

Germany.

Repressing “the gypsy scourge”

Under the Weimar Republic in the spring of **1929**, the **National Committee Against Crime** in Munich assumed the coordinating role for “the repression of the **Gypsy scourge**” throughout Germany.

These procedures per se constituted the legal and operative but also cultural premise for the **subsequent measures adopted by the Nazis**, when they came to power in 1933. From that year onwards, although a number of other departments also contributed to the operation, the **Criminal Police** were called upon to oversee the entire repressive process.

In **1935**, the municipal governments instituted **settlements for Roma and Sinti** where local authorities were called on not only to observe and register their every movement but also to investigate how the families were structured. **Non-migratory gypsies were expelled from their council-owned homes and forced to reside in camps with little or no facilities.** Gypsy camps sprang up in several of the most important German cities, including Berlin and Frankfurt. Those interned were subjected to restrictive laws of movement, and their freedom severely curtailed. These open-air internment camps were, in fact, really ghettos where movement was strictly regulated by the Authorities .

Although Third Reich academics and politicians discussed and analyzed “the Gypsy problem” from a racial perspective, throughout the **1930s** the Regime failed to resolve the issue and define the biological nature of this community. It was left to the police to deal with the gypsies. In fact, until the outbreak of the Second World War, the position taken regarding the presence of Roma and Sinti was basically considered above everything as an issue of a social order, and their so-called “anti-social” behavior was deemed a threat to the *völkisch* communities’ judicial system. However, this did not make on-going persecution of the Gypsies any less harsh.

In **1938**, after relocating from Munich to Berlin, the Reich Centre, established to combat “the Gypsy nuisance”, took a **census of about 17,000 “racial Gypsies”, just under 10,000 itinerants and 5,000 hybrid or unclear cases.** A **Research Centre on Race Hygiene and Population**, established at the Health Office of the Reich, dealt specifically with finding the **definition of a “scientific” approach.** **Robert Ritter** and his assistant **Eva Justin** were two of the leading specialists on the subject. The conviction they shared with the political authorities was that they found themselves facing a **“race” apart** whose “biological value” (on account of dealing with a population of Indo-European origin) was the subject of various and, often opposing, opinions. Were gypsies to be considered Aryan or not? However, in the absence of any conclusive answers, an attitude prevailed whereby the legal sanctions provided for persons disturbing the peace, should be applied systematically.

The organized extension of this principle took place when the process of **“safeguarding security”** was increasingly applied against the Roma and

the Sinti, a process that also applied to groups who were considered dangerous, **even though no specific crime had actually been committed.** In addition to the Criminal Police, the Gestapo, or Secret Police, were also called in during this phase of persecution where habitual criminals and asocial people were the target for restrictive measures. A wide range of behavior fell under these definitions, beginning with the repetition of minor infractions, behavior contrary to public morals right up to the refusal to comply with regulations imposed by the authorities, even in the absence of specific laws on the subject. The margin of discretion and arbitrariness on the part of individual local functionaries was fairly broad. Above all, the Roma and Sinti were criticized for vagrancy, their unwillingness to work, behavior that deviated from the general norm, indolence and self-isolation. In fact, almost all these behavioral traits, when applied, evolved from the same segregation policies implemented by the public authorities thirty years earlier. In these instances, **the first signs of a racial policy being applied to the Roma** occurred with a program of “voluntary” **sterilization being implemented. This policy** decreed that adults and children be subjected to this process, often with the threat of serious consequences if they refused. **Sterilization meant cutting off the hereditary line.** In this way, the German authorities revealed just how they considered the existence of the Roma and Sinti to be a threat to German cultural and demographic balance, particularly as the country was undergoing a complete process of “Nazification”,

