

The Nazi Period in Italy

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The Race Question | From Theory to Practice | Internment | The Camp | After the Armistice

➤ *In Italy the victims of the fascist dictatorship also included the Roma. Today, whilst historical investigation of the subject is only just beginning and has to contend with over half a century of more or less deliberate neglect and “memory lapses”, we can say with certainty that the Roma were tracked down, put on file and imprisoned by the fascist government of the time. Those interned endured cold, hunger and disease which in some cases resulted in their deaths.*

INTRODUCTION

In Italy research on the persecution and internment of the Roma remains very thin on the ground – especially academic research – and there has been little study of internment in a country, which is reluctant to acknowledge its complicity with the Nazis and consequently its shared responsibility for the policy of extermination.

For this same reason, there are many gaps in facts and figures on the fascist persecution of the Roma in Italy, and it is only now, thanks to the tenacity of a few historians and researchers, that this forgotten story is starting to be told. Unfortunately, figures on the number of victims are not yet known. Nor is it possible as yet to be clear on the reasons for the persecution. But we have to appreciate that even if the fascist persecution of the Roma can-

ITALIAN ROMA CAMPS OR CAMPS WITH ROMA INTERNEES

III. 1 (based upon Boursier 1999, p. 24)

not definitely be categorised as part of a racist policy on the part of the regime, aimed, like Hitler's, at actually exterminating the groups in question, the fact remains that the Roma were always discriminated against, singled out and persecuted as “zingari” (“Gypsies”). And that definitely means something.

by a policy of imperialistic domination which also drew on racist theory and practice.

In 1938 fascism revealed the full violence and ugliness of its racist face, particularly against the Jews. The Race Manifesto was published in July, spelling out the “differences” between the human races in clear terms, and this was soon followed by the establishment of the Department for Demography and Race and the Race Tribunal. Then, in

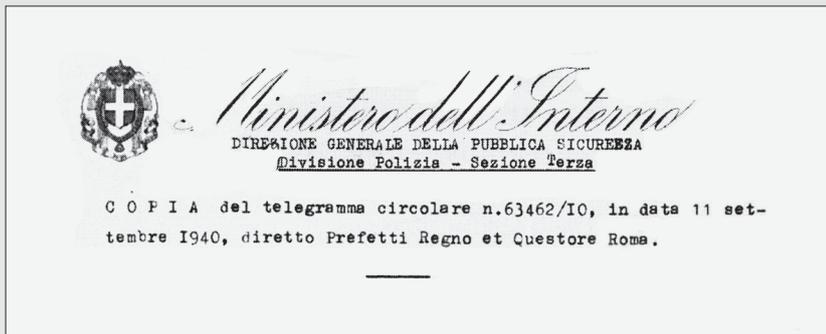
September, the racial laws against the Jews were approved, a clear reflection of the regime's violently anti-Semitic policy.

In terms of the law, at least, the Roma do not seem to have been included in the regime's racial policies. For that reason it has always been denied that they were racially discriminated against in Italy. But they were, right from the outset, targeted by policies on law and order. Italy too had a “Gypsy problem”

THE RACE QUESTION

On October 28, 1922, the fascist Blackshirts marched on Rome and, the next day, King Victor-Emmanuel III asked Benito Mussolini to form a new government. This ushered in the period of fascist dictatorship, characterised by the elimination – including physical elimination – of all opposition groups and





III. 2 (Detail)

The ministerial internment order of September 11, 1940:

"... due to the fact that they sometimes commit serious crimes because of their innate nature and methods of organisation and due to the possibility that among them there are elements capable of carrying out anti-national activities, it is indispensable that all Gypsies are controlled ... It is ordered that those of Italian nationality, either confirmed or presumed, who are still in circulation are to be rounded up as quickly as possible and concentrated under vigorous 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..."

(excerpted from Boursier 1999, p. 18)

TYPES OF INTERNMENT

Roma prisoners were of course subject to the general rules of internment in Italy, which consisted of two types of procedures: internment in "concentration camps" and compulsory residence in a designated locality (they had to stay within that locality and were not allowed to leave it). The two types of internment were practised almost exclusively in remote areas and small villages, in harsh living conditions where prisoners were subject to an endless number of strict and often cruel rules for their control and supervision. The Ministry of Interior ordered that the camps were to be established in derelict or rarely used buildings, far from strategically important centres and wherever possible in remote areas. Most of the camps were in the regions of central Italy, particularly in the central Apennine valley and the Abruzzi.

III. 3

which, as we shall see, took shape from 1926 onwards and became increasingly prominent after the outbreak of war.

In any event, in recent years the archives have displayed much of the the-

orising on the supposed "Gypsy threat" of the time, including the ideas of leading architects of fascist racial policy, like Guido Landra, head of the Office of Racial Studies at the Ministry of Popular

Culture. Landra, like others before and after him, made the issue an unequivocally racial one, not least by reference to appraisals of the physical and moral attributes of the "Gypsy race". [III. 5]

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

Most of those who have studied the question of the fascist persecution of the Roma have not yet drawn on archive material, but have often based their research on scattered documents and oral testimonies collected over time. Those documents have nevertheless provided a number of interesting facts, such as the detention of Roma in the biggest Italian concentration camp

at Ferramonti, in Calabria, or the fact that some Italian Roma were sent to Austria and Germany. In oral accounts survivors often recalled their places of imprisonment such as Agnona (in Molise), Tossicia (in the Abruzzi), the Tremiti Islands and Sardinia. [III. 4]

The fascists' views are already apparent in 1926, when a circular ordered the expulsion of all "foreign Gypsies" from the kingdom in order to "cleanse the country of Gypsy caravans which, needless to recall, constitute a risk to safety and public health

by virtue of the characteristic Gypsy lifestyle". The aim was to "strike at the very heart of the Gypsy organism."

On September 11, 1940, an actual internment order was issued which applied to Italians, too. This was a circular from the Ministry of Interior to all prefectures, instructing them to round up "Gypsies" and hold them throughout the country "under strict supervision in the most appropriate location in each province". It acted with great zeal to imprison the "Gypsies". [III. 2]

INTERNMENT

The identity of those arrested also emerges from documents preserved in the archives, particularly personal files, dozens of which were left in the records

with no one doing anything about them. These are important testimonies which allow us to piece together the stories of some Roma between the years 1928 to 1943. The accounts describe the experiences of men, women and children, itinerant market traders, horse breeders or coppersmiths, travelling around selling

wicker baskets or embroidered cloths, trying to live their lives despite being hampered on all sides by rules and regulations which ultimately dragged them into the tragedy of World War II.

All of them, even those claiming to be Italian at the time of their arrest, were expelled, re-arrested, and expelled

IN ITALIAN CAMPS –
REMINISCENCES FROM ROMA

Rosa Raidic: "My daughter Lalla was born in Sardinia on 7 January 1943, because we were in a concentration camp there at the time".

Mitzi Herzemberg: "During the war we were in a concentration camp at Perdasdefogu in Sardinia. Everyone was desperately hungry.

One day, I don't know how, a chicken found its way into the camp. I fell on it like a fox, killed it and ate it raw, I was so hungry. They beat me and locked me up for six months for stealing."

Zlato Levak: "In Italy we were in a concentration camp, with virtually nothing to eat. I was near Campobasso, with my family. There were a lot of us... in a convent, all closed in, with

guards around, like a prison... we spent nearly two years there. My eldest son died in the camp. He painted well and was a bright lad."

Antonio Hudorovic: "Once, whilst we were at Tossicia, a German officer came. He took our body measurements, even measuring our heads. He said it was for new clothes and a hat."

III. 4



III. 5 "Gypsy family" photographs from an article by Guido Landra. The photographs should "prove" the "inferiority" of the "Gypsies". (from Boursier 1999, p. 16)

again, in the period 1928 to 1940. After 1940, arrest was followed by internment, under the directive of the Ministry of Interior from September 1940. [III. 3]

Measures taken by the fascist regime against the Roma can be divided into at least two phases. In phase one, prior to September 1940, people arrested were expelled from the kingdom and dumped at the border, so that as a rule they came back across the border almost immediately, a procedure which was repeated at

intervals. In phase two, between 1940 and 1943 (we do not yet know enough about the period after 1943), the policy of expulsion was replaced by internment.

Details of the reality of imprisonment and of the premises in which the Roma were held have gradually emerged. At this stage it seems that in some of them, such as the Tremiti Islands, Sardinia and others, the Roma were only one of several "categories" held there, but in other camps, particularly Boiano,

Agnona et Tossicia, they formed a clear majority.

There was at least one case of a transfer of Roma to Germany. This concerned the Levakovich family, father, mother and eight children, who were transported to the German Reich in early 1944 after six years of "free internment" (compulsory residence) in the town of Ravenna. It is, however, not possible to find out more about this case from the documents available.

THE CAMP

At Boiano, in Molise, prisoners were housed in the five sheds of an old tobacco factory, in conditions so inhumane that even the fascists sought to move them to other premises. However, not the Roma and Sinti, who were only moved when the camp closed down in August 1941. At that stage there were 65 Roma (many Sinti), 21 of them under the age of 15. [III. 1]

From Boiano they went to Agnona, another village in Molise where the camp was in a former Benedictine convent above the village at an altitude

of 850 metres. Here the records not only show that Roma and Sinti were held in the camp; they also suggest that after late 1941 the camp was used exclusively for them. In July 1942 there were 250 of them in the camp and in January 1943, the authorities actually opened a school for Roma children or, more specifically, "for the intellectual and religious instruction of minor children of Gypsies interned there". A document dated April 23, 1943, records the presence of 146 "Gypsy" internees and insists that everything is proceeding well, including the school which is concerned with "weaning them away from their vagabond and amoral cus-

toms". Unfortunately is not possible to get to find out more about the variations in prisoner numbers, and the reasons for them, until the camp lists are recovered and studied. But there are personal testimonies, like that of Tommaso Bogdan, a Rom now living in Rome, who remembers his two brothers starving to death in Agnona and his parents who did not survive their escape from the camp.

The camp at Tossicia was operational from October 1940 and was closed down after the armistice. The prisoners there included Roma and Sinti. We have at least two lists which show that at least 108 of them were there in



III. 6

On the basis of the conditions of the Armistice of September 8, 1943, signed between Italy and the Allies, many camps in Southern Italy were closed. Roma then fled, spreading out over the mountains, in some cases joining up with the partisans. This photograph, in possession of the Rom Amilcare Debar, shows his partisan group, the 48th Garibaldi Brigade, in 1944.

(from Boursier 1999, p. 29)

July 1942. Tossicia, in the Abruzzi, was one of the worst of the camps in central Italy. The internees lived crow-

ded together in the buildings, and the Roma were housed in the Mirti barrack where conditions were intolerable: the

buildings had no windows, there was no water, and the sewers constantly overflowed.

AFTER THE ARMISTICE

After the Allied landings in Sicily and the defeat of fascism, Italy signed the armistice with the Allies on September 8, 1943, and the country descended into chaos. The Royal Family and the government fled ignominiously south, the Germans occupied part of the country and Mussolini formed a new fascist government in Northern Italy, the Social Republic of Salò. The country was fragmented and overrun by foreign

troops, whilst the anti-fascist forces organised the Resistance. [III. 6]

There is very little information on what happened to the Roma and Sinti during the time of the German occupation and the Social Republic, and even less on what happened to those already on record as interned when the armistice was signed. We know that some prisoners managed to flee the camps and joined up with the partisans and the Resistance. But in other cases prisoners remained in the camps, many of which then came under Nazi control. For this reason it is appropriate to consider to which extent

Italy takes responsibility for the transportation and subsequent elimination of Roma and Sinti in Hitler's death camps. We should at least mention the testimony of one woman who survived the camp at Bolzano (the transit point for deportation to the Reich) and who remembers "Italian Gypsy children" living with their mothers in the one hut set aside exclusively for women. And that of Vittorio Mayer, a Sinto who remembers his sister Edvige, dead at 20 in the camp at Bolzano: "That filthy war! In my mind's eye I still see my sister, trapped there behind the barbed wire."

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