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The Genocide of Roma and Sinti

Their Political Movement from the Perspective of Social Trauma Theory

Abstract

It is argued in this paper that Roma and Sinti memories of the genocide during the Second World War did not form a coherent picture of the past that would be widely shared among them. Therefore, the recent spread of memorialization and commemoration of the genocide of Roma and Sinti shall be interpreted as a process of the social construction of trauma in which memory increasingly becomes a marker of identity, not just the recollection of the past. The article presents the consequences of the genocide of Roma and Sinti for their post-war situation and the emergence of the memory of the genocide within their political movement, both on the local and transnational levels. Drawing on Jeffrey Alexander's social theory of trauma, I argue that Roma and Sinti do remember the Nazi persecution, that these memories are fragmented and incoherent largely because of the nature of the crimes committed on them by National Socialism, and that their self-definition as victims of genocide is a social construction embedded in their struggle for empowerment.

The genocide of Roma and Sinti during the Second World War was a result of a complicated process in which the old anti-Gypsy measures and policies merged with the Nazi regulations based on racist ideology. The process was largely inconsistent and de-centred, although based on a general consensus among its perpetrators. The genocide took different forms and intensity in the Third Reich, the occupied territories, and in the areas controlled by the allies of Nazi Germany.[1] Contrary to some interpretations,[2] it does not devaluate the status of the fate of Roma and Sinti as genocide, but it makes its study more difficult. As a result of the Nazi policies, whatever their nature, Roma and Sinti people have suffered terrible human losses, many Roma and Sinti communities have been wiped out and we have good reasons to believe that their final fate would have been annihilation had the military situation suited Nazi policy in this respect.[3]

This situation calls for a revision of the intentionalist, top-down approach to genocide as a consistent implementation of a preconceived plan. The Nazi persecution of Roma and Sinti can be fully understood as neither a consistent implementation of the centrally conceived murderous intention, nor as a contingent side effect of the relations between different sectors of the Nazi apparatus of power but rather as a multi-layered phenomenon that was not governed by a single mechanism.[4]

1 Michael Zimmermann, The Wehrmacht and the National Socialist Persecution of the Gypsies, in: Romani Studies 11 (2001) 2, 111-135; Brenda Davis Lutz/James M. Lutz (1995) Gypsies as Victims of the Holocaust, in: Holocaust and Genocide Studies 9 (1995) 2, 346-359.

2 Guenther Lewy, The Nazi Persecution of the Gypsies, Oxford 2000.

3 Eve Rosenhaft, Blacks and Gypsies in Nazi Germany: The Limits of the 'Racial State', in: History Workshop Journal (2011) 72 (1), 161-170; Henry Friedlander, The Origins of Nazi Genocide. From Euthanasia to Final Solution, Chapel Hill 1995.

4 Gilad Margalit, The Uniqueness of the Nazi Persecution of the Gypsies, in: Romani Studies 10 (2000) 2, 185-210; Michael Stewart, How Does Genocide Happen?, in: Rita Astuti/Jonathan Parry/Charles Stafford (Eds.) Questions of Anthropology, Oxford 2007, 249-279.

The nature of genocide Roma and Sinti experienced has influenced their post-war memories. I would argue, following my previous research,[5] that those memories did not form a coherent picture of the past that would be widely shared among Roma and Sinti. Therefore, the recent memory boom with regard to Roma and Sinti genocide can be interpreted as a process of social construction of trauma in which memory increasingly becomes a marker of identity, not just the recollection of the past, and an element of the Roma and Sinti struggle for recognition.

The approach presented here is a mixture of what Jeffrey Alexander calls the *lay trauma theory*, because it assumes that the nature of the traumatising event bears consequences for the way it is remembered, and Alexander's own vision of the social construction of trauma – because it assumes that such pre-existing memories receive a concrete shape in the social process of constructing the meaning of the past.[6] Here it means that Roma and Sinti do remember the Nazi persecution, that these memories are fragmented and incoherent largely because of the nature of the crimes committed on them by National Socialism, and that their self-definition as victims of genocide is a social construction embedded in their struggle for recognition and empowerment.

The aftermath of the Holocaust and the situation of Roma and Sinti

Among the outcomes of the genocide of Roma and Sinti that are the most important from the point of view of memory studies: one should mention the crisis of traditional culture, the destruction of the traditional patterns of memory transmission, and the generalised reactions of survivors such as anxiety, apathy and depression that have been passed on to the next generations.[7]

The Nazi persecution created for Roma and Sinti a situation in which the categories of traditional culture could no longer perform their role of the regulators of social life and frames of interpretation that could give meaning to the world. The survivors associated their experience not only with oppression and the threat of physical elimination but also with the destruction of the whole symbolic universe supported by cultural patterns (which was tantamount to cultural death). They learned first-hand that there are situations in which the elaborated protective mechanisms of traditional culture can offer no defence against the external threat. This experience subverted the sense of traditional culture and left Roma and Sinti survivors with a permanently emasculated culture, ruined tradition, destroyed family and clan bonds, and weakened system of cultural cohesion.[8]

The destruction of social ties due to mass murder, sterilisation and forced migration has resulted in the rupture of intergenerational memory transmission and made it difficult for Roma and Sinti to build communities of shared memories of past experiences. This has contributed to the further disempowerment of Roma and Sinti and to their withdrawal, enhanced by the fact that – for example in Germany – often the very same

5 Slawomir Kapralski, Naród z popiołów. Pamięć zagłady a tożsamość Romów [=A Nation from the Ashes. The Memory of the Genocide and Roma Identity], Warszawa 2012; Slawomir Kapralski, The Aftermath of the Roma Genocide. From Implicit Memories to Commemoration, in: Anton Weiss-Wendt (Ed.), The Nazi Genocide of the Roma: Reassessment and Commemoration. New York 2013, 229-251.

6 Jeffrey C. Alexander, Trauma. A Social Theory, Cambridge 2012.

7 Heike Krokowski, Die Last der Vergangenheit. Auswirkungen nationalsozialistischer Verfolgung auf deutsche Sinti, Frankfurt 2001; Heike Krokowski, The Effect of Persecution on the German Sinti, in: Donald Kenrick (Ed.), The Gypsies during the Second World War, Vol. 3. The Final Chapter, Hatfield 2006, 215-229.

8 Lech Mróz, Niepamięć nie jest zapominaniem. Cyganie-Romowie a Holokaust [=Non-Memory is not Forgetfulness: Gypsies-Roma and the Holocaust], in: Przegląd Socjologiczny 49 (2000) 2, 89-114.

people who participated in the administration of the genocide of Roma and Sinti have been handling the matters of survivors. Antigypsyism has survived in the opinion of legal experts and in popular attitude according to which the injustice Roma and Sinti suffered were "justifiable actions" on the part of the National-Socialist state.[9]

Having been socially discriminated again, the post-war Roma and Sinti communities did not have access to the means of production and reproduction of historical knowledge, nor was it a space for their experience in the public memories of European societies. Social and economic exclusion was therefore for the Roma and Sinti associated with exclusion from the communities of memory sustained by the societies in which they lived.

In this situation, Roma and Sinti have developed a number of defensive tools that further contributed to the silence regarding their genocide. The attempts to restore Romani life and culture involved the process of silencing the memory of the time in which the physical existence of Roma and Sinti people was threatened and their culture shattered.

One can thus speak of two mechanisms, which together have contributed to the silence about the genocide of Roma and Sinti. On the one hand, the non-Romani world has not been able (and willing) to place those whom it defined as "people without history" in what has been acknowledged as the central event of world history. On the other hand, the Roma and Sinti, with their memories being fragmented and disjoined as the result of the specific nature of the genocide they survived, have not been able to reclaim their own history, especially because some of them could perceive such efforts as dysfunctional regarding the main goal of Roma and Sinti communities: survival in a hostile environment.

With the help of the terminology used in memory studies we can interpret this situation as a problematic relation between two types of memory: an ephemeral, bottom-up, communicative memory that is sustained in everyday interactions and ingrained in the living experience of the past on the one hand and, on the other hand, the relatively long-lasting, top-down cultural memory that creates a frame for the acts of individual identification with the experiences of other members of the collectivity and is maintained by political, cultural and social institutions.[10] Although the experience of the genocide has been present in many Roma and Sinti communities in the form of communicative memory, it has not been homogenised and solidified by the frames of cultural memory. This situation has started to change only in the second half of the twentieth century together with the transformations of the living conditions of the Roma and Sinti communities and the beginning of their political movement.

Emerging memory and Roma and Sinti political movement

The new context for Roma and Sinti memories of the genocide has emerged no doubt thanks in no small measure to processes in which they have been acquiring agency and organising themselves in a conscious search for new formulas for living in the contemporary world. As a result of this process, the Roma and Sinti have begun entering the precincts of the media, education, and popular culture along with their own discourses and visions of memory and commemorative practices.

9 Günter Saathoff, Preface, in: Julia von dem Knesebeck, The Roma Struggle for Compensation in Post-War Germany, Hatfield 2011, ix-xi; Gilad Margalit, The Representation of the Nazi Persecution of the Gypsies in German Discourse after 1945 in: German History 17 (1999) 2, 220-239.

10 Aleida Assmann, Transformations between History and Memory, in: Social Research 75 (2008) 1, 49-72.

This has gradually led to the rise of forms of memory where the Roma and Sinti preserve their past experience and make it relevant to their present and future.

The crucial factor in the growing interest in the historical approach to Roma identity is the growth of Roma organisations and the attempts of at least some of them to devise the self-definition of the Roma and Sinti in nation-like categories (including, for example, a concept of a "transnational nation").[11] An example of such a vision of history can be found in a policy paper in which the Romani intellectuals and activists Andrzej Mirga and Nicolae Gheorghe expand upon the program of the International Romani Union:

> "Romani political elites were never driven to demand their own territory and state. Thus, to legitimize their claim, they advanced other elements of the concept of nation – the common roots of the Romani people, their common historical experiences and perspectives, and the commonality of culture, language and social standing. The experience of the Porrajmos – the Romani holocaust during World War II – played an important role in providing the Romani diaspora with its sense of nationhood."[12]

National self-definition requires historical legitimisation. As David McCrone has written, members of a potential nation must be able to produce a vision of the future that is imaginable in the categories of a past.[13] This task calls for a linear-historical concept of identity in which the present self-definition of a group depends on its members' idea of who they were in the past and whom they would like to be in the future. In other words, by linear-historical construction of identity I understand a synthesis of those aspects of identity that have been inherited (based on the past events remembered as important for the community) with the prospective aspects (based on the group's project for the future) and those experienced as the most important in the present. It is in this context, along with practical issues of compensation, where the disparate individual memories of the genocide have been embedded in Roma and Sinti politics that offered a sustainable frame to organise and elaborate various recollections of the past.

Chronologically, the Nazi persecution had been first invoked in political discourse in the 1970s as a part of the German Sinti struggle for compensation and enfranchisement but without an attempt to politically unite all Roma and Sinti.[14] A crucial moment of this process was a hunger protest set up in 1980 by several Sinti activists in the former concentration camp Dachau. This event, which received broad media coverage, may be perceived as a turning point in the German Sinti struggle for recognition of their fate under the Nazi regime. In 1981, German Sinti occupied the University Archives in Tübingen that stored about 20,000 files of German Sinti and

11 A good example is the "Declaration of a Roma Nation" issued in 2001 by the International Romani Union, http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/60/132.html (1.8.2014).

12 Andrzej Mirga/Nicolae Gheorghe, The Roma in the Twenty-First Century: A Policy Paper. Princeton 1997, 18. The term Porrajmos (or, strictly speaking, o baro Porrajmos – the great devouring) is attributed to the Roma linguist and activist Ian Hancock although he denies his authorship. It has been criticized by other Roma intellectuals for having inappropriate sexual connotations and for not being used in this sense (that is to describe Roma genocide) in everyday language. An example of criticism of the concept can be found in: Lev Tcherenkov/Stéphane Laederich, The Roma. Vol. 1: History, Language, and Groups, Basel 2004, 184, and Hancock's response to his critics in Ian Hancock, On the Interpretation of a Word: Porrajmos as Holocaust, in: The Holocaust in History and Memory 3 (2010), 19-23. Mirga and Gheorghe do not capitalise holocaust in an attempt not to jeopardise the relations with the advocates of the uniqueness of the (Jewish) Holocaust.

13 David McCrone, The Sociology of Nationalism. Tomorrow's Ancestors, London 1998.

14 Although already in the 1960s Ionel Rotaru (also known as Vaida Voevod) combined the claims for Holocaust compensation with a pan-Romani agenda and was issuing Roma passports of the Romani state to be located on the territory of Somalia that he demanded from the UNO.

Roma collected in the Nazi times by the Institute for Research into Racial Hygiene and Population Biology. German Sinti and Roma were have been denied access to these files that contained evidence needed in their struggles to receive compensation. Symbolically, the protest in Tübingen can be interpreted as an attempt of the organised movement of Sinti and Roma to take the control of their own past and to mobilise memory as a resource in their struggle for just treatment, against present-day discrimination, and as a part of their new identity-politics.[15]

To make the genocide a fundamental dimension of Roma and Sinti history is an effort to show the Roma and Sinti as a people at the centre of the most important events in Europe's modern history, not as a marginalised people vegetating outside of history. Besides, the historical narrative of the fate of Roma and Sinti can become an excellent link to unite the different groups into which they are divided, by making them aware that in certain historical situations their differences did not matter: they were treated the same (at least in principle) because they were stigmatised as Gypsies. Moreover, the conception of the history of the Roma and Sinti as a (transnational) nation, which Romani activists have elaborated, can contribute to the creation of a paradigm of collective memory in which they can bring together dispersed individual or family memories.

Different factors, usually more pragmatic, operated, however, on the local level in particular countries. In Austria, for example, one of the main aims of the Cultural Association of Austrian Roma, established in 1991, was to achieve the status of an officially recognised ethnic group in Austria, which, among others, would make the Association eligible to receive subsidies from the government.[16]

The Austrian Roma and Sinti have not been automatically recognised as an ethnic group according to the Law on Ethnic Groups that was passed in 1976 because of two reasons. First, because the authorities, following the stereotypical picture of Roma and Sinti, claimed that as a nomadic people they could not be treated as "autochthonous" in Austria. Second, the authorities demanded an organised representation of Roma and Sinti to negotiate with. The interest in the group's history and the building of institutions have been thus intertwined processes that contributed to and were a necessary precondition of the empowerment of the Austrian Roma and Sinti. As a result, the authorities withdrew their objections when "the Roma and Sinti associations, with the help of historians, had proved that they had lived in permanent settlements in Burgenland for centuries".[17]

An essential part of that politicised interest in history is documenting, researching and commemorating the genocide experienced by the Austrian Roma and Sinti:

> "The Cultural Association of Austrian Roma has always regarded it as one of its heartfelt obligations to commemorate the victims of national socialist persecution by erecting and maintaining memorial sites in Austria and abroad. The latest addition to the list of memorial sites commemorating the persecution of Austrian Roma and Sinti was erected in 1998 in the city of Oberwart in southern Burgenland, in memory of the four victims of the bomb attack 1995."[18]

15 Huub Van Baar, The European Roma. Minority Representation, Memory and the Limits of Transnational Governmentality, Amsterdam 2011.

16 Gerhard Baumgartner/Ludwig Csepai/Andreas Sarközi/Helga Sarközi, Vom Rand in die Mitte. 20 Jahre Kulturverein österreichischer Roma. From the Margins into the Centre. 20 Years Cultural Association of Austrian Roma, Wien 2011. The status of an ethnic group has been granted to the Austrian Roma and Sinti in 1993.

17 Ibid., 36.

18 Ibid., 140.

These activities are related on the one hand to supporting the victims of the Nazi persecution regarding restitution payments and thus to the communicative memories of survivors and their families, and, on the other hand, to the protests against the contemporary acts of violence against Roma and Sinti.

A similar situation characterises organisational activities of the Roma in Poland. According to the Law on the National and Ethnic Minorities, adopted in 2005 after long discussions, one of the characteristics a group needs to possess to be recognised as an ethnic minority is an "awareness of own historical ethnic community and determination towards its expression and protection".[19] The Association of Roma People in Poland, established in 1992, lists as one of its main purposes the recollection and commemoration of the Roma Holocaust.[20] The Association, along with other organisations of Polish Roma, combines commemorative initiatives with activities in the field of improving living conditions and protesting against acts of violence and discrimination against Roma. The historical reference to the Nazi persecution is frequently employed as a reference point in the non-commemorative activities of these organisations that indicates an attempt to combine the politics of identity with the policy of economic redistribution.

Roman and Sinti identities in the perspective of social trauma theory

The narrative of the Holocaust victims may perform well as a factor that unites different groups of Roma and Sinti by providing them with a cultural frame in which they can develop their communicative memory of the Nazi persecution, or – if such memory is absent – with a "prosthetic memory" of suffering.[21] It may strengthen the political construct of Roma and Sinti as a people with history whose crucial point was the same as the history of other European nations and is paradigmatically exemplified by the narrative of the Holocaust. Such a narrative helps Roma and Sinti activists to claim the power of representation in a cultural sense: the power of designing an identity that transcends existing internal divisions.

This identity project is correlated with the cultural frames of memory that on the one hand help to express private or local memories of genocide by those who have them and – on the other hand – to adopt them as prosthetic memories by those who had different experiences of the past. In the case of the latter, the adoption of memories should not be assessed in terms of "authenticity of remembrance",[22] but it is proof of Jeffrey Alexander's thesis that "imagined events […] can be as traumatizing as events that have actually occurred".[23] In the context discussed, it means that we shall read the adoption of memories of genocide by those who did not experience directly the genocidal events as a sign of acceptance of a certain cultural frame and thus of the identity project behind it. It is an expression of the

19 Ustawa z dnia 6 stycznia 2005 o mniejszościach narodowych i etnicznych oraz o języku regionalnym [=The Law from January 6, 2005 on national and ethnic minorities and on regional language], in: Dziennik Ustaw (2005) 17, 141.

20 http://www.stowarzyszenie.romowie.net/ (2.8.2014).

21 Alison Landsberg, Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture. Cambridge, MA, 2004.

22 Elena Marushiakova/Vesselin Popov, Holocaust and the Gypsies. The Reconstruction of the Historical Memory and Creation of New National Mythology, in: Johannes-Dieter Steinert/Inge Weber-Newth (Ed.) Beyond Camps and Forced Labour. Current International Research on Survivors of Nazi Persecution. Vol. 2. Osnabrück 2006, 805-826.

23 Alexander, Trauma, 13.

wish to transgress one's local experience whereupon the claim *to remember* means the intention *to belong* to this newly constructed, trans-group imagined identity called Roma and Sinti.

The process of the (re)construction of Roma and Sinti memories fits therefore very well the model presented by Jeffrey Alexander.[24] For this author, trauma is not a feature or a direct consequence of a historical event but a way in which a community approaches it. In other words, trauma is a social-cultural construction that defines the way in which the community experiences past events: namely, as something that has threatened its collective identity. In the case of the Roma and Sinti, the reinterpretation of the past in the categories of trauma corresponds with the redefinition of collective identity, on the group level (as with the German Sinti) and on the transnational level (as with some Eastern European Roma activists).

One can even say that the memory of the genocide of Roma and Sinti becomes the "foundational trauma" of their new identity. This concept describes the situation when the perception of the disastrous historical events that shattered the very base of a group's existence becomes the starting point of a reflective, critical redefinition of a group's identity that results in incorporating that perception as its important building block.[25] This concept offers therefore not only a deeper insight into groups' identities in the sense of an epiphany or transformational experience of the groups' members,[26] but also a deeper sense of commonality of those who share the traumatic pain,[27] and a growing chance for the recognition of the group's painful history within the contemporary culture of memory which is largely a "culture of trauma" and privileges traumatic memories as something worth remembering.[28]

The phenomenon of breaking the silence regarding the genocide of Roma and Sinti must be interpreted in the context of the contemporary situation of their communities. The collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe and the transformations of the economic situation in Western Europe radically altered the situation of Roma and Sinti and contributed to the inadequacy of strategies for dealing with the environment they experienced elaborated in the course of time.[29] If we apply Piotr Sztompka's concept of the trauma of social change to the situation of Roma and Sinti, we could speak here of the "damage inflicted by major social change" on the "cultural tissue" of their groups.[30] Such experience has contributed to the unblocking of the memories of the genocide during the Second World War, which form the cognitive frame in which the present situation becomes intelligible. It may be expected that people whose social world collapses would search for the meaning of this situation in memories of similar moments in the past. This mechanism resembles to some extent the relation between "structural trauma" and "historical trauma" in the conception of Dominick LaCapra,[31] in which anxi-

24 Ibid.
25 This definitions draws upon the one by Dominick LaCapra although it adjusts it to be coherent with Alexander's interpretation of trauma as a social-cultural perception rather than a historical event. Dominick LaCapra, Tropisms of Intellectual History, in: Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice 8 (2004) 4, 499-529.
26 Norman K. Denzin, Interpretive Interactionism, London 2002.
27 Frank R. Ankersmit, Trauma and Suffering. A Forgotten Source of Western Historical Consciousness, in: Jörn Rüsen (Ed.), Western Historical Thinking. An Intercultural Debate, New York 2002.
28 Michael Lambek/Paul Antze, Introduction. Forecasting Memory, in: Paul Antze/Michael Lambek (Ed.), Tense Past. Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory, London 1996, xi-xxxviii.
29 Zoltan Barany, Explaining Marginality: Portrayals of East European Gypsies, Budapest 1998.
30 Piotr Sztompka, Cultural Trauma. The Other Face of Social Change, in: European Journal of Social Theory 3 (2000) 4, 449-466.
31 Dominick LaCapra, Writing History, Writing Trauma, Baltimore 2001.

eties caused by structural transformation receive the form of concrete fears associated with the past events.[32]

Finally, the broken silence regarding the plight of Roma and Sinti during the Second World War can contribute to the recognition of their history as a part of the European past and to the growing sense of solidarity with the present-day Roma and Sinti groups. Jeffrey Alexander is rather pessimistic regarding this issue when he makes a direct reference to the situation of Roma and Sinti. As he says, "Roma ('Gypsies') are acknowledged by many contemporary Central Europeans as trauma victims, the bearers of a tragic history. Yet insofar as large numbers of Central Europeans represent Roma people as deviant and uncivilized, they have not made that tragic past their own".[33] In a more optimistic spirit, I would claim that the relation between recognition of trauma and solidarity with the contemporary descendants of its victims is a dialectical process which may well start from the opposite end: the recognition of someone's trauma may lead (although by no means easily) to the social inclusion and broadening the boundaries of solidarity and identification. The capacity to revise the perception of history, to redefine of what counts as our past, and to react to historical trauma by constructing new visions of the future is, after all, an essential part of the European cultural heritage.[34]

32 To some extent, because the collapse of Communism was a concrete historical event and thus cannot be presented as the source of structural trauma. The latter was, however, involved in a number of social consequences of the post-Communist transformation.

33 Alexander, Trauma, 19.

34 Ankersmit, Trauma and Suffering; Leszek Kolakowski, Modernity on Endless Trial, Chicago 1990.

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