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THE ROMA AT RISK

by

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Abstract

The persistent and unresolved plight of the Roma presents challenges to the respect for human rights required of all members of the United Nations. The “mysterious” Roma, present in countries worldwide, isolate themselves and are isolated. Their statelessness and persecution have continued for centuries and in some cases, made them victims of genocide. Their lack of cohesion and other characteristics of nationhood may explain their marginalization and mistreatment. From 16th century anti-Roma English laws to 21st century deportations, the Roma have been targets of cruelty ranging from subtle bigotry to organized mass murder. Continued monitoring of even the slightest pre-genocidal behavior is required to avoid future catastrophe. While governments must guarantee the security of their people and territory, they must also uphold their obligation to respect human rights. Nations must ensure ethical treatment of the Roma and we must all maintain vigilance to protect our fellow man.

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INTRODUCTION

Imagine a people who for centuries faced displacement, expulsion, blame, and attempted extermination. One might understandably think of the world's Jewish Diaspora or any number of forgotten groups, but the people whose historic struggle and present troubles have lately reminded us of our unique differences are the Roma. The Roma, Romani or Gypsies, as they are commonly known in English, are a transient population present in many countries worldwide, but primarily in Europe. The descendants of migrants who left Northern India in the 11th century to settle as far away as North and South America, the Roma have rich traditions, but their unique and closed culture has made them easy scapegoats and victims of genocidal behavior and actual genocide. Primarily existing in communities outside mainstream society; the Roma are extremely vulnerable to bigotry and hate. For centuries, they have endured displacement, marginalization, and even extermination. "The true history of the Gypsy race is in the study of their language"¹, but the absence of a significant written language and territory, among other things, may actually contribute to their consistent marginalization. By examining historic mistreatment of the Roma, we can identify current and future trends that may signal a return to extreme behavior.

Extreme mistreatment reached new levels in the 20th century. The meticulous identification, monitoring, and segregation of Roma by Nazis and Romanian fascists caused death by disease from inhumane treatment and mass executions in towns and camps. Some scholars claim that as many as one million Roma were murdered by the German and Romanian fascist regimes. Additionally, 20th century Balkan leaders committed genocide against the Roma. More than 80,000 Roma were killed by direction of leaders Ante Pavelić and Slobodan Milosevic. Unfortunately, Roma traditions and illiteracy have prevented the accurate

documentation and remembrance of atrocities and perhaps have also contributed to a deficiency in the advocacy required to keep it from happening again.

The reason for continued marginalization and mistreatment is found in one clear and unfortunate truth; The Roma are not respected. For as much as the international community speaks of respect for human rights and liberty, it seems to only apply to more settled peoples. Brutality against Albanians, Kurds, or more recently Libyan civilians is met with outrage, while the quiet and not-so-quiet discrimination of the Roma is met with moderate anger and sometimes apathy. It is not uncommon for citizens of countries with a robust Roma population to speak of them in disdainful terms. These predominately Eastern European countries are plagued by intolerance. In fact, the US Department of State currently warns of varying degrees of discrimination, displacement, and violence against Roma in Hungary, Romania, Montenegro, Slovenia, Serbia, Slovakia, France, Italy, Croatia, Bulgaria, Greece, and Latvia among others. The Roma live as minorities in these countries because of their lack of nationhood. Existing as an ethnicity without a home made them vulnerable to genocide in the past and makes them susceptible to continued mistreatment in the future. The Roma have survived genocide, but due in part to their statelessness, continue to endure persistent intolerance and discrimination by governments and people who ignore past lessons and risk repeating the worst possible inhumanity.

ORIGINS

There has long been significant romance attached to the history of the Roma. They have been characterized as traveling bands of musicians and fortune tellers with strange customs and speaking a mysterious, and until recently, unwritten language. Their storied origins range from Egypt to Bohemia, but they most likely left their native India in the 11th century and spread

throughout Europe and eventually to North and South America. Scholars agree that the Roma originated in northern India. Some evidence of this is found in comparative linguistics. Romani is the language of the Roma and it is closely related to the Indic languages of Sanskrit and Hindi.² Early anthropologists relied on physical characteristics and measurements to identify Roma. “The Nazis were the most thorough of ethnographers. They collected more than thirty thousand Gypsy genealogies. They measured skulls, collected blood samples, and charted eye colors.”³ More recently, population genetics suggest Indian lineage.⁴ Racial mixture over centuries has made the evidence more suggestive than conclusive, but there is little doubt their origin is the Indian subcontinent.⁵

Not unlike other minority ethnic groups, modern Roma experience a renewed desire to explore their origins and celebrate their uniqueness. However, definitively identifying the roots of a “rootless”⁶ people is extremely difficult. As a result, stories developed giving them biblical lineage including one that explains their nomadic nature by identifying them as “the cursed descendants of Cain, condemned to wander the world,”⁷ fulfilling prophesy in the book of Genesis “when you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth.”⁸ Other stories link them to biblical events such as the claim that Gypsies had forged the nails used to crucify Jesus Christ.⁹ Dismissing the linguistic and physical ties to India, some Roma even believe they are descendants from one of the twelve lost tribes of Israel. However, the most widely accepted theory traces their migration from northern India into Persia, Armenia, modern day Turkey, Serbia and the Balkans and throughout the rest of Europe including Scandinavia and the British Isles.

MODERN ROMA

Today, it remains difficult to accurately count the world's Roma population. Racial mixing, transiency, and their extremely closed societies make census nearly impossible despite the legal requirement in most nations to declare oneself. There are upwards of 12 million Roma worldwide with the highest concentrations in Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and Spain. The Roma speak the languages of the countries in which they live, but also use dialects of their Romani language. They also tend to practice the predominate religion of their adopted land which is why one can find Muslim, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and various Protestant Roma including Evangelical.¹⁰ Occupationally, Gypsies of old depended upon metalwork, music, and fortune-telling to make their living and while music, dance, and fortune-telling continue; trading in salvage and construction work are more recent endeavors. More educated Roma have prospered in business, academia, and medicine, but most live in poverty, marginalized by the majority populations. A Romanian study in the 1990s showed, "the vast majority of Roma – 79.4 percent have no profession; only 16.1 percent are qualified in a modern profession, while 3.9 percent are qualified in traditional professions."¹¹ The resulting conditions mean substandard living conditions, poor health, reduced life expectancy, increased infant mortality, illiteracy, child labor, crime, and a host of other social ills that Roma communities have not been able to adequately address and place a significant burden on governments.

Integration into societies varies among nations and Roma groups. As times, governments, and public sentiment change; the Roma are constantly shifted as they migrate to less hostile regions. Human Rights Watch reports that Hungarian Roma live in ghettoized communities as they are "actively discriminated against in the sale and rental of housing and in the supply of credit."¹² In Italy, "most of the nation's 150,000 Roma live in so-called camps,

which are really shanty towns that lack such basics as electricity, water, or sanitation.”¹³ The Berlusconi government has been criticized for being aligned with right-wing extremists who while advocating the removal of camps may incite violence against the Roma. In addition to housing challenges, the Roma face significant educational disadvantages. In Romania, it is reported that “22 percent of Roma have no schooling whatever, 5.3 percent have failed to complete primary school, giving a level of illiteracy of 27.3 percent. Only 3.9 percent have completed secondary school and only 0.7 percent have studied at the level of higher or further education.”¹⁴ Most observers agree that education is vital to improvement in the lives of Roma globally, but specifically in Europe. Many Romani children are kept out of school by their parents for cultural and economic reasons. Roma culture focuses on the ability of children to contribute to family income more than education and government schools sometimes discriminate. In Slovakian “special schools”, 60 percent of the students are Roma.¹⁵ Many Romani children who are eventually sent to school at older ages are often too far behind to catch up and government policies make enrolling such students difficult. “An American campaigner who runs a charity in Romania noted that ‘the law that makes schooling mandatory...is not implemented, but the law that prevents registration of a child over the age of nine is strictly enforced’.”¹⁶ Additionally, costs associated with books and supplies are more than Roma families can support. While arguably the most important to overall improvement, education is only one of many things the Roma desperately need. If health concerns are not addressed, the Roma face an even more desperate future.

There can be no doubt that prolonged inadequate and unsanitary living conditions directly and negatively affect health. According to public health specialists in Italy, not only to Roma endure worse conditions and health than the general Italian population, but they also fare worse

than other immigrant groups. In Italy, 24 percent of Roma children are malnourished and 25 percent are born underweight. Children are treated in Italian Roma camps for illnesses such as bronchitis, dermatological infections including scabies, gastrointestinal disease, and developmental disorders caused by “poor and unclean living situations, social isolation, and widespread dietary instability.”¹⁷ Roma face similar conditions and have poorer health in other countries. Bulgaria and Romania specifically have significant Roma populations with higher birth rates, higher infant mortality, and lower life expectancy than the general population. Unlike more successful Roma communities, they continue to live in extreme poverty and very primitive conditions. Unfortunately, health problems are sometimes self-inflicted. “In some sectors of the Roma community, health is not perceived as a top priority. Housing, finances or employment all come before health in terms of this group’s perceived needs.”¹⁸ Because many Roma view health as the absence of disease and disease as linked to death, they tend to only seek emergency care therefore making attempts to widely encourage preventative care very difficult. Additionally, once immediate care of critical disease produces results and symptoms disappear, Roma patients generally disregard all other therapeutic guidelines.¹⁹ This dilemma presents significant costs to the healthcare system as emergency care and care for chronic and uncontrolled diseases is much more expensive than care to prevent disease in the first place. A Spanish Ministry of Health and Consumer Affairs report discusses health factors for Roma. It asserts “Inadequate housing, deficient education, insufficient income, etc. all have an important influence on health and are important factors determining the state of well-being and living standards of a population group living in a specific environment. The processes of exclusion and social marginalization limit people’s access to healthcare services and the use they make of them. Therefore, interventions aimed at improving living standards (reducing environmental

pollution, improving access to high-quality food, potable water, eradication of shanty towns or sub-standard housing, etc.) contribute to improving health and promoting integration.”²⁰ It is not surprising that such insight, which is only part of a lengthy study of health and the Roma community, comes from Spain. Spain is one of the only European countries to have more success integrating the Roma, or Gitanos as they are called in Spain, into the larger society. Although Gitanos still maintain their unique cultural distinction, they are more often found in modern and even affluent communities with higher levels of education and better health than their Eastern European kin. However, even Spain has work to do. In that country’s Gitano community, the infant mortality rate is 1.4 times higher than the national average, life expectancy is up to 10 years below the average, there are higher incidences of hepatitis and HIV infection, lower childhood immunization, higher accident rates, little gynecological or sexually transmitted disease prevention, and because Gitanos are cultural inclined toward marrying within their own society; they are at a higher risk for congenital malformations.²¹

Despite the significant costs of providing healthcare to the Roma, not doing so could cost in other ways. The political and environmental scientist Andrew Price-Smith discusses the relationship between health and the stability of the state when he affirms the health and size of a given population can be regarded as indispensable to the vitality of that body politic and to the power of that nation.²² He says “The manifestation of pathogenic infectious disease represents a direct threat to the population base, erodes economic productivity, often weakens the institutions of the state and its ability to provide public goods, compromises governmental legitimacy...thus an exogenous agent could act to fundamentally threaten the material interests and the stability of the affected polity in question.”²³ Clearly, we must consider that addressing the “Roma problem” helps more than just the Roma. It can strengthen the nation in which they live.

Despite the significant ills of the majority of Roma, the growing achievements, pride, and rich artistic traditions of some Roma should not go unnoticed. In Europe, Spain is leading the way by doing their part and actively engaging the Roma to do theirs. Still, the Spanish recognize the need to do more. “The reality facing the Roma population is still a pending issue in Spanish society because the ‘Roma issue’ has yet to be given priority on the nationwide social policy agenda. There is a gradual trend towards improvement in living standards but a number of barriers still stand in the way to full participation in the different fields of public life.”²⁴ The work continues in Spain and North America in particular where thriving communities with robust social support host festivals and other forums to celebrate and teach their culture. Some Roma worldwide are improving their condition through education and integration into the societies in which they live. The University of Texas’ Dr. Ian Hancock, director of the only department of higher education dedicated to Romani studies is a part of bringing the Roma culture to the rest of us. His studies, lectures, and writings are dedicated to replacing the mystical, romantic, and sometimes scary stereotype with a more accurate and helpful understanding of the Roma people. Unfortunately, Dr. Hancock has also extensively studied the Roma’s experience with genocide.

GENOCIDE

Genocide goes not generally occur spontaneously. The founder of genocide studies, Raphael Lemkin, referred to genocide as a “coordinated plan of different actions.”²⁵ Scholars describe non-linear phases of genocide to explain how instead of following a strict order, regimes participate in phases of genocide to varying degrees. The experience of the Roma is filled with examples of classification, symbolization, dehumanization, polarization, organization, preparation, execution, and denial. Despite the controversy surrounding the definition of

genocide, it is clear that if the non-linear phases indicate genocidal behavior, the Roma have been victims.

HISTORIC MISTREATMENT

For their entire history, Roma have been the subject of ridicule and hatred. They were seen as criminals with “heathenish practices and sorcery.”²⁶ In 1530 England’s King Henry VIII decreed “anyone conveying Gypsies into the country was to be fined and any Gypsy so transported was to be deemed a felon.”²⁷ English law from the 16th to 18th centuries imposed strict penalties for activities often undertaken by Roma. Wandering, begging, fortune-telling, lodging under tents, carts, or wagons. The penalties included mutilation, imprisonment, and execution. The Dutch, Prussians, Polish and other European realms enacted similar laws. Beginning in the 18th century, more moderate leaders and monarchs, “guided more by practical considerations than by humanitarianism,”²⁸ allowed Gypsies to settle in their lands. The Habsburg Empress Maria Theresa who ruled the last House of Habsburg set out to assimilate the Gypsies by making them subject to taxes and compulsory military service.²⁹ She even “ordered the name of Gypsy to be dropped, in favour of Ujmagyar or ‘New Hungarian’.”³⁰ Empress Maria Theresa’s approach was emulated by Frederick the Great. Anti-Gypsy sentiment remained, but for the next century or so, they were tolerated.

Even if violence was clearly related to ethnicity, many European governments hesitated to categorize crimes against Roma as hate crimes. “If someone attacked another person, or insulted someone, because he was Roma, or Jewish...right away they punished that person for agitation and whitewashed the matter.”³¹ Such crimes were considered political. Before World War II, there wasn’t an overt hatred of the Roma. “Anti-Gypsy attitudes and manifestations were not to be found in the Romanian nationalism of the inter-war period.”³² While the

atmosphere was decidedly anti-Semitic, the governmental commissions for minorities in Europe did not really deal with Gypsies. Roma were certainly not free from racism, but neither were they a real target. Not until the Nazis that is.

In the mid to late 19th century, anti-Gypsy attitudes returned in abundance, especially in Western Europe. In the 1850s a Frenchman, Count Gobineau, published a document called *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* which significantly impacted “philosophical and political thought in Europe, most notably in Germany”³³ and paved the way for Nazi doctrine. In it, Count Gobineau posited that “race was the decisive factor in historical development and that there were ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ races with pride of place assigned to the ‘Aryan race’.”³⁴ Europeans began to subscribe to the idea that criminality and deprivation were caused by the Gypsies’ racial identity making them inferior in all respects. For those Roma who had not fully assimilated and maintained their nomadic and distinct culture, this was very bad news. Even assimilated Gypsies may not pass the racial test. In France, Germany, and Britain; Gypsies had to be registered and carry identity documentation with photographs and fingerprints.³⁵

THE PORAJMOS

With the advent of Nazi power in 1933, “it inherited a well developed legal apparatus for controlling many of the groups which it deemed to be undesirable.”³⁶ The Nazis fully intended to use that apparatus and more in order to complete their mission. “Jews and Gypsies were in fact the only two ethnic groups which would be designated for annihilation by National Socialist ideology.”³⁷ German physicians conducted research through the Research Centre for Racial Hygiene and Population Biology that took them to camps to classify degrees of racial mixture and study the correlation between heredity and criminality. Their conclusions are outrageous by today’s standards, but were completely in accord with Nazi philosophy. “...further results of our

investigations have allowed us to characterize the Gypsies as being a people of entirely primitive ethnological origins, whose mental backwardness makes them incapable of real social adaptation...The Gypsy question can only be solved when the main body of asocial and good-for-nothing Gypsy individuals of mixed blood is collected together in large labour camps and kept working there, and when the further breeding of this population of mixed blood is stopped once and for all.”³⁸

Nazi research was used to justify the pre-genocidal separation of the Roma. The 1935 Nuremberg Laws “excluded Jews, Gypsies, and blacks from the community of German people, restricting their rights and prohibiting marriage or sexual intercourse with them.”³⁹ In 1938, “a decree issued by Minister of the Interior Frick on 26 November noted that, besides Jews, there were others who polluted the German blood – ‘Gypsies, Negroes and their bastards’.”⁴⁰ The mass transportation to concentration camps occurred throughout the 1930s and the mass murder of Roma by Nazis began in 1940. “By 1940, the Nazi ideological obsession with Gypsies became almost as strident and aggressive as their campaign against the Jews.”⁴¹ Perhaps more than Jews, Gypsies were seen as a particularly serious racial threat and deportation to camps was deemed necessary to curb miscegenation. Along with Blacks, Gypsies were considered to have *artfremdes Blut* (“alien blood”) which was racially, intellectually, and morally inferior. With the exception of certain exemptions, Gypsies over age 17 were arrested and resettled by the 28 April 1940 order of the Chief of the Reich Security Main Office, Reinhard Heydrich. Gypsy possessions were confiscated and organized transports took thousands of Gypsies from around Germany and Austria to camps such as Lublin.

German research also uncovered a puzzling aspect of Nazi beliefs. At the core of Nazi ideology was a belief that the Germanic people were descended from the true Aryans who were

an Indo-Germanic people from North India. Ironically, this is the same origin of the Roma. Some Nazis refused to accept the linkage, but the very influential Heinrich Himmler was fascinated by the connection. As the Reichsführer of the SS, Himmler had the responsibility to oversee the concentration camps and killing squads. However, he saw the racially pure Gypsies, those with unadulterated Gypsy blood, as special. He ordered research into their customs and language, and he ordered them untouched. He intended “that in the future racially pure Gypsies be allowed a certain freedom of movement, so that they can itinerate in a fixed area, live according to their customs and mores, and follow an appropriate traditional occupation.”⁴² He wanted to “preserve a small research sample of what might speculatively be regarded as one variety of early Indo-Germanic life.”⁴³ However, such freedom only applied to a select few. The majority of Roma were targeted for deportation and extermination. The methods of genocide included sterilization and murder which included the systematic gassing of thousands. “The Roma lost between 500,000 and 1.5 million of their members in the catastrophe that they call the Porrajmos (Devouring).”⁴⁴ Unfortunately, Nazis weren’t the only fascists with a nefarious plan for the Roma.

THE ROMANIAN HOLOCAUST

As Germany’s axis partner, Romania subscribed to anti-Semitic and anti-Roma policies. However, under the leadership of Conducător Ion Antonescu, Romania independently implemented policies to rid themselves of Jews and Gypsies. Unlike Jews, Roma were actually considered Romanian citizens, although they were not considered equal. Gypsies that were considered asocial or nomads were targeted for deportation and “ultimately, approximately 25,000 Gypsies in all were deported.”⁴⁵ Their destination was Transnistria which was Romanian occupied territory taken from the Soviets. As in Nazi-occupied Europe, deportee possessions

were confiscated, and in some cases, Roma arrived without coats. Makeshift concentration camps and ghettos housed Jews and Roma, but the intentionally harsh conditions and scarcity of food caused thousands of deaths from starvation, exposure and diseases like typhus. “An eyewitness recalled there were men, women, children, old people, lifeless corpses, frozen, almost glued to one another, because of the frost.”⁴⁶

The detention of Roma was “all the more unbearable because of the humiliating circumstances under which deportation had been carried out.”⁴⁷ Fulfilling their military duty as Romanian citizens, many Roma were fighting on the front lines when the deportations began. Amazingly, “some Gypsies still wearing Romanian military uniforms were seized and deported.”⁴⁸ Romanian officials imposed significant bureaucratic barriers, but allowed some military Roma to retrieve their families. Although the intent was to confine only those Roma considered nomadic nuisances considered “dangerous to public order”⁴⁹, artisans, farmers and business owners were also deported. It was a humiliating betrayal; however, Romanian Gypsies fared better than others in Europe. “The persecution of Gypsies had barely gathered a full head of steam by the time Romanian policy makers began to worry about the possibility of postwar answerability for their crimes.”⁵⁰ Fortunately, there were some voices against the brutality. The leader of the Romanian Liberal Party, Constantin I.C. Brătianu appealed to Antonescu by writing “...they play an important economic role in our country...as good Romanians, they shed their blood when fighting for our nation...why such cruelty?...what are these unfortunate people guilty of?...what will this expulsion accomplish?”⁵¹ Still, thousands died at the hands of the Antonescu regime before it stopped.

THE BALKANS

Not only did Nazis and Romanian fascists kill hundreds of thousands of Roma, but when Croat separatists came to power in Yugoslavia and slaughtered non-Catholics, they were nearly obliterated. “Serbia was reported to be the first country where the Jewish and Gypsy ‘questions’ were considered to have been ‘solved’.”⁵² The earliest known account of Roma in the Balkans is found in a 1362 legal document “referring to a petition by two ‘Egyptians’ (i.e. Gypsies).”⁵³ The region’s Roma were diverse religiously, occupationally, and linguistically, but were all identified as Gypsy. However, before the 20th century, their existence was not marked by significant segregation or violence. “The basic legal rights of the Gypsies were the same as those of their fellow-Christians or fellow-Muslims.”⁵⁴ That would change during and after World War II.

Like Romania, Yugoslavia was a puppet state of Nazi Germany during World War II. Their leader, a Croatian fascist called Ante Pavelić led a regime that murdered approximately 80,000 Roma in annihilation plans that began with laws “which authorized the expulsion and imprisonment of Serbs, Jews, Gypsies and others as ‘threats to Croatian racial purity’.”⁵⁵ Based on the number of deaths per year of the regime’s existence, Pavelić’s government tops the list of the ‘most lethal regimes’ along with Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge and Turkey under Kemal Atatürk.⁵⁶ Murders were carried out through death camps and killing squads so vicious “that even the German military authorities were appalled.”⁵⁷ “In occupied Serbia the systematic use of Gypsies as hostages meant that they fell steadily to firing squads (at the rate of 100 for each German killed by partisans, and 50 for each German wounded), while others were dispatched by mobile gassing vans in internment camps.”⁵⁸

In the 1990s, Serbian President Slobodan Milošević was no friend to the Roma and although the brutality of his ethnic cleansing did not match that of Pavelić, he oversaw the killing

of Roma nonetheless. Due to the large number of Muslim Roma in the Balkans, it is likely that some of the 50,000 Muslims killed in the Bosnian war and genocide were Roma. Certainly, when Milošević “began to plot a decisive resolution of the Kosovo quandary”⁵⁹, Roma were not immune. “About 10,000 ethnic Albanians died during the war, along with some Serbs and Roma (Gypsies). The killings were accompanied by the largest mass deportation of a civilian population in decades.”⁶⁰ The genocides of Roma by Nazis, Romanians, and Yugoslavs provide the ultimate display of racial hatred and violence against the Roma. They survived, but hatred remains.

CONTINUED SUFFERING

INVISIBLE NATION

The reasons hatred grows are varied. However, the lack of respect as a result of statelessness underlies them all. The scholar Adrian Hastings described the existence of the small ethnicities like the Roma perfectly. “Small ethnicities easily succumb to the pressures of state construction, however unimaginatively the latter are mediated, if an ethnicity’s resources, economic, linguistic, ideological or geographical, are too limited. Its settlement pattern may be too diffuse to provide a viable area of resistance geographically; its members may be so poor as to be swallowed up in the economy of the dominant ethnicity; its language may be merely an oral vernacular, so little used in a literary way that it appears incapable of challenging the claims of that of the state for administrative and educational purposes; it may have no religion, ideology or historical tradition of its own sharp enough to set it apart from that of the state and so provide the imaginative base for resistance.”⁶¹

Developed and even some underdeveloped states have physical, social, political, and economic structures in place to provide for and protect its people. The Roma have no such

provision of their own and must rely on their host governments. Unlike the dream-turned-reality that is modern day Israel, a Romani state is improbable. Although Hastings sees the possibility, he's not overly optimistic. "Every ethnicity, I would conclude, has a nation-state potentially within it but in the majority of cases that potentiality will never be activated because its resources are too small, the allurements of incorporation within an alternative culture and political system too powerful."⁶² In 1971, the first World Romani Congress was held to discuss social issues including civil rights and the standardization of the Romani language. The International Romani Union grew from the World Romani Congress and provides political representation for Roma worldwide. Although these organizations speak of a "Romani nation", they can only advocate for the wellbeing of Roma and their interests. They do not have legal authority over Roma communities or a responsibility to their people. The lack of nationhood leaves the Roma as unwanted guests of societies whose treatment of them is at best unequal to that of the majority.

LACK OF ADVOCACY

Unequal and sometimes inhumane treatment of Roma can be improved through advocacy. The World Romani Congress and the International Romani Union are not alone in their work. Most governments have agencies to address problems in housing, employment, healthcare, and education. Other non-governmental and intergovernmental organizations such as the European Union and United Nations actively work to understand Romani culture and traditions in order to improve their living conditions and societal acceptance. However, despite their presence worldwide, they remain a minority everywhere. Partly because of their illiteracy and lack of education, their representation in local and national governments is extremely low and they suffer from inadequate advocacy because of it.

A EUROPEAN PROBLEM?

Although Europe provides the most likely setting for future mistreatment of the Roma, non-Europeans may have an interest in this issue of human rights. In North America, the number of Roma is lower and they endure a more moderate discrimination. In Canada, there are approximately 80,000 Roma⁶³ and perhaps as many in the United States although the US Census Bureau does not include Roma in their racial categories. Christopher Columbus brought them to the West Indies, but many North American Roma are descended from the Romanichal of the British Isles and others arrived in the late 19th century and early 20th century with the large wave of Eastern European immigration to North America. For the most part, Roma culture remains largely unknown to North Americans. They are even perceived as mythical. They are referred to as the “hidden Americans” because they choose to separate themselves from mainstream society and are often mistaken for Hispanic or Southern European. American Roma are not reviled as they are in parts of Europe because they are able to survive and prosper although they maintain a very closed society. Roma culture is even celebrated in North America where there is a tradition of diversity. A large number of American Roma, approximately 20,000, live in Texas. Some participate in more traditional trades such as “stove and boiler repair or fortune-telling, but other Gypsies include musicians, teachers, university professors, and a documentary filmmaker.”⁶⁴ However, the hidden nature of the Roma in North America causes educational deficiencies because Roma parents are “reluctant to send their children to school, especially after puberty.”⁶⁵ A project in the 1970s was intended to establish a mobile school that would travel among Roma communities to improve literacy, but it was soon curtailed.⁶⁶

Illiteracy and perhaps some petty crime aside, the Roma in North America do not place the same burden on the American and Canadian governments as the Roma in Europe. North

American governments are not under the same pressure to address the plight of the Roma. Instead the US and Canada focus their Roma support overseas. Canadians are increasingly pressing their government to grant asylum to Roma from places such as Kosovo where they continue to suffer discrimination and violence.⁶⁷ After the 1999 war in Kosovo, “ethnic majorities attacked their minority neighbors in assaults that primarily involved local Albanian retribution and intimidation against Serb and Roma families.”⁶⁸ The US government recognizes the struggle of European Roma and has stated its commitment to “the success of Roma.”⁶⁹ The US’s “development assistance”⁷⁰ across Central and Eastern Europe is intended to provide preschool education, tutoring, elections and political processes training and to ensure better access to legal services.⁷¹ Additionally, the US sponsors international visitors programs which provide “Roma from across Europe opportunities to visit and study in the U.S. to gain a firsthand view of how the rights of every individual can be ensured both in law and in practice.”⁷² Such programs have focused on political and economic empowerment and teaching high school students about “self-respect, community development, and minority advocacy.”⁷³ The US also acknowledges the ongoing problem of crimes against Roma and has provided training and assistance to international law enforcement to investigate, solve, and prosecute those crimes. “The U.S. Government stands ready to explore similar forms of assistance to governments in the future.”⁷⁴ The programs have assisted Roma adults and children from Slovakia, Bulgaria, Kosovo, Serbia, Italy, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Romania. As a leader in the world, it is important the US continue to set an example of tolerance and progress and fight against the ignorance and poverty that oppress Roma worldwide.

An American perspective of the European Roma condition introduces some conflicting thoughts and emotions. Americans can sympathize with European governments’ need to secure

their borders from illegal migrants, especially those who maintain a distinctive and separate culture isolated from larger society. America values groups that assimilate, work hard, and succeed despite adversity and shuns dependency on the state and refusal to send children to school just to keep them away from the influence of other traditions. However, as a nation of immigrants, America also has a long and difficult history with hatred and racial discrimination. Americans are sensitive to the plight of the underprivileged and take pride in a strong sense of justice. For that reason, Americans can also sympathize with Europe's Roma and will likely continue their efforts to assist their development and press European governments to ensure their human rights.

HUMAN RIGHTS

Most if not all nations with Roma populations are required to uphold the United Nation's principle of respect for human rights and perceived violations must be taken seriously. The UN defines human rights as "rights inherent to all human beings, whatever our nationality, place of residence, sex, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, language, or any other status. We are all equally entitled to our human rights without discrimination. These rights are all interrelated, interdependent and indivisible."⁷⁵

In addition to the UN declarations on human rights, countries that belong to the European Union must adhere to the EU standards of human rights. The EU sums up its position on the topic this way: "human rights, democracy and the rule of law are the core values of the European Union. Embedded in its founding treaty, they have been reinforced by the adoption of a Charter of Fundamental Rights. Countries seeking to join the EU must respect human rights. So must countries which have concluded trade and other agreements with it."⁷⁶ Therefore, not only must European Union countries agree to this core value, so must those engaged in trade with EU

members. One of the EU's specific human rights battles is the fight against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance. In 2001, the UN held a world conference to "assess the fight against racial discrimination and its future, increase the level of awareness about racism and its consequences, and formulate recommendations to the UN on ways to increase the effectiveness of actions."⁷⁷ In response to the UN call and in recognition of racism and xenophobia throughout Europe, the EU began to infuse the fight against racism into various policies and they passed measures intended to standardize the enforcement of discrimination legislation. One policy in particular, the External Relations policy deals with combating racism, "especially with regard to the Roma population."⁷⁸ The EU also established monitoring processes to ensure that developments or "manifestations of racism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism" can be recorded and analyzed and if necessary, forwarded to the European Parliament. This is evidence that countries in Europe, where the majority of the world's Roma live, are committed, at least on paper, to fighting against racial discrimination. Because much of the criticisms of the actions of European governments towards the Roma come in the form of accusations of racism, those governments would do well to remember their stated commitment.

CONCLUSION

Isabel Fonseca, a respected author and chronicler of Roma life wrote "The Gypsies were- and are-a people on the brink. They have begun to taste the power of the idea of knowing that they are Roma; at the same time, they are in danger of becoming just another 'language' (in their case, little-understood dialect) of ethnic self-assertion and victimhood"⁷⁹ The Roma have a strong sense of who they are, but their lack of nationhood keeps them on the brink of victimhood. The widespread disrespect of the Roma may have many causes, but it certainly has

dangerous consequences. Disrespect breeds hatred and hatred can quickly turn into acts of genocide.

Tragically, we have many examples of genocidal behavior to help us identify its occurrence. The Roma face pervasive discrimination, but if we begin to see dehumanization and polarization with any regularity, we should be concerned. And “we” includes the United States. “The United States...must respond to genocide with a sense of urgency...given the affront genocide represents to America’s most cherished values and to its interests, the United States must also be prepared to risk the lives of its soldiers in the service of stopping this monstrous crime.”⁸⁰

The Roma deserve no less protection than any other ethnicity. Their traditions may confuse us and complicate social, economic, and educational improvement, but they must not stop us from trying. Such improvement is our hope to change attitudes and decrease the likelihood of atrocities.

Notes

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- ⁴ Fraser, Angus. *The Gypsies*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers. 1992. 24.
- ⁵ Ibid., 25.
- ⁶ Fonseca, Isabel. *Bury Me Standing*. New York, USA: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. 1995.
- ⁷ Ibid., 88.
- ⁸ International Bible Society. *Holy Bible, New International Version*. USA: Rainbow Studies, Inc. 1992. 8.
- ⁹ Fonseca, Isabel. *Bury Me Standing*. New York, USA: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. 1995. 89.
- ¹⁰ Fraser, Angus. *The Gypsies*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers. 1992. 311.
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- ¹⁸ Ministry of Health and Consumer Affairs. "Health and the Roma Community," *Directorate-General for Public Health*. 13.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 13.
- ²⁰ Ibid., 9.
- ²¹ Ibid., 14-15.
- ²² Price-Smith, Andrew T. *Contagion and Chaos: Disease, Ecology, and National Security in the Era of Globalization*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. 2009. 15.
- ²³ Ibid., 15.
- ²⁴ Ibid., 25
- ²⁵ Jones, Adam. *Genocide: A Comprehensive Introduction*. New York, NY: Routledge. 2006. 23.
- ²⁶ Fraser, Angus. *The Gypsies*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers. 1992. 130.
- ²⁷ Ibid., 132.
- ²⁸ Ibid., 157.
- ²⁹ Ibid., 157.
- ³⁰ Ibid., 158.
- ³¹ Human Rights Watch/Helsinki. *Rights Denied: The Roma of Hungary*. USA: Human Rights Watch. 1996. 51.
- ³² Achim, Viorel. *The Roma in Romanian History*. Budapest, Hungary: Central European University Press. 1998. 163.
- ³³ Fraser, Angus. *The Gypsies*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers. 1992. 248.
- ³⁴ Ibid., 248.
- ³⁵ Ibid., 255.
- ³⁶ Ibid., 257.
- ³⁷ Ibid., 257.
- ³⁸ Ibid., 260.
- ³⁹ Bársony, János, Daróczi, Ágnes. *Pharrajimos*. New York, USA: The International Debate Education Association. 2008. 25
- ⁴⁰ Lewy, Guenter, "Himmler and the 'Racially Pure Gypsies'," *Journal of Contemporary History* Vol 34, No 2 (Apr 1999): 201-214. 201.
- ⁴¹ Milton, Sybil, "Gypsies and the Holocaust," *The History Teacher* Vol 24, No 4 (Aug 1991): 375-387. 379
- ⁴² Lewy, Guenter, "Himmler and the 'Racially Pure Gypsies'," *Journal of Contemporary History* Vol 34, No 2 (Apr 1999): 201-214. 205.
- ⁴³ Fraser, Angus. *The Gypsies*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers. 1992. 265.
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- ⁴⁵ Ioanid, Radu. *The Holocaust in Romania: The Destruction of Jews and Gypsies Under the Antonescu Regime, 1940-1944*. Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, Inc. 2000. 226.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., 207.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., 232.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid., 226.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., 226.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid., 237.
- ⁵¹ Ibid., 229.
- ⁵² Fraser, Angus. *The Gypsies*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers. 1992. 268.
- ⁵³ Malcolm, Noel, *Bosnia: A Short History*. Washington Square, NY: New York University Press. 1994. 114.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., 116.

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- ⁵⁸ Ibid., 267.
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- ⁶⁰ Ibid., 331.
- ⁶¹ Hastings, Adrian. *The Construction of Nationhood*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 1997. 30.
- ⁶² Ibid., 31.
- ⁶³ Papa, Tony, *Opre Roma: Gypsies in Canada*, National Film Board of Canada, 52 min 1 s., 1999, video.
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- ⁶⁹ U.S. Department of State, "United States Assistance for Roma Issues," *Office of the Spokesman*, 8 April 2010, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2010/04/139844.htm> (accessed 3 November 2010).
- ⁷⁰ Ibid., 1.
- ⁷¹ Ibid., 1.
- ⁷² Ibid., 1.
- ⁷³ Ibid., 1.
- ⁷⁴ Ibid., 1.
- ⁷⁵ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, <http://www.ohchr.org>
- ⁷⁶ European Union. Human Rights. http://europa.eu/pol/rights/index_en.htm
- ⁷⁷ European Union. Contribution to the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance. http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/human_rights_in_third_countries/r10107_en.htm
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