is considered one of the greatest contributors to the jazz guitar in history.

Romani brass musicians in southeastern Serbia play a significant role in the region’s musical culture. They were likely introduced to brass instruments during military service in the Balkan Wars (ca. 1912–1913) and later formed ensembles to perform folk music. These bands have preserved 19th century older repertoires from the, which they continue to play nowadays at celebrations. Roma musicians are expanding the popularity of “Balkan Gypsy Brass” music, reaching national and international audiences.<sup>14</sup>

As an art form, Flamenco is a form of oral history where behaviour, gestures, poetry, dance, music and emotions come together to document a people's and a region's past. Flamenco originated with the Spanish Roma and is closely linked to interaction between non-Roma and Roma. Consequently, a large part of all the *Gitano* artistic movements in nineteenth-century Spain directly relate being *Gitano* to being flamenco, which complicates the task of studying the history of the Roma people in Spain.

Apart from the Roma and Travellers’ influence in developing music genres, many renowned performers, musicians and composers have Romani roots.

- Šaban Bajramović, dubbed the “King of Romani music”. Bajramovic came from Serbia and had a long and intensive musical career. He was inspired by and performed within many different genres, including traditional Romani and Serbian music as well as jazz.
- Esma Redžepova, hailed as one of the world’s “50 Great Voices” and crowned “The Queen of Romani Music”, was perhaps the most famous Romani singer in the world. Esma was the first Romani musician in Yugoslavia to reach mass audiences in the Romani language, and she was the first Macedonian woman to perform on television.
- Yuri Yunakov is a saxophone superstar from Bulgaria. In 2011, Yunakov was awarded the prestigious National Heritage Fellowship Award from the US National Endowment for the Arts, the highest honour for an American folk musician. He gained international recognition for his pioneering work in Bulgarian “wedding music,” a genre that was officially banned by the socialist government but which became a form of countercultural expression. During this period, Yunakov went to jail for playing this music.<sup>15</sup>
- The Rajkó Ensemble, the “Gypsy Orchestra of the League of Young Communists Artists Centre,” was founded in Budapest in 1952 as a staged folk ensemble, bringing together talented Roma youth from across country<sup>16</sup>. The Rajkó reshaped the traditional “Gypsy band” according to state socialist ideology.
- Valfrid and Tuula Åkerlund are Romani musicians with a repertoire of many original gospel songs – which grew out of Finnish Romani folk music – and became an established style among Roma in Finland.

<sup>13</sup> Petra Gelbart, “Men in Black, Women in Sight”, <https://www.romarchive.eu/>

<sup>14</sup> Alexander Marković, “Romani Brass Bands in Southeast Serbia – An Overview”, <https://www.romarchive.eu/>

<sup>15</sup> Carol Silverman, “Yuri Yunakov – Bulgarian Saxophonist”, <https://www.romarchive.eu/>

<sup>16</sup> Lynn Hooker, “The Rajkó Ensemble”, <https://www.romarchive.eu/>

- Damian Drăghici, a Romanian musician of Romani origin. He is renowned for his combining jazz with traditional Romanian pan flute music, as well as for being elected as a member of the European Parliament.

### **From *Time of the Gypsies* (1998) to *Peaky Blinders* (2013): Roma and Travellers in Theatre and Films**

Roma and Travellers have been present in the European theatre and cinema development since its inception - whether as dramaturgs or directors, actors, dancers, acrobats, animal tamers or scriptwriters. The myths, stereotypes and dominant clichés existing in the collective imagination about the Roma people, as well as their artistic creations in all areas, have been and remain an inexhaustible source for theatre and cinema creators. It is important to note here that many of these depictions have played and still play on the prejudice and exoticization of the Roma. They therefore must be carefully contextualised when used in the classroom, else one risks merely reproducing and perpetuating stereotypes and antigypsyism.

The portrayal of Roma women on European stages has also perpetuated stereotypes. One of the earliest depictions was in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* (1607), where the association between Egyptians and Roma people led Shakespeare, to use the image of a Roma woman to symbolise Cleopatra's sensuality. The trope of the hypersexual Roma woman who seduces white men was perpetuated in the 17th and 18th centuries. Georges Bizet's *Carmen* (1875) is a notable example, where the story of a Roma woman's scandalised audiences, focusing on her relationship with Don José, a Spanish soldier<sup>17</sup>. The popularity of *Carmen* has thus played a large role in promoting a harmful image of the "hyper-sexualised" Romani woman.

There are many more examples of popular culture depicting Roma and Travellers, not necessarily positively, such as the "Gyptians" in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* books. In Star Wars, the Ryn race is allegedly inspired by Roma. Robin in the Batman comics is part Roma, as is Doctor Doom. The TV show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* has Roma characters, and the popular BBC series *Peaky Blinders* features the Lee and Shelby families, both with Traveller heritage<sup>18</sup>.

One many will be familiar with is the many adaptations of Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. All these depictions show how, often, negative and exaggerated stereotypes of Roma have been perpetuated through European/western cultural productions. However, these depictions have also received criticism. In particular, there has been much criticism of *The Hunchback* and its film adaptations, with its stereotyping of, for example, exaggerated noses or the sexualisation of Esmeralda's character.

On the other hand, some filmmakers have portrayed Roma and Travellers communities in a much more sensitive and accurate way. For example, Aleksandar Petrovic's *I Even Met Happy Gypsies* is one of the earliest internationally released features to be made in the Romani language and shot in its entirety among Roma people, showcasing everyday life. Another sensitive portrayal of the Traveller community is the Irish movie *Into the West*, directed by Mike Newell. The movie accurately portrays Irish Travellers' tendency to settle and social exclusion in Irish society. In addition, Emir Kusturica's films, mainly the *Time of the Gypsies*, have played a considerable role in making Roma culture, mainly the musical aspect, available and accessible to large audiences. Already familiar with the Roma communities of Sarajevo during his childhood, he conducted fieldwork for the movie, learnt the language - which ultimately led to the movie being shot in the Romani language - and selected actors from the Roma community. Kusturica has many other films, including Roma characters, music and culture, like *Black Cat*, *White Cat* or

---

<sup>17</sup> Sydnee Wagner, "Bizet's *Carmen* and the Wanton Woman", [www.romarchive.eu](http://www.romarchive.eu)

<sup>18</sup> Candy Bedworth, "Remarkable Romani - Astonishing Works by and about the Community", *Daily Art Magazine*, 8 April 2024

*Underground*. However, it is important to note that his films also worked with and promoted exoticized and stereotypical images of the Roma. It is thus highly contested within the community.

At last, there have also been critically acclaimed filmmakers and actors with Roma origins, like Tony Gatlif (born Michel Dahmani and from a family of Algerian-Andalusian *gitanos*). His movie *Corre Gitano* was filmed in Spanish with a cast of *gitanos* from Granada and Sevilla. But his real success came with the movie *Les Princes*, about a sedentary group of Roma in Paris. Today, Gatlif is a spokesperson for the situation of Roma in Europe, appearing on television to denounce the exclusion and discrimination that these communities suffer. Notably, the renowned early 20th century Charlie Chaplin had Romani heritage through his paternal grandmother.

As this briefing has demonstrated, Roma and Travellers are not isolated communities. Rather, they are an integral part of the societies in which they live and share common general cultural characteristics. Like any other culture, Romani culture is not static and rigid over time but rather a dynamic, constantly evolving and enriching system.

### Discussion Questions:

1. Can you identify other characters in popular culture that represent Roma and Travellers? How can you identify them? How are they portrayed? Do stereotypes play a role in how their characters were shaped?
2. Find popular Roma and Traveller artists from your country: how did they contribute to the development of the arts and culture of your country? How has their influence been acknowledged?

## Roma and Travellers Today: Politics and Strategies of Resistance

Although there are huge discrepancies between the figures for the Roma population listed in official censuses and the estimates published by independent human rights organisations, it is estimated that around 10 to 12 million Roma and Travellers live in Europe today. The overarching term “Roma” is often used in the international community to refer to the distinct Roma groups and subgroups living in Europe (Roma, Sinti, Kale, Romanichels, Romani/tatere, Boyash, Ashkali, Egyptians, Yenish, Travellers, Dom, Lom, etc.).

Many of these communities face deep social problems such as low schooling and formal qualifications, high unemployment and precarious employment, inadequate housing and lack of access to health services. Crucially, the gap between Roma communities and the majority population has been growing significantly in the last decades and is increasingly worsening due to the economic crisis, the growth of racist discourses and movements, the lack of guarantee and exercise of rights, spatial segregation, and the absence of consistent policies aiming to revert these trends. These factors are interrelated and generate a vicious circle of social exclusion. The underlying cause of many of these problems is a systemic and deep-rooted “antigypsyism”, “a specific racism towards, Roma, Sinti, Travellers and others who are stigmatised as ‘gypsies’ in the public imagination”.<sup>19</sup> It is important to note that antigypsyism does not primarily reside in the actual traits or conditions of the group defined as gypsies nor negative actions or attitudes towards this group. The core of antigypsyism is the very act of labelling people as belonging to such a group and constructing this group as the “other” in relation to the likewise constructed majority group. Consequently, antigypsyism can have many concrete forms, from violent right-wing rhetoric and acts, to a widespread common/day-to-day antigypsyism, to romantic and exoticizing stereotypes and paternalistic attempts to help the ‘others’, not because they are citizens with national or universal rights, but because they are belonging to a perceived disadvantaged “other”.

---

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.enar-eu.org/about/antigypsyism/>

Consequently, when discussing a population as diverse as the Roma and Travellers, it is not only essential to consider diversity and similarities within these groups, but also what effects the very act of labelling them as specific groups has had and still has. While there is a growing number of public displays and information sources on Romani traditions and customs, direct and reliable information is still difficult to access. At the same time, specific discriminatory images of Roma continue to prevail in mainstream fiction, film, and folklore. Any attempt to offer a historicisation of Roma and Travellers' presence in Europe must start with addressing and deconstructing these deeply embedded myths and stereotypes.

## Discrimination and Persecution in the 20th Century

For centuries, Europeans had feared and mistrusted the Roma and Travellers, frequently accusing them of various crimes and labelling them as “anti-social” and “lazy.” During World War I, Germany suspected them of spying and required them to register with the police to facilitate their continuing monitoring<sup>20</sup>. In other countries, some Roma were interned in prison camps for years, while others served in the armies, often returning as highly

decorated soldiers. In the following interwar years, tensions increased, and local authorities were less willing to provide funds for education and welfare programmes that many Roma benefited from. For instance, police authorities increasingly cooperated internationally to create records of Roma people and fingerprinting was employed for the first time for that purpose. From 1912 onwards, files of so-called “gypsies” were created, complete with photographs and fingerprints, and in 1933, representatives of all the Austrian political parties came together in Oberwart for a so-called “gypsy conference”, where the first plans were discussed for forced labour or deportation to Africa.

Like the Jews, the Roma were considered subhuman and targeted for extermination by the Nazi regime and its allies. The concrete numbers are disputed, but the most common estimate is that at least 500 000 Roma were killed in what has been referred to either as the Roma Holocaust, the Roma Genocide, “Samudaripe(n)”, meaning “murder of everyone”, reminiscent of the Hebrew term “Shoah” (“destruction”) or “Phar(r)aj(i)mos” and “Por(r)ajmos” meaning “that which devours”. This genocide was only officially recognised by the German state in 1982, almost four decades later, an analogy of the unequal treatment of Roma in the official recognition and reparations for the Holocaust. During WWII, escape attempts and networks of solidarity with prisoners were key elements of Roma's self-assertion and resistance, together with desperate attempts to prevent mass shootings in occupied territories. For example, on May 16, 1944, the Roma in the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp resisted their planned murder and succeeded in delaying the mass execution by several weeks. Additionally, groups of Roma joined partisan organisations in Eastern Europe, and others were part of the French Resistance.

Nonetheless, the road to recognition was a long one. At the Nuremberg Trials, from 1945 to 1949, and the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trials, from 1963 to 1965, the crimes committed against the Roma received only marginal attention, even though in both trials, survivors testified as witnesses. Furthermore, on January 7, 1956, the German Federal Court of Justice denied any racial persecution of Roma before the 1942 Auschwitz Decree. In their statement, the judges used racist stereotypes that were also on a par with those of Nazi propaganda. Their statement not only directly affected the restitution and compensation of the victims, but also justified the persecution and

---

<sup>20</sup> Facing History & Ourselves, “Targeting the Sinti and Roma”, last updated August 2, 2016

discrimination perpetrated by the National Socialist regime. The ruling was only revised in the 1960s and was only condemned in 2012 by the then President of the Federal Court of Justice Bettina Limperg.

In Czechoslovakia, in the 1970s and 1980s, Roma women were sterilised to reduce the reproduction rate, and in Bulgaria, until the 1950s, it was forbidden to speak Romani in schools.

After 1945, the development of Roma political activism was fragmented. Since then, the demands for recognition and restitution have been formative in developing the Roma civil rights movement. The quest for recognition of the Roma Holocaust and the pursuit of claims against Germany was also crucial for the circle of intellectuals, paving the way for the international Romani movement in the 1950s.

- 1970s, the emergent civil rights movement succeeded in drawing attention through several high-profile campaigns. Most notable was the First World Roma Congress in 1971, leading to the adoption of the term Roma, the Roma flag, and the Roma anthem, shaping the idea of the Roma identity and of a Roma nation beyond borders. Another important event was in 1979 when what was then known as the Association of German Sinti, supported by the Society for Threatened Peoples, organised the first large-scale international
- 
- 
- 
- remembrance ceremony for Roma victims at the former Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. It was attended by around 2 000 participants, including the first female president of the European Parliament, Simone Veil.<sup>21</sup>
- 1980 was a turning point in the civil rights movement, with the hunger strike staged by 11 Sinti and the Munich social worker Uta Horstmann at the Church of Reconciliation on the grounds of the former Dachau concentration camp. The strikers called for society to reappraise the Nazi genocide perpetrated on the Sinti and Roma. After seven days, the Bavarian Ministry of the Interior relented and acknowledged publicly that any form of discrimination against the Sinti and Roma had to be abolished.<sup>22</sup>
- 1981, the civil rights movement occupied the Tübingen University Archives, where the documents from the Nazi Racial Hygiene Research Centre were stored, which included thousands of family trees, measurement card files and thousands of photographs, which continued to be used for scientific research.

### Political developments and the situation today

The last 50 years have seen the birth of organised Roma movements. The seminal moment was the 1971 First World Roma Congress. This congress was followed by similar congresses every few years, with the eleventh being held in Berlin in 2023. They have been important occasions where the Roma themselves have raised issues to address. The congresses gave rise to the International Romani Union. Today this is one of many Roma organisations actively working for Roma rights and interests such as the European Roma Rights Center (ERRC), European Roma Grassroots Organisations Network (ERGO) and the European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture (ERIAC). In addition to these international or European level organisations, there are also a plethora of national institutions and organisations working for Roma interests. Roma activism has led to attention from numerous high-level actors, such as the European Union which has established multiple frameworks for dealing with the marginalised position of Roma, with the most recent covering the period from 2020 to 2030. The European Union has also responded to calls from the Roma community for increased awareness, acknowledgement and commemoration of the Roma Holocaust. In 2015, the European Parliament passed a resolution declaring August 2nd as the European Roma

---

21 [sintiundroma.org](https://sintiundroma.org) | „Rassendiagnose: Zigeuner“

22 [sintiundroma.org](https://sintiundroma.org) | „Rassendiagnose: Zigeuner“



Holocaust Memorial Day, joining other established Roma commemorative days such as the International Roma Day on 8th of April and the World Day of the Romani Language on the 5th of November. The years-long struggle for compensation and recognition also included the wish for a central memorial in remembrance of the victims of the Roma Holocaust. This culminated with a memorial being put up in Berlin in 2012.

However, despite numerous political programmes and strategies, Roma minorities remain socially and economically marginalised in many countries, with higher levels of poverty, lower levels of education and worse health and shorter life expectancies than the majority population. Likewise, antigypsyism is still a huge problem, perpetuating marginalisation and otherness. In the United Kingdom and Ireland, the Traveller and Roma communities continue to be considered among the most socially excluded communities. Thus, Roma and Travellers communities still experience racism and discrimination.

### Discussion Questions:

1. What is the situation of the Roma and Travellers communities in your country today? And how have they changed through time?
2. What strategies for the dehumanisation of the Roma and Travellers communities can you find in this briefing?

## Online Resources on Roma and Travellers' History

### Archives and Repositories with Testimonies, Biographies and Photographs

- Gypsy Lore Society Collections: <https://libguides.liverpool.ac.uk/library/sca/gypsyloresociety> (English)
- Online Archive with testimonies "Forced Labor 1939-1945. Memory and History." <https://www.zwangsarbeit-archiv.de/en/sammlung/ueberblick/index.html> (English, Czech, German, Russian).
- Online book for students with pedagogical instructions "Elses Geschichte." <https://www.elses-geschichte.de/> (German)
- Online exhibition, "Sinti & Roma." <https://romasinti.eu/> (English, Dutch, Czech, German, Polish, Croatian, Hungarian, Romanian)
- Online exhibition: Romani in Europe developed by the Archives Portal Europe: <https://www.archivesportaleurope.net/explore/highlights/romani-in-europe/> (English)
- Online map "Traveller Community Mapping Coolock StoryMap." <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/62f124c0295c439ebd0de48f4ce2619c>
- Online platform with videos, music, articles and testimonies. "RomArchive." <https://www.romarchive.eu/en/> (English, German, Romani)
- Online repository of testimonies "Remembering Westerbork." <https://learning.westerbork-interviews.org/#/> (English, German, Dutch)
- Online testimonies, "Tajsa.eu." [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s2nR7IWKWwk&list=PLK-WOwh6Y\\_2nYEXg5D9-G-5EjTHXCu1Mw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s2nR7IWKWwk&list=PLK-WOwh6Y_2nYEXg5D9-G-5EjTHXCu1Mw)
- Repository of resources on various topics "Romani Culture & Arts Council," <https://www.romaniarts.co.uk/resources/>
- Repository with biographies "Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand." <https://www.gdw-berlin.de/en/recess/topics/172-resistance-by-sinti-and-roma/> (English, German)

- Repository with biographies. Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, “The Roma Genocide.” <https://www.hmd.org.uk/learn-about-the-holocaust-and-genocides/nazi-persecution/the-roma-genocide/>
- Repositories with biographies, “Lebensweg.” <https://verortungen.de/lebenswege/> (German)
- Repository with educational tools. European Holocaust Memorial Day for Roma and Sinti, “Educational tools and places of learning.” <https://www.roma-sinti-holocaust-memorial-day.eu/educational-tools-and-places-of-learning/>
- Repository with films. European Holocaust Memorial Day for Roma and Sinti, “Films about the Holocaust of Sinti and Roma.” <https://www.roma-sinti-holocaust-memorial-day.eu/films-about-the-holocaust-of-sinti-and-roma/>
- Short video on Sinti and Roma in Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp (13:13 min). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6auhJZ1yUT8&t=1s> (German with English subtitles)
- Short video on Sinti and Roma in Ravensbrück Concentration Camp (24:29 min). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VEVA9od6dMs> (German with English subtitles)
- Video series with eight episodes “What is Antizynganism?” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cVtfm2fLRkA> (German with English subtitles)

### Readings and videos to Strengthen Historical Knowledge

- Animation on Roma and Travellers History by the Open Society Foundation. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q6wSLfGBVGY> (English)
- Candy Bedworth, “Remarkable Romani – Astonishing Works By and About the Community,” Daily Art Magazine. <https://www.dailyartmagazine.com/roma-art/>
- ERIAC, Barvalipe Roma Online University - with video courses and lectures. <https://eriac.org/barvalipe-roma-online-university/>
- ERIAC, Barvalipe Digital Library of Critical Romani Scholarship, <https://eriac.org/digatal-library-of-curricula-roma-scholarship/>
- ERIAC, Stories of Resistance, <https://eriac.org/re-thinking-roma-resistance-stories-of-resistance/>
- ERIAC, Roma Heroes, boardgame, <https://eriac.org/re-thinking-roma-resistance-heroes-game/>
- Facing History & Ourselves, “Targeting the Sinti and Roma.” <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/targeting-sinti-roma>
- Council of Europe, “Roma History. Factsheets on Roma History: General Introduction.” <https://rm.coe.int/factsheets-on-romani-history-general-introduction/16808b18e9>
- Council of Europe, “Factsheets on Romani Literature.” <https://www.coe.int/en/web/roma-and-travellers/factsheets-on-romani-literature>
- Council of Europe, “Factsheets on Romani Culture.” <https://www.coe.int/en/web/roma-and-travellers/factsheets-on-romani-culture>
- Council of Europe, “Roma Holocaust Webpage.” <https://www.coe.int/en/web/roma-genocide>
- Current Biology, “Reconstructing the Population History of European Romani from Genome-wide Data.” [https://www.cell.com/current-biology/fulltext/S0960-9822\(12\)01260-2?returnURL=https%3A%2F%2Flinkinghub.elsevier.com%2Fretrieve%2Fpii%2FS0960982212012602%3Fshoall%3Dtrue](https://www.cell.com/current-biology/fulltext/S0960-9822(12)01260-2?returnURL=https%3A%2F%2Flinkinghub.elsevier.com%2Fretrieve%2Fpii%2FS0960982212012602%3Fshoall%3Dtrue)



- Herinneringscentrum Kamp Westerbork, “Persecution of Sinti and Roma,” <https://kampwesterbork.nl/en/history/second-world-war/persecution-of-sinti-and-roma>
- IHRA, “Roma Memory Porajmos.” [https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/sites/default/files/inline-files/2015-540\\_roma\\_memory.compressed\\_1.pdf](https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/sites/default/files/inline-files/2015-540_roma_memory.compressed_1.pdf)
- Junghaus, T. (n.y). *Towards a New Art History - The Image of the Roma in Western Art*. <https://www.romarchive.eu/en/visual-arts/roma-in-art-history/towards-a-new-art-history/>
- Key dates for Roma and Traveller people throughout history. <https://www.gypsy-traveller.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/GRTHM-History-timeline-2-1.pdf>
- Mirga-Kruszelnicka, A. & Dunjeva (Eds.). *Re-Thinking Roma Resistance Throughout History: Recounting Stories of Strength and Bravery*. ERIAC. <https://eriac.org/re-thinking-roma-resistance-book-roma-resistance/>
- Pollák, P. “Romani in Europe.” <https://www.archivesportaleurope.net/explore/highlights/romani-in-europe/>
- Roma and Sinti Genocide website with teacher guidelines, information divided into topics and country reports. <https://romasintigenocide.eu/en/a-f>
- RomArchive, “Roma Civil Rights Movement,” <https://www.romarchive.eu/en/roma-civil-rights-movement/>
- Sinti und Roma “Racial Diagnosis: Gypsy” <https://www.sintiundroma.org/en/>
- Zachos, D. (2018). *How Europe Gets Roma Culture and Identity Wrong*. Social Europe. <https://www.socialeurope.eu/roma-culture-and-identity>

## Bibliographies and Life Stories

- Council of Europe, “Right to Remember: A Handbook for Education with Young People on the Roma Genocide.” <https://rm.coe.int/168008b633>
- Dominique Chansel, “Roma On The Screen: The Roma On Europe’s Cinema Screens - Images Of Freedom,” Council of Europe. <https://rm.coe.int/roma-on-the-screen-the-roma-on-europe-s-cinema-screens-images-of-freed/16808b3f38>
- Ilsen About & Anna Abakunova, “The Genocide and Persecution of Roma and Sinti. Bibliography and Historiographical Review,” IHRA. [https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/sites/default/files/bibliography\\_and\\_historiographical\\_review.pdf](https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/sites/default/files/bibliography_and_historiographical_review.pdf)

## Anti-racist Guidelines to Prevent Antigypsyism

- Alliance against Antigypsyism (2016). Antigypsyism – a reference paper. <https://antigypsyism.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Antigypsyism-reference-paper-PRINT-11.07.2017.pdf>
- Anti-Bullying Alliance, “Gypsy, Roma & Traveller Targeted Bullying.” <https://anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/tools-information/all-about-bullying/at-risk-groups/racist-and-faith-targeted-bullying/gypsy-roma>
- Council of Europe. “Education of Roma Children.” [https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/roma/histoCulture\\_en.asp](https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/roma/histoCulture_en.asp)
- Council of Europe. “Mirrors - Manual on combating antigypsyism through human rights education.” <https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth-roma/mirrors-manual-on-combating-antigypsyism-through-human-rights-education>

- Lizz Bennett, Marie Simpson, Sue Green, & Fiona Ranson. “Out of Site: Challenging racism towards Gypsy, Roma and Travellers.”  
<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/574451fe37013bd0515647ac/t/589b3eabbefb6528348cb5/1486569148341/out-of-site-education-pack.pdf>

\*All references to Kosovo, whether the territory, institutions or population, in this text shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations' Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.