Antipathy, Anguish, and Annihilation:
The Nazi Genocide of the Gypsies

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2003-2004
Abstract:

The Romani, or Gypsies, remain one of the groups most often overlooked in Holocaust literature. As the only other ethnic group in addition to the Jews that the Nazis deemed deserving of total annihilation, Nazi policies against the Gypsies contained all the brutality and inhumanity that characterized those used against the Jews. The Romani resisted the efforts of the Nazis, despite the brutal policies the Nazis enacted against them. To truly destroy the Gypsies, then, the Nazis first had to utterly convince their subjects of the inferiority of the Romani. Deep seated prejudices from before the Nazi regime and Nazi propaganda helped accomplish this in many cases. Since the Gypsies took such pride in their culture, the Nazis also had to convince the Gypsies of their own inferiority. Once the Nazis accomplished these objectives, the Gypsies became easy prey. Hated and feared by many, without refuge, and utterly demoralized in concentration camps, many Gypsies lost their will to live and welcomed death when it came. Thus, the Nazi genocide of the Gypsies consisted of a three-fold policy of antipathy, anguish, and, finally, annihilation. The true horror of this policy appears through the examination of official Nazi policies and propaganda against the Gypsies alongside the reactions of Nazi supporters, ordinary people, and Gypsy victims.
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Dr. Raphael Lemkin first coined, and then defined, the term genocide as a plan organized and supported by the state to physically destroy a national group or groups. The most famous historical example of genocide remains the Nazi regime’s destruction of the European Jews. The murders of six million people cannot be minimized, but they also should not be the only focus in writings about the Holocaust or genocide. When Dr. Raphael Lemkin first advocated the creation of an international document to outlaw barbarous acts at the League of Nations’ Fifth International Conference for the Unification of Criminal Law in 1933, he wanted this document to be used to protect all minority groups. Furthermore, the Nazis hated all non-Aryan groups, not just the Jews. Indeed, “The holocaust atrocities against Jews, Blacks, Gypsies, Slavs, and others were so inhuman, so atrocious and diabolic that any attempts to minimize the evils…on any group would be tantamount to betrayal…Our entire humanity is the victim of the Holocaust” (Evans & Mbabuike 9). Thus, while the Jews of Europe suffered the most causalities of any one group persecuted by the Nazis, they certainly did not constitute the only victims.

The Romani, or Gypsies, remain one of the groups most often overlooked in Holocaust literature. As the only other ethnic group in addition to the Jews that the Nazis deemed deserving of total annihilation, Nazi policies against the Gypsies contained all the brutality and inhumanity that characterized those used against the Jews. However, the Gypsies had faced unfounded hatred long before the rise of the Nazi Party. In fact, since the Romani first arrived in Germany during the early fifteenth century, they had faced persecution, prejudice, and punishment (Lewy 1-4). But the Gypsies took pride in their culture and resisted all malevolent outside forces to abandon it.
This did not change when the Nazi Party came to power in Germany in January of 1933. The Romani resisted the efforts of the Nazis, despite the brutal policies the Nazis enacted against them. They refused abandon their nomadic lifestyle and distinct customs – in other words, the Romani did not attempt to conform to the Nazi standards of the “master race.” To truly destroy the Gypsies, then, the Nazis first had to utterly convince the German people of the inferiority of the Romani. The Nazis relied both on their own propaganda and existing societal prejudices to achieve this goal. Since the Gypsies took such pride in their culture, the Nazis also had to convince the Gypsies of their own inferiority. Once the Nazis accomplished these objectives, the Gypsies became easy prey. Hated and feared by many, without refuge, and utterly demoralized in concentration camps, many Gypsies lost their will to live and welcomed death when it came. Thus, the Nazi genocide of the Gypsies consisted of a three-fold policy of antipathy, anguish, and, finally, annihilation. The true horror of this policy appears through the examination of official Nazi policies and propaganda against the Gypsies alongside the reactions of Nazi supporters, ordinary people, and Gypsy victims.

When the Nazis first rose to power in January 1933, the Gypsies represented such a miniscule minority of the German population that they did not interest Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party leadership. And yet by 1942, the Nazis had singled out the Gypsies, along with the Jews, for total destruction and had created several death camps specifically designed for the obliteration of the Romani race. What caused this drastic change? Recent research indicates that the initial indifference of Nazi Party leaders toward the Romani,

…changed gradually…largely as a result of pressure from below. In a political and social climate which stressed law and order, the Gypsies, long regarded as asocial and given to crime, drew increased hostility…[also] many Gypsies’ dark
complexion marked them as an alien group and inevitably drew the attention of those who desired a racially pure state… (Lewy 15)

In other words, lower ranked Party members increasingly demanded that the “Gypsy problem” receive more attention from the Nazi leadership. Moreover, Nazi policies against the Gypsies did not develop overnight, but instead changed slowly. By the time World War II broke out in 1939, Hitler and his party considered the Romani both racially and socially inferior – making them an easy target for deportations to concentration camps.

Nonetheless, the Nazi genocide of the Gypsies could not have occurred if German citizens and other ordinary people in the countries under Nazi control had not permitted it. While one must note here that not all Germans shared the Nazis’ hatred of the Gypsies, it can be argued that the antipathy of the ordinary people condemned as many Romani as the brutal policies of the Nazis. The origins of this antipathy stretch back to medieval times - long before the rise of Hitler in Germany. In fact, the Romani lifestyle “… was seen as a challenge to the German sedentary way of life. As a consequence…the host people reacted with irrational antipathy” (Thurner 8). Ordinary Germans not only saw Gypsies as different from their own culture, but a threat to that culture. This antipathy towards the Gypsies rose to a head in 1899 when the government established a Central Office for Fighting the Gypsy Menace. By 1920, the Weimar Republic – the only democratic government to exist in German before 1945 - forced all Romani to be photographed and fingerprinted at this office (I. Friedman 9). These policies set a dangerous precedent because the government of the Weimar Republic did not create the hatred that allowed them to persecute the Romani. It simply utilized and mobilized the ordinary German people’s hatred of the Romani in order to enact prejudiced laws against the Gypsies – just as the Nazis would later do with great success.
The Nazis both inherited and scoffed at the prejudiced judicial system of the Weimar Republic. A Nazi party member, Georg Nawrocki, illustrated the fundamental difference between Weimar and Nazi anti-Gypsy policies when he said, “It was in keeping with the inner weaknesses and mendacity of the Weimar Republic that it showed no instinct for tackling the Gypsy question. For it, the Sinti [a Gypsy tribe] were a criminal concern at best. We, on the other hand, see the Gypsy question as above all a racial problem, which must be solved and which is being solved” (Fraser 256). From the Nazi perspective, both Weimar policy and public antipathy towards the Gypsies required intensification. The central problem was that the Weimar regime and German public opinion continued to concede the humanity of the Gypsies. In Nazi Germany, the government would not permit this kind of weakness.

When the Nazis had changed the classification of the Gypsies from a criminal problem, to a racial problem, the Party needed a fresh method to resolve their new dilemma. One must remember that the Nazis not only required a system that would dehumanize the Gypsies in their own minds, but would also cause the ordinary German populace to view the Gypsies as a racial threat. A preliminary solution to this quandary came from Heinrich Himmler when he created the racial- biological evaluation system. This system, “…ranged from Z (for Zigeuner, denoting ‘pure Gypsy’) at one extreme, through ZM+, ZM, ZM-…the plus or minus signs denoting whether Gypsy blood predominated or not…” (Fraser 259). German scientists traveled to the campgrounds of the Romani in order to determine how many of Germany’s Gypsies fit into each of these respective categories. The Gypsies’ fate often depended on whether or not they had more impure Gypsy blood or more pure Aryan blood in their bodies. If they happened to have pure Gypsy blood, the likelihood of dying in a concentration camp appeared very high. How exactly the so-called scientists of the Nazi regime actually determined different Gypsies’ state of
impurity remains unclear to this day. Himmler’s classifications simply hid the Nazi’s racist policies behind the impersonal guise of science, causing the Romani to seem more like lab animals than abused people.

This allowed many scientists to maintain a clear conscience when examining the Gypsies. Some even believed that Hitler and his regime deserved praise from the scientific community for encouraging the racial-biological evaluation system. Professor E. Fischer, Director of the Kaiser Institute of Anthropology, stated that, “It is a rare and special good fortune for a theoretical science to flourish at a time when the prevailing ideology welcomes it and its findings can immediately serve the policy of the state” (Fraser 260). Fischer’s words show the effectiveness of Himmler’s racial-biological evaluation system. By allowing himself to think of the Gypsies in terms of a scientific experiment, Fischer eliminates all moral dilemmas from his mind, and allows his antipathy towards the Romani to rule his actions - just as the Nazi regime wanted him to do.

Perhaps more disturbing than scientists like Fischer were ordinary people that used Nazi ideology to justify their own ant-Gypsies prejudices. Eva Justin, “…the assistant to Dr. Robert Ritter of the Health Ministry’s Race Research Division, submitted a thesis on the racial characteristics of Gypsies…[that] declared that Gypsy blood was ‘very dangerous for the purity of the German race.’ Ms. Justin’s research was based on Gypsy children…At the conclusion of this study; the children were deported to Auschwitz, where most were killed” (Evans & Mbabuike 17). Justin had no moral dilemmas regarding genocide of the Gypsies before the Nazi Party rose to power. After it happened, she simply used Himmler’s system to reinforce her beliefs.
After the Nazi party convinced the scientific elite of the morality of mass murder, they had very little trouble convincing the rest of the German populace. Paul Polansky found evidence of the antipathy toward the plight of the Romani while researching Lety, the Gypsy death camp in the Czech Republic. Located in the center of a miniscule town, the workers of Lety could not conceal the heinous deeds that went on behind the camp’s walls. Strangely though, Polansky found very few people who would actually discuss the camp. When he finally did, “…an old man on a bicycle claimed that everyone in the town knew about the Gypsy death camp run by Czech policemen. The old man even recalled riding by the camp everyday on his way to work, but he would not give up any information on how the prisoners died” (Evans & Mbabuike 20). The old man’s story alone does not strictly implicate the Czech populace in the murders of the Gypsies, who undoubtedly were beyond helped once in concentration camps. However, the matter-of-fact way in which the old man discussed the Lety death camp with Polansky also begs the question of whether or not some ordinary people cared about the Gypsies’ fate in the first place. The Nazis encouraged this type of antipathy. They wanted the ordinary people to ignore the massacres they committed in the concentration camps. Otherwise, the Nazis could not have murdered nearly as many people as they did. Without the support, or at least the lack of dissent, from their *Aryan* subjects, many of the atrocities of the Holocaust attributed to the Nazis may have been preventable.

Once the Nazis convinced the public of Romani inferiority, they then had to dehumanize the Gypsies themselves. The Operation Work-Shy Program of 1938 functions as a particularly good example of the type of policy used by the Nazis before World War II broke out in 1939. On January 26, 1938, Heinrich Himmler issued a decree ordering the Gestapo to take action against the indolent. Many Nazi party members believed the Romani fit into this category. As
early as June 1938, the Gestapo enacted demoralizing measures against the Gypsies - such as deporting them to work camps, where they died in large numbers. While the terror and pain suffered by those taken to the camps must have been terrible, their families suffered even worse demoralization. In the case of Albert L., “His ‘criminal life history’ accused him of never having worked in his life…He died in Buchenwald on October 9, 1942…his next to kin were informed that the body of the deceased could not be returned to them for ‘hygienic reasons.’ His ashes were available upon written request” (Lewy 31-32). Like most indolent gypsies, Albert L.’s family had not seen or heard from him since 1938. After over four years of hoping and waiting, the news of his death must have devastated them. However, the Nazis had to do much more than devastate Albert L.’s family – they had to dehumanize them. By telling the family that they must ask for the ashes of their loved one in writing, the Nazis clearly indicate that they think of Albert L.’s death as less of human tragedy and more of a paper-work problem. The Operation Work-Shy Program indicates that the Nazis not only tried to destroy the Romani who resided in their death camps, but also the families of those Romani. If the allies had not stopped the Nazis, they would have undoubtedly annihilated these remaining families. By making these future victims feel less than human via the deaths of their loved ones, they became as easy to prey on as those Romani who had already arrived at the camps.

When World War II started in 1939, Hitler further increased his policies of demoralization against the Gypsies. The movement of Gypsies into crowded, unsanitary ghettos remains the most famous of these early war policies. The Nazis created the largest ghetto in Lodz, Poland, and took immediate action against the Romani as soon as the Gypsy transports arrived in the ghetto. Every evening, “…terrible screams and cries were heard from there…Jews of the ghetto saw cars crammed with drunken Germans going into the Gypsy camp. All the
windows had been smashed there — in the dead of winter…a typhus epidemic broke out among
them [the Gypsies]” (P. Friedman 384). The Germans tortured the Gypsies each evening with
their drunken antics. Even more terrifying, the Germans refused to help the Romani once the
typhus epidemic broke out in the camp. cramped into such a tiny space, the disease spread
rapidly and thousands of Gypsies died. To avoid typhus, the Gypsies tried to avoid one another,
cutting them off from the small emotional comfort incarceration in the ghetto provided. By
forcing the Romani to care only about themselves as individuals the Nazis broke down the
cultural cohesion of Romani as a group and, once again, made them easy victims. One could
suggest that emotional attachment to other Romani in these situations held more importance than
physical health. Once the Romani stopped caring about their fellow people, they often lost their
will to live and succumbed to death.

The Nazis most effectively destroyed the emotional attachment that bound the Romani
together in concentration camps. The first person account of Bubili Fojn illustrates the
devastating transition from proudful and caring Gypsy to demoralized creature in this type of
situation. Fojn first encountered the Nazis in 1938 in Austria at the age of fifteen. On the way to
visit his sick uncle in the local hospital, Fojn met two Gestapo. They quickly threw Fojn into jail
without explanation. When the policeman in the jail informed Fojn that the Nazis may send him
to a concentration camp, Fojn asked another prisoner what those two words meant: “The
prisoner…shrank into the corner, as though I was poison…’You’re a dead man’” (Fojn 13). But
instead of acting frightened, Fojn replies, “’No, I am Bubili’” (Fojn 13). This clearly shows
Fojn’s pride and his will to live. Fojn’s desire to survive helped him escape from his cell and
eventually return home.
However by 1939, the Nazis had recaptured Fojn and his family. A drastic change occurred in Fojn’s behavior as soon as he arrived at the concentration camp:

I cried when the prison barber clipped my hair and threw the locks into my lap...The barber put his hand on my shoulder to keep me from rising...With a dull razor, he shaved the rest of [me]...My whole body ached...Without my hair, I was no longer Bubili. I was a piece of wood. No, worse. Even a piece of wood could be used for something. We were trash...Why did the Germans have to strip us of our humanity? (Fojn 11-12)

In the above quote, Fojn clearly and poignantly described the overwhelming dehumanization the Romani suffered as soon as they arrived at the death camps.

Still, Fojn implored himself to survive while he lived in the camp surrounded by his family. He wanted to bear witness to the horrible crimes of the Nazi regime. But when his father died in a gas van, Fojn’s will to live quickly diminished. He changed from a caring human being into a dehumanized creature. For example, when the Kapos forced Fojn to carry rocks out of a deep stone quarry via perilously stone steps, he wrote, “The steps were covered with the blood from wounded prisoners. Those who slipped fell to their death. I always tried to be in the center of the column so if I slipped, I wouldn’t plunge over the side” (Fojn 22). Fojn unemotionally described the fate of the prisoners who fell from the quarry steps. He did not even pretend to concern himself with their fate. Utterly destroyed by the policies of the Kapos in the death camp, he evolved, or perhaps devolved, into the demoralized creature the Nazis desired to create. The loss of the emotional attachment to his father quickly made him a victim of the Nazi regime.
Remarkably, Fojn survived by finding a new source of emotional attachment. Sixteen young children arrived in Fojn’s death camp in 1944. By this time, Hitler had ordered that he wanted no one alive to bear witness against the crimes of the Nazis. Fojn knew that these children would die in a gas chamber if he did not act to save them. He switched the children’s condemned numbers with those of the extremely ill elderly. These people were so ill that the Nazis had not even bothered to sentence them to death – they would die on their own soon enough. Deciding who should live and who should die sickened Fojn, but it also gave him a new reason to survive. He states, “When the Americans marched into the camp, I was hysterical with joy. I had survived. More than that, I had helped save sixteen children” (Fojn 23). Saving the children gave Fojn a reason to live. Without them, he would have surely succumbed to the Nazis’ evil.

Perhaps more than any other regime before or since, the Nazis party knew exactly how to develop the antipathy of the public, as well as how to dehumanize and destroy their victims – including the Romani. The Nazis’ three-fold policy of antipathy, anguish, and annihilation, stripped both their ordinary subjects and their Gypsy victims of humanity. Once the Gypsies lacked champions, any hope, and a will to live, the Nazis easily murdered them. Many Romani, horrified by the atrocities they had witnessed and overwhelmed by the loss of their loved ones, welcomed death when it came. Any death, no matter how painful or humiliating, could not possibly be worse than the terrible tortures the Nazis employed. Over a half million of the Romani captured by the Nazis fit into this demoralized category and did not survive to tell their important stories. Since the Gypsies cannot bear witness to the terrible crimes perpetuated against them, we must do so – as well as continue to educate the world about the plight of the Gypsies.
Works Cited


