

Sinti und Roma. Geschichte einer Minderheit. Karola Fings. C.H. Beck: Munich. 2016. 128 pp. ISBN 978-3-406-69848-4

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This is a brief introduction to the history of Sinti and Roma in Europe, addressed to a non-Romani readership. Not only the fact of its publication in German, but the terms in which the narrative and analysis are framed, mark it as an appeal specifically to the German public for awareness of the history of discrimination and reflection on the power and dangers of antigypsyism. At the same time, though, it is a serious work of historical synthesis, remarkable in its combination of concision, breadth and balance. The author's declared aim is 'to contribute to a more nuanced view of the past and future of the [Romani] minority' (10) than that provided by a long history of othering discourses and narratives. She acknowledges the necessity of navigating between negative stereotypes (on the one hand) and visions of permanent disempowerment and victimhood (on the other), to find an account that instates Sinti and Roma as subjects of their own history, and also the difficulty of writing such an account from a Gadjó perspective. By and large, she has succeeded in delivering on that promise, and if the project proves difficult at some points, that is a reminder of how much empirical research remains to be done in recovering the normality of daily lives in families and communities.

The least satisfactory aspect of the book is that the whole of the first chapter (of four) is devoted to recapitulating those very stereotypes (with a view to explaining or debunking them). In writing in this field the 'brief history of antigypsyism' has acquired a virtue-signalling function, not to say a ritualistic one, and I am inclined to doubt that this is necessary for any readers, however ignorant. In heuristic terms, it invites continued generalisation (through counter-generalisations) rather than promoting the attention to specificity and materiality that its human subjects deserve. Here, it actually tends to subvert the purpose of the book, preparing the reader for a narrative more polemical and less nuanced than the story that is actually told in the chapters that follow.

The second chapter, 'History', does a good job of tracing the rhythms and variations in the situation of Sinti and Roma between their arrival in central Europe in the fifteenth century and the early nineteenth century. It draws effectively on the limited but illuminating recent scholarship about the early modern period to show that the marginalisation and criminalisation of 'Gypsies' was an uneven process that can be explained by circumstances that generated social anxieties (like plagues, wars and religious conflicts in sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) and by state-building projects that called for the policing of social order in the face of widespread poverty and vagrancy in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Without underplaying their impact, Fings rightly points out that the disciplining measures employed by European states against Sinti and Roma, from expulsion to compulsory sedentarisation, were of a piece with those that were directed at other outsider groups in the project of creating an ordered and homogeneous society. And she makes a good effort to complement what constantly threatens to become a 'perpetrator narrative' with evidence for normality and resilience in the everyday life of Sinti and Roma – their representation among ordinary skilled tradesmen, soldiers and other servants of the state, their articulate if rarely recorded claims to be human beings and Christians like anybody else, or (signalling their actual integration) to be 'former Gypsies'. The wide variation in the circumstances of Sinti and Roma in this period is illustrated by the contrast between enslavement in Wallachia on the one hand, and the relatively high degree of personal and occupational freedom and social integration that Sinti and Roma enjoyed in Tsarist Russia on the other.

The shorter section of the 'History' chapter (10 pages) devoted to the era of the nation states tends to fall back into a negative narrative, with a neat if telescoped account of how the consolidation of ethno-national states combined with the rise of scientific racism to generate regimes of permanent surveillance whose effects were to stigmatise and criminalise Sinti and Roma to an unprecedented degree, critically limiting their opportunities and exposing them to the official discourses and police practices that would facilitate genocide. The gloom is relieved only by a brief look at the way that the early Soviet Union granted them the privileges of a national minority and a concluding paragraph which

acknowledges the extent to which German Sinti and Roma in particular continued to build lives and families and to construct normality in a very wide range of circumstances and social positions. How, we wonder, did they manage it? But this does in fact bring home how far, particularly for this relatively recent period, research on the lives of Sinti and Roma has stood in the shadow of the genocide that was to come.

The third chapter is devoted to that genocide. As we would expect from an author who is a specialist in the history and commemoration of the National Socialist persecution of Sinti and Roma, it is informed by a significant breadth and depth of knowledge and reflects the findings of the most recent research. Particularly impressive is the way in which, in a very limited space, Fings succeeds in parsing the complexity of the process and the multiplicity of agencies and experiences that constituted genocide in the European frame between 1933 and 1945. In the account of genocidal practices, sterilisation and massacre are given due attention. Much of the chapter is devoted to a structured account of the different kinds of physical segregation and internment that 'Gypsies' were subject to – a narrative strategy that both highlights the peculiar complexity of the Sinti and Roma experience and provides the information that readers need to grasp and communicate it. The variety of camps – municipal 'Gypsy camps', labour camps and concentration camps, ghettos and the makeshift settlements that followed the 1940 deportations of Germans to Poland or the removal of Romanians to Transnistria, up to the 'Family Camp' in Auschwitz-Birkenau – is itself a pointer to the range of perpetrator individuals, groups and agencies: This account makes very clear the complicity of science and scholarship, churches and social agencies, municipal authorities and local police, as well as the race policy sections of Party and Gestapo in Germany and allied parties and governments in occupied and client states. But here, too, the chapter concludes with what we know about the agency of the persecuted in escape and resistance, and also with evidence of help and support from Gadge. In the course of her account, Fings deals deftly with the question of numbers of victims and debates over the relative uniqueness of the Shoah and the Roma genocide.

The book's final chapter covers developments since 1945, under the title 'European Perspectives'. It offers an account of the impacts of the genocide on various Sinti and Roma communities, including the failures of public acknowledgement and the persistence of institutional discrimination that German Sinti characterise as the 'second persecution'. The mixed and ambivalent policies of the socialist states before 1990 are set out clearly and in ways that help to contextualise the upsurge of anti-Roma violence in those territories after the end of socialism. The preconditions for the westward migrations of Eastern European Roma since then are lucidly explained, while the barely explicable insensitivity of response of Western European authorities is set out in clear though by no means dispassionate detail. Against this background Fings provides a very useful account of the tangled history of the Roma rights movement, from the first organisations of genocide victims to the establishment of the European Roma and Traveller Forum (ERTF) at the heart of the Council of Europe; always careful in her judgements and alive to divisions and conflicts among Sinti and Roma, she does not present this history in a triumphalist mode (and for good reason), but she sees positive signs for the future in the self-mobilisation of the younger generation since the turn of the century.

At its best, this book represents the best kind of politically engaged history writing. Insisting that hostility and discrimination are not 'natural' or 'default' conditions, it nevertheless shows that and *how* discrimination and persecution have arisen out of concrete historical situations. And it does so in a compact and readable form. Appearing in the publisher's 'Wissen' (general knowledge) series, it will certainly serve its purpose of reaching a wider educated public and encouraging readers who are not Sinti or Roma to find themselves in that history. I hope that the book will travel further, since Europeans who are not German, including Sinti and Roma themselves, should be able to look through the windows it opens onto that shared past. Guidelines recently issued by the ERTF insist that the teaching of Roma history in schools is a key tool for combatting antigypsyism. This little book would be a good place to start.