

The Suffering of Roma in the Independent State of Croatia 1941 – 1945

The Roma are a people who have suffered greatly in many European countries during the Second World War. Their suffering in certain countries in the time immediately before and during the Second World War was marked by a policy of extermination based on racial laws, with the goal of resolving the „Gypsy Question“. The consequences of this war for the Roma population of Europe were not only demographic in nature, but were also transmitted to all aspects of their position in society. We could say that the marginalized position of Roma within European societies had a strong effect on the attitude of governments towards them and their suffering in the time immediately before and during the Second World War. This was followed by victimological marginalization after the war, succinctly expressed by the term „forgotten holocaust“. To forget the suffering of an entire people in a war which had almost led to their extinction in some countries means not only to evade all responsibility – whether legal, political, material, or other – for this crime, but to enable the continuation of the same pattern of persecution. The Second World War can in some ways be considered one of the high points of the domicile (European) population's intolerance towards the Roma as the eternal „others“ (foreigners). This intolerance is today usually encompassed by the term antiziganism.

The position of Roma in the Croatian lands can be examined in a similar historical context, especially during the Second World War. It is the intent of this work to contribute towards a better understanding of the suffering of Roma in the Independent State of Croatia (*Nezavisna Država Hrvatska* – NDH). It is important to note that this book was produced as the result of the scientific research project „Roma Suffering on the Territory of the Independent State of Croatia during the Second World War“. The leader of this project was the Ivo Pilar Institute of Social Sciences in association with the Roma National Council in Zagreb. In the description of the project proposal it was stated, among other things, that the research shall be focused on analysis of accessible archive, museum, and other relevant sources within a given time frame, and that „the goal was not to gather all sources, but only the most relevant ones“. The goal of the project was to conduct a one-year research and to publish a scientific publication with the results of the research within that time. The research encompassed thirteen archives, four museums, and two libraries. The archival institutions in which the research

was conducted include: the Croatian State Archives, the State Archives in Zagreb, the State Archives in Karlovac, the State Archives in Varaždin, the State Archives in Bjelovar, the State Archives in Slavonski Brod and their Department in Požega, the State Archives in Sisak, the State Archives in Osijek, the State Archives in Pazin, the Serbian Military Archives in Belgrade, the Archives of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo and the Archives of Republika Srpska in Banja Luka. Research was also conducted in the following museums: the Croatian History Museum, the Koprivnica Town Museum, the Museum of Roma Culture in Belgrade, and the Historical Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo as well as the following libraries: the National and University Library in Zagreb and the Gazi Husrev-beg Library in Sarajevo. The selection of institutions encompassed by the research was based on the then-existing knowledge about the possibility of them possessing the relevant documents as well as the accessible information on the significant presence of Roma on those areas on the eve and at the beginning of the Second World War. The project located some 200 documents with more than 1000 pages, which include data not only on the attitude of the authorities towards the Roma, but also their everyday life during the war.

The book is divided into three larger sections. The first includes a text by Danijel Vojak on the suffering of Roma in the Independent State of Croatia, the goal of which is to emphasize some of the aspects of Roma suffering on the basis of existing scientific and other research. The second part of the book includes a selection of documents related to the suffering of Roma in the NDH which the authors of this book have collected from the mentioned archives, museums and libraries. The third part of the book is a bibliographical selection of works on the topic of Roma suffering in the NDH.

It is important to note that the Roma, whom the Croatian writer Ivan Goran Kovačić called „the last free people“ on the eve of the Second World War, were historically persecuted precisely because of their freedom, way of life, culture, tradition, and language. The negative perception of the authorities and populations of many European lands, including Croatia, was mostly based on the prejudice that the Roma were „others“. It was precisely in the newly-established NDH that the Roma were considered an „other“ and unwanted part of society, which was particularly emphasized in the racial laws which were enacted soon after the Ustaše came to power. The NDH authorities considered Roma to be „parasites“ and „ulcers“ which need to be removed from the pure Croatian racial organism as soon as possible. The first act of the NDH authorities was to make a list of Roma in summer 1941, in order to gain insight into the demographic status of the Roma population and to create a certain basis for resolving what was termed the „Gypsy Question“. The authorities soon

rejected the ideas about colonizing Roma on certain parts of the state's territory, which was impossible to implement due to the state of war. Instead, just over one year after coming to power, the Ustaše authorities decided to deport Roma from all parts of the NDH to the Jasenovac concentration camp. Mass deportations ensued, while the government deceived the Roma by promises that they would be taken to areas where they could live and work in peace. Instead, their final destination was the Jasenovac camp, where most of the country's Roma were taken from May 1942 until the end of the summer of that same year and where they were tortured and killed. According to some accounts, most were killed during that period, while a smaller number was spared because they were used by the camp authorities to assist in the killing and burial of prisoners. However, they too were killed in early 1945. The accessible sources suggest that deportations of Roma also occurred after the mass deportations in mid-1942, implying a certain systematisation in the NDH government's policy towards them. Some of the Roma managed to avoid deportation, especially the sedentary Roma of Muslim faith who lived on the Bosnian and Herzegovinian lands and were called „White Gypsies“. A number of Muslim intellectuals, with the support of the Islamic religious community, managed to secure the protection of these Roma by proving that they cannot be considered Roma due to their way of life, customs and religion, and that they identified as an inseparable part of the Bosnian and Herzegovinian Muslims – therefore part of the Croatian nation according to the NDH's state ideology. More research is needed in order to determine exactly how many Roma were saved from deportation to Jasenovac in this way. A smaller number of Roma managed to evade deportation and joined the Partisan movement as a form of active resistance towards the NDH government. Although there is little data on the participation of Roma in Partisan units, they do confirm that Roma were present there. The Ustaše authorities used the Roma not only in the Jasenovac camp, as helpers in the killings and burial of victims, but also as part of their intelligence system. In addition, several cases were noted where Roma assisted the local authorities in committing atrocities, or where Roma performed certain logistical tasks (e.g. acquiring horses for the army). A part of the NDH's population didn't share the government's attitude towards the Roma, and actively protected them. There are quite a few examples of the population cooperating with the government of some local community, requesting the governing authority to protect, free, or return from the Jasenovac camp those Roma who had been taken from their area, considering them good and honest members of their community. A smaller number of these requests was indeed granted, but it should be noted that the local functionaries of the NDH also participated in them and thus in a certain way resisted the central government's policies towards the Roma. The end of the Second

World War in May 1945 brought considerable changes to the Roma community of Croatia. The community recovered from the demographic consequences of the war only some 60 years later. The attempt to exterminate the Roma of Croatia did not succeed, in which the efforts of part of the non-Roma population to save them may have played a certain role. The post-war testimonies and reports of various state and local committees for investigating the victims of the war did not significantly contribute towards raising public consciousness about the extent of the suffering of this minority population. What followed can be described by the term „forgotten holocaust“, which was in use in many European countries after the Second World War. One of the goals of this publication is to make a step towards achieving a better understanding of Roma suffering in the NDH, based primarily on scientific argumentation using archival and other relevant sources. The idea is to foster a debate, both among the broader public and in the scientific community, and simultaneously make it clear that Roma suffering should never be forgotten.

Na engleski preveo: Boris Blažina