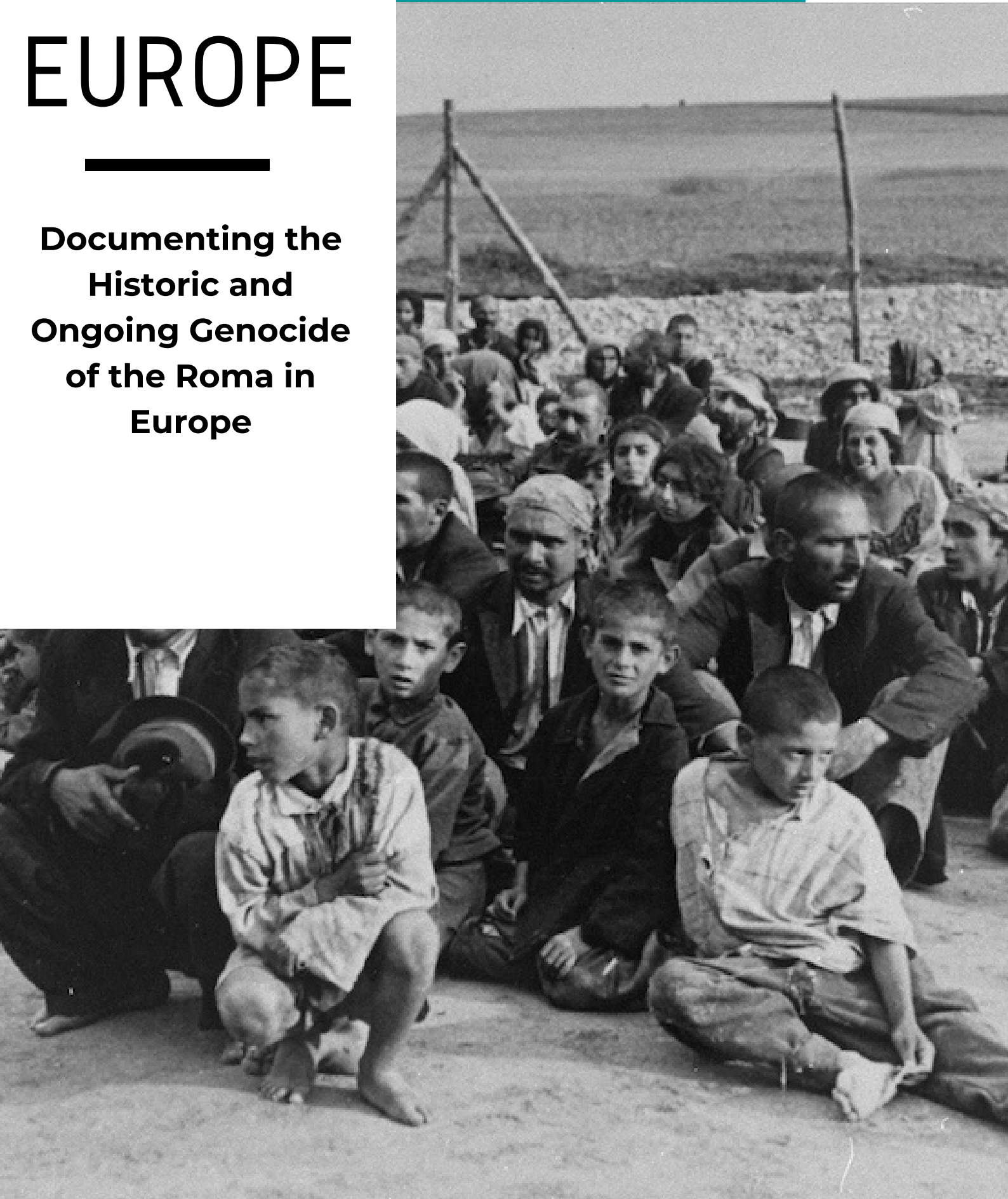


# ROMA IN EUROPE

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**Documenting the  
Historic and  
Ongoing Genocide  
of the Roma in  
Europe**



# INTRODUCTION

The Roma, also known as the Romani people, Kale, Sinti, or Citanos, are a diverse group of peoples whose ancestors originally migrated from the Indian Subcontinent. Although the Roma are more commonly known as Gypsies, many now consider this term a slur. There are an estimated 20 million Roma living across the world today, with the majority concentrated in Europe. The Roma people have their own unique set of languages, religious beliefs, culture, and economy.

Roma life, particularly in Western Europe, is often associated with a nomadic existence; Roma people move from place-to-place trading and performing. A significant source of Roma identity derives from the Romanipen, or Romani Code; however, such an attachment to the code is not universal. While many "Gadje" (the Roma term for non-Roma) still view Roma as nomads, Romani settlements, villages, and communities have existed in Europe for hundreds of years and have left an indelible mark on European culture and history.

The Roma's perceived nomadic lifestyle, distinct culture, and dark complexion have subjected them to consistent discrimination and persecution in Europe. For centuries, European rulers have oppressed, enslaved, and expelled Roma communities. Nazi Germany and its allies systematically exterminated an estimated 500 thousand to 1.5 million Roma due to their "racial inferiority," in what the Roma now call the Porajmos ("The Devouring").



Romani Protest - The Brussel Times

Roma still face systematic discrimination due to their ethnicity and lifestyle. Through this particular form of discrimination, known as "antigypsyism" or anti-Romani racism, the Roma face both official and non-official barriers to healthcare, education, housing, and cultural expression across Europe and other parts of the world. Hate crimes and acts of violence against Roma communities are commonplace. Right-wing and ultranationalist groups view the Roma as an existential threat to their nations and violently attack Roma or promote hate speech against the community. The following report will attempt to summarize the current and historic genocidal actions against the Romani community, as well as provide recommendations to better prevent violence against the Roma people.

"I confess that I feel somewhat guilty towards our Romani friends. We have not done enough to listen to your voice of anguish. We have not done enough to make our people listen to your voice of sadness. I can promise you we shall do whatever we can from now on to listen better...I remember what happened in the "night of the Gypsies...that night will remain with me as long as I live."

— Elie Wiesel, Author & Holocaust Survivor, 1986

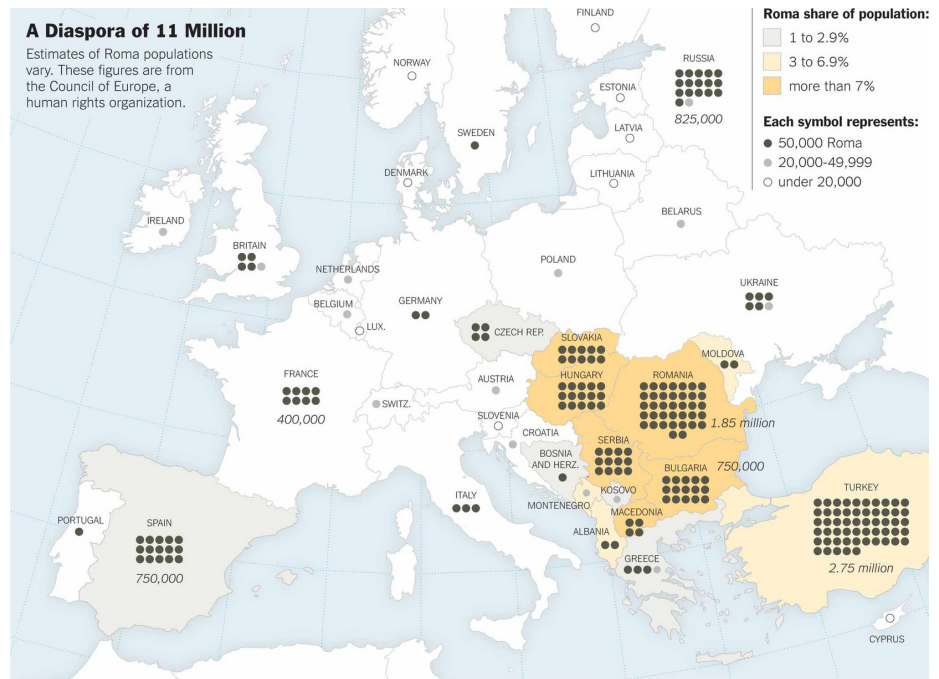
# KEY TERMS

## Porajmos

This term describes the genocide of the Roma by Nazi Germany and its allies. The Nazi regime killed between 500,000 and 1,500,000 Roma during the Holocaust. In the Romani language Porajamos literally means "the devouring."

## Antigypsyism

A term used to describe the specific racist structures and perceptions that perpetuate discrimination against European Roma. Anti-Roma or anti-Romani racism are also widely used.



Map of Roma Populations in Europe - Council of Europe

## TEN STAGES OF GENOCIDE

**Classification:** "us and them," Roma as an "Other"

**Symbolization:** naming "Gypsies," and distinguishing dress, language, culture, and skin color

**Discrimination:** refusing or retracting of citizenship

**Dehumanization:** denial of humanity through use of slurs, stereotyping as lazy, dirty, immoral

**Organization:** state police, and paramilitaries form to attack Roma

**Polarization:** widespread polarizing hate speech against Roma

**Preparation:** police, paramilitary, or far-right groups target Roma

**Persecution:** destruction of life conditions, separation of children, forced displacement, forced sterilizations

**Extermination:** genocidal massacres, mass killings of Roma

**Denial:** lack of recognition for Roma genocides, use of euphemisms, impunity for perpetrators

"Genocide is a process that develops in ten stages that are predictable but not inexorable. At each stage, preventive measures can stop it. The process is not linear. Stages may occur simultaneously. Logically, later stages must be preceded by earlier stages. But all stages continue to operate throughout the process."

—Dr. Gregory Stanton

Founding President and Chair of Genocide Watch

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Countries in Europe should make denial of the Roma Holocaust a criminal offense, in the same manner as a denial of the Holocaust of Jews is criminalized.

2. Social media companies should work to remove hate speech against Romani from their social media platforms.

3. Integration of Roma into society should focus on promoting a Roma identity rather than forcing assimilation into the larger majority.

4. European governments must immediately halt the forced eviction and/or destruction of informal Roma settlements.

5. Germany, the rest of the former Axis powers and former Yugoslav states should provide reparations and justice for Roma who suffered under the Nazi regime and during the Yugoslav Wars.

6. Biased policing towards Roma communities should be addressed; Roma resources officers and community organizations should be integrated into police forces, particularly in Eastern Europe.



# HISTORICAL PERSECUTION

Since their migration to Europe and the Middle East in the 11th century, the Roma community faced discrimination and persecution at the hands of the local populace and ruling elite. From the Middle Ages through the early modern period, Europeans developed racist attitudes towards the Roma, assigning suspicion to traditional Roma occupations, such as merchants, traders, craftsmen, and performers. The Roma's dark hair, dark skin, and unique dress easily singled them out from the rest of the population.

Prior to the 20th century, European governments crafted official state policies that excluded Roma from living in cities and allowed them to be legally enslaved or killed. For example, the 1545 Diet of Augsburg declared, "whosoever kill a Gypsy, will be guilty of no murder." In 1749, Spanish King Ferdinand VI arrested all Roma in his realm and imprisoned them in labor camps, now known as the Gran Redada De Gitanos or "Great Gypsy Round-Up."

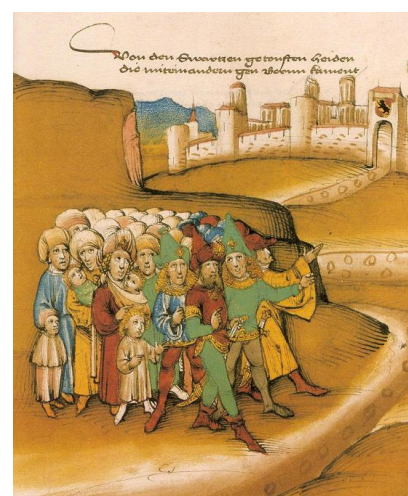
The Roma were outright banned from living in certain countries. The English Parliament passed the Egyptians Act of 1530, which forbade any Roma from emigrating to England, and gave local Roma communities 16 days to leave or face execution. Similar acts in France and the Holy Roman Empire banned Roma from their lands in the 17th Century. Policies in medieval and early modern Europe also forced Roma to renounce their traditional lifestyle and settle in segregated ghettos outside of cities.

In 1774, Austrian Queen Maria Theresa issued a declaration that forbade marriage between Romani and forcibly settled them in collective farms. Roma children were also taken away to be raised by non-Roma families. Pogroms against Roma and discriminatory state policies continued in the 18th and 19th centuries. In Romania, monasteries, princes, and other noble families enslaved Roma. Chattel slavery of Roma lasted for hundreds of years, ending in the late 1850s.

The stereotypical Roma was viewed as poor, untrustworthy, and primitive. Non-Roma suspected the Roma of stealing food and money, putting curses on innocent people, and defiling non-Roma women. These stereotypes remain prevalent today. Roma communities and individuals have faced violent pogroms and discrimination from their non-Roma neighbors. Roma across Europe and the Middle East were called "Zigan", which comes from the Greek word "atsinganoi" meaning "untouchable."



The Expulsion of the Gypsies from Spain - Edwin Longsdon Long, 1872



The first arrival of Gypsies outside Bern, described as *getaufte heiden* "baptized heathens" - Diebold Schilling the Elder, 1480

# ROMA HOLOCAUST



Roma Prisoners in Dachau - US Holocaust Memorial Museum

The Roma Holocaust, known in Romani language as the *Porajmos* or “the Devouring,” was the systematic genocide of Roma and Sinti communities by Nazi Germany and its allies during the Second World War. An estimated 500,000 to 1.5 million Roma were killed, with countless more deported or detained in concentration camps. The Nazi regime targeted the Roma people for two main reasons:

- The Nazis deemed Roma to be a “racially inferior” people who should be exterminated alongside the Jews and the Slavs.
- The “stereotypical” Roma lifestyle of vagrancy, unemployment, thievery, and homelessness was considered “asocial” behavior that should be eliminated from society.

Prior to the start of World War II, the Nazi regime began creating ghettos, revoking the Roma's citizenship, and issuing ID badges to separate Roma from the rest of society. Many Roma were also forced to undergo compulsory sterilization at the hands of Nazi racial “scientists.” Psychologist Robert Ritter and his assistant anthropologist Eva Justin spearheaded the study of the “Gypsy Question” or Zigeunerfrage by examining Roma's physical features, lifestyle, and culture to properly justify their imprisonment and extermination.

The killing and large-scale detention of Roma communities began with the Nazi invasion of Poland in 1939 and ended in 1945, in tandem with the genocide of Jews and other victims of Nazism. Many Roma were killed outright by Nazi death squads, known as Einsatzgruppen, or by local fascist militias such as the Hungarian Arrow Cross or Romanian Iron Guard. Concentration and extermination camps, such as Auschwitz-Birkenau, Dachau, and Jasenovac contained designated sections for Roma prisoners known as Zigeunerlager. In France, some Roma prisoners were interned in these camps until 1946.

The Roma Holocaust was particularly brutal in Occupied Yugoslavia. The German Wehrmacht along with the Croatian Fascist Ustasha killed an estimated 200,000 Roma during the war. The Roma were also subjected to brutal Nazi medical extermination, with Auschwitz doctor Joseph Mengele often performing horrific experiments on pairs of Roma twins.



Margarete Kraus, a Czech Roma, photographed after the war. Her Auschwitz tattoo is visible on her left arm - Wiener Holocaust Library Collections.



Nazi Scientist Robert Ritter interviews a Romani woman, 1936 - Wiener Holocaust Library Collections

The Roma Holocaust has had a complex legacy. Often called the “Forgotten Holocaust,” the Porajmos lacks modern recognition and attention. Following the Second World War, the discrimination of Roma across Europe continued, and the Roma had few political or social avenues to bring about awareness of the genocide committed against their community. Some have perceived the persecution of Roma to be a sideshow or less organized than the Holocaust against the Jews or that they were simply targeted for their “asocial behavior” and not their race. Roma seeking reparations from Germany and other Nazi allies have been denied restitution for these very reasons or due to the persistent discrimination against the Roma people. However, it is unequivocal that the Nazi regime and its allies sought the total destruction of the Roma people as a whole.



# COLD WAR EUROPE



"Gypsy best-workers of socialist labour." Sofia, end of the 1940s, in the middle Shakir Pashov, then MP in Bulgaria.  
(from the archives of Studii Romani, Sofia, Bulgaria)

The traditional lifestyle of the Roma all but disappeared in Hungary and Czechoslovakia as a result of the compulsory "sedentarization" programs. In Bulgaria, the state attempted to create a monoethnic identity and violently suppressed the Roma's attempts to educate in their own language or establish a community organization to represent their people. Sedentarization programs continue to this day.

Europe's Roma population saw little improvement in their lives following World War II. Many Roma still found significant barriers to education, healthcare, and employment, alongside traditional anti-Roma sentiments from the general public. Communist regimes in Eastern Europe compelled Roma to take on a sedentary lifestyle on collective farms, where they were forced to abandon their languages and customs. Communist governments aimed to generally assimilate into the larger society, which, in turn, erased Roma culture.



Gypsies. Svinia, Slovakia, Czechoslovakia. 1966 - © Josef Koudelka | Magnum Photos



1974 Soviet Film, *Gypsies Are Found Near Heaven*

Communist regimes also destroyed the Romani's traditional sources of income and sustenance. Romani were forced to abandon their roles as performers, traders, and small-scale craftsmen for low-paying positions in the industrial or agricultural sectors. Even though Communist ideology promoted an egalitarian vision of a society, Roma communities remained at the bottom of the racial hierarchy. Romani had little chance of advancing in employment or obtaining an advanced education.

Exclusion and violence against the Romani were not limited to Eastern Europe. In the 1970s, the Norwegian and Swedish governments required compulsory sterilization for Romani, and in Switzerland, Romani Sinti children and a non-Romani Traveling group (known locally as Yenish), were forcibly taken from their mothers and put into state-run boarding schools. Sterilization programs continue to this day.

"Whatever is no good, every reject is left at the Gypsies door" — Ion Cioba, Romanian rights activist and self-styled "King of All Gypsies"

# CONTEMPORARY PERSECUTION

After the fall of the Iron Curtain, a new wave of ethnic nationalism swept over Europe. Despite the fall of Communism, the Roma continued to be one of the most marginalized groups in Europe. Many Roma still live in segregated ghettos or informal communities made of scavenged materials. Police forces across Europe are particularly brutal towards the Roman community, recurrently evicting Roma, demolishing Romani homes, and frequently beating or falsely imprisoning Roma for no reason other than their identity.

The general public of Europe still holds a deep-seated hatred and mistrust of the Roma, and their persecution is often defended or simply ignored. In 2008, several Italians demonstrated the common callous attitude towards Roma when the corpses of two Roma children floated onto a beach and the sunbathers ignored their bodies because they were “gypsies.” Efforts to completely segregate Romani children from schools in Eastern Europe continue, most notably in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary. Roma children are often placed in “special” schools or classes that provide the children with a low-quality education and remove them from the general population.

Roma communities throughout the Balkans were also explicitly targeted during the various conflicts in the Former Yugoslavia, by all sides. Many Bosnian Roma were killed in the Srebrenica Massacre alongside Bosniaks, and in July 1992 Serb paramilitaries singled out Roma for torture and execution in the village of Skočić. An estimated 50,000 Roma were displaced by the war.



Neo-Nazi rally against the Roma in Czech Republic - Wikimedia Commons

During the Kosovo War, Roma Kosovars were persecuted by the Albanian Kosovar Liberation Army (KLA) because of (false) allegations that they collaborated with the Serbian invaders.

The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) did not explicitly single out the Roma as a persecuted class during the war, making it difficult for Roma to seek justice for crimes committed against them. So far only, only one indictment has been brought forward to the Hague concerning the persecution of the Roma.

In Kosovo, The KLA burned Roma settlements, beat elderly Roma, and forced the Roma into refugee camps. Many Roma still reside in the Mitrovica camp, in which several residents contracted severe lead poisoning due to the unhygienic conditions of the camp.

Modriča, Bosnia, June 17, 2000: Ms Halida Džafić with her son in front of their land - European Roma Rights Center



Roma Slum in Bulgaria - Jodi Hilton/PA

While always the minority, Roma are the largest ethnic minority in Europe, with the largest populations in South-Eastern and Eastern Europe; Bulgaria, Slovakia, and North Macedonia have at least 10 per cent of their population identifying as Roma. The fear of the “Gypsy Scourge” continues to be invoked across Europe by nationalist factions. Neo-Nazi and nationalist mobs frequently attack Roma settlements or vandalize their property. The majority of attacks occur in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia; however, attacks have been recorded across Europe.



# CONCLUSION

The Roma continue to be Europe's "eternal minority" and face persecution and discrimination across Europe. While beyond the scope of this report, another related group in the Middle East, known as Dom or Domari) and members of the Roma diaspora in North and South America also face racist attacks and discrimination due to their identity. Because of the diversity of the Roma experience in Europe, Genocide Watch considers the community to occupy the full range of the 10 Stages of Genocide. In some countries, such as those in Scandinavia, Roma faces Classification (1) and Discrimination (3), yet in countries like Bulgaria, they face active Persecution (8) and Extermination (9). Lastly, the Roma community faces Denial (10) about the Porajmos, including minimization of the scale or impact of the Roma Holocaust. In addition, there is an unwillingness/inability to recognize the continuation of the genocidal nature of some anti-Roma policies today.



Roma Flag



## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- RomArchive  
<https://www.romarchive.eu/en/>
  - Digital archive for Roma arts, history, and culture curated by Roma, see Voice of the Victims collection for oral accounts on Roma Holocaust
- European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC)  
<http://www.errc.org/>
  - Founded in the 1990s and based in Belgium, the ERRC was founded to fight discrimination against Roma people across Europe.
- Sinti and Roma ("Gypsies") United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM)  
<https://www.ushmm.org/collections/bibliography/sinti-and-roma-gypsies>
  - A useful bibliography of books and articles related to the Roma Holocaust.
- Sinti un Roma  
<https://www.sintiundroma.org/en/contact/>
  - The website of the Documentation of and Culture Centre of German Sinti and Roma.
- Romani or Gypsies? | Dijana Pavlovic | TEDxBocconiU  
[https://www.ted.com/talks/dijana\\_pavlovic\\_romani\\_or\\_gypsies/up-next](https://www.ted.com/talks/dijana_pavlovic_romani_or_gypsies/up-next)
  - TED Talk by Romani actress Dijana Pavlovic.
- European Institute for Arts and Culture (ERIAC)  
<https://eriac.org/>
  - An organization dedicated to promoting Roma culture, music, and art.

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