

Non-recognition of the “Porrajmos” at Nuremberg

Though mentioned several times in the dreadful deeds related to **International Military Trials**, the trials held in Nuremberg from 1945 to 1949 against the architects of the crimes committed by the Nazi regime, the Porrajmos, which in the Romani language means “devastation” or “huge devouring”, refers to the mass murder of the Romani communities by the Nazi/Fascists. In fact, even today, the Romani Holocaust has not yet received the recognition that it deserves not only as an historic event but also as a collective tragedy. The many reasons for this are not the result of casual negligence but rather a repeated cultural and civil omission. They constitute the extension of that same mechanism of extermination, based on a dual system, that of actually killing the victims and, at the same time, removing from public memory any signs that they existed. The underlying assumption of the decree «Nacht und Nebel» (whose very name, «night and fog», was designed to evoke the final extinction), was targeted at political adversaries destined to be interned in camps. The murder victims would have been consigned to oblivion once the gigantic “political cleansing” of Germanized Europe had been concluded. Racial extermination followed and emphasized this approach: for Nazis in power, a crime could not be deemed perfect if the murder was not accompanied by **removal of the memory of the crime committed**. The fact that this result was not achieved depended solely on Germany’s military defeat. Recovering other memory of crimes suffered, not only by individuals but as part of a larger group, did not follow linear trends in the Post-War period, due both to different cultural and political attitudes which, from 1945 to the present, alternated both in regard to the internal rationale of the groups affected by repression and by Nazi violence. From this second, and strictly sociological viewpoint, **recognition of the condition as a victim** varies, depending on the contractual power that the group manages to express regarding the society in which it is active. In the case of the Romani communities, it is almost non-existent. During the immediate Post-War period, the painful memory was mainly the

prerogative of survivors and their relatives, but from a political point of view, it was part of the more general problem of *Displaced Persons*, or the resettlement, throughout the world, of a large number of exiles and refugees, often devoid of goods and even the most elementary rights. During the 1960s, the establishment of what has been defined as the “Era of the Witness” (Annette Wieviorka) was married to a focus on the victims, a fact which over the two following decades led to a real respect for memory, at times almost in unnecessarily complex terms where historical investigation was first placed side by side, then superimposed and, in some cases, replaced by individual biography. Regardless of the debatable nature of this phenomenon which, on the one hand, contributed to a socialization of the awareness of crimes perpetrated by Nazi and Fascist totalitarianism, and, on the other, induced the perception of the historical process as a recognizable phenomenon only on account of the fact that it was juxtaposed to individual events, the fact remains that the history of the persecutions and deportations of the Sinti and the Roma has not been given the attention that it deserves. Although there is no shortage of historical documentation (see Günther Lewy, Sybil Milton, Donald Kenrick and Grattan Puxon) what is lacking – and in all probability is likely to continue to lack – is the assumption in the public mind that the **Porrajmos** is an integral part of the history of the 20th century violence conducted by totalitarian regimes. The exclusion of the Roma and Sinti from this context is, in some ways, a part of the same **discriminatory rationale** which, in its most radical manifestations, led to their murder on account of their being considered an undesirable ethnic and social group. Without wishing to establish improper lines of continuity between illiberal regimes and democratic ones, to begin with, in both circumstances, there is a widespread indifference, largely, on a cultural level, towards groups considered, now as they were then, as basically alien, incapable of integrating or abiding by the laws and customs of society as we know it today. Although in the case of right-wing totalitarian regimes, this facilitated the transition to procedures of exclusion and, subsequently, persecution, with the more or less unanimous consent of the People; in

the case of democratic countries, prejudice continues to be fuelled through the refusal, in the collective mind to remember *those* criminal events. The perception of memory in the public mind, regardless of how it is experienced between members of the same cultural group, is almost non-existent and, when existing, is narrowed down to celebration of an abstract concept: that of yesterday's victims and, that of their grandchildren today.

In addition to the **persistence of a mechanism of prejudicial exclusion**, among other things, in a relationship of mutual reinforcement, even though involuntary, the Sinti and Roma communities often tend to resort to **oral memory** which has little or nothing to do with the methods of public speaking, by now highly ritualized and consigned to words and writings based on well-established procedures. Therefore there is a lack, not necessarily random, which shows just to what extent these mechanisms of removal from the collective mind already existing in the past, still pertain to the present.

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