

**Guenter Lewy.** *The Nazi Persecution of the Gypsies.* New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. xii + 306 pp. Photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 0-19-514240-3.

Reviewed by Pontus Hiort, Department of History, Northern Illinois University.

Published by H-German (June, 2001)

## A Community Destroyed

With *The Nazi Persecution of the Gypsies*, Guenter Lewy has set a new standard for scholarship on Nazi policy toward the Gypsies. This meticulously researched and well-written work challenges some traditional notions about the tragic history of this people and in doing so enhances our understanding of one of the less-studied aspects of the Third Reich. Lewy's account constitutes a balanced contribution to a field of study that in the past has often been affected by personal agendas and emotionally-charged discourses.

Drawing upon a wide array of sources--many of which unused by scholars--Lewy offers a harrowing description of how the Nazis attempted to solve what they labeled the "Gypsy problem." The author provides intricate and detailed discussions of the hostility, discrimination, and cruelty that the Gypsy community faced during the Nazi years. In this aspect, Lewy is in agreement with earlier works on this topic, however, by arguing that the Nazi regime never formulated a plan to annihilate this minority, he disagrees with most previous scholarship. He exposes the often confused and contradictory nature of Nazi policy, though even when addressing some of the inconsistencies in Nazi racial policy, the author always remains careful not to downplay the extreme brutality and destruction that the Nazis imposed on the Gypsies.

In the introduction, Lewy establishes that early Nazi policy regarding the Gypsies in many ways constituted a radicalization of already existing legislation. During the *Kaiserreich* and Weimar Republic, many German states passed laws restricting freedoms of trade and movement for Gypsies. These laws were enacted partly in response to demands from the local population, who often viewed the itinerant lifestyle and different culture of Gypsies with great aversion. Throughout this work, the author maintains that

several Nazi policies were created as a result of pressure from below, and he consequently stresses the importance of uncovering the origins of the animosity that the Gypsies often encountered.

Lewy, while emphasizing that the vast majority of accusations against the Gypsies were based solely in myth, juxtaposes stereotypes and reality about Gypsy lifestyle and culture in order to locate the roots of this hostility. He argues that discrimination (for instance, not being allowed to do business with shopkeepers, or being denied access to the local town pump) offers a plausible explanation as to why traits such as thievery and uncleanness became integral parts of the stereotypical view of the Gypsy. However, in what might be a more controversial part of his argument, he suggests that certain features of Gypsy culture tended to create or reinforce hostility on behalf of the population among whom they lived. Citing anthropological evidence, he recounts that stealing from a Gaje (non-Gypsy), as long as it was limited to basic necessities and not motivated by greed, carried little stigma according to many Gypsy cultures. He uses this and other examples as illustrations of how cultural and behavioral differences between Gypsies and non-Gypsies often made congenial relations difficult to maintain, and how they eventually made Gypsies the victims of various forms of discriminatory legislation.

The author describes Nazi treatment of the Gypsies during the pre-war years as running along a "three-track policy." First, from 1933-1937, local and state authorities intensified the measures of control and harassment that had existed prior to the Nazi takeover. Secondly, in 1937, as a part of their much publicized "preventative crime campaign," the Nazis launched an initiative against the "work-shy" and "asocials," in which the Gypsies became primary targets simply because many of them maintained itinerant life-styles. Frequently responding to complaints from the local

population, Nazi officials insisted that by living a roaming life instead of engaging in what was considered standard work, Gypsies were prone to criminal behavior and generally detrimental to the welfare of the nation. By extensive analysis of secret police files, Lewy uncovers great numbers of individual and collective tragedies as many Gypsies, only by account of failing to register a permanent residence, were labeled as criminals and sentenced to disproportionate harsh punishments, including expulsion to concentration camps.

In his perceptive discussion of a third aspect of pre-war policies, the decree for "Combating the Gypsy Plague," Lewy explores the evolution of Nazi racial policies toward the Gypsy minority. This decree, which for the first time officially labeled Gypsies racially inferior, was issued in December 1938 and called for registration of sedentary and nonsedentary Gypsies. Tracing the emergence of this decree, the author focuses on the activities of the Research Institute for Racial Hygiene and Population Biology, founded in 1936 and under the direction of Robert Ritter. Attempting to verify biological and racial traits as determinants for criminal and asocial behavior, Ritter and his staff carried out de-humanizing experiments and measurements on thousands of Gypsies. They eventually reached the conclusion that the purer the blood of a Gypsy, the less inclined s/he was to engage in criminal activity. Lewy observes that this conclusion provided Nazi officials with an acceptable explanation to the thorny question of the racial origin of the Gypsies.

Many Nazi scientists had long wrestled with the predicament of how to address the presumed Indian origin of the Gypsies, which indicated that they were of Aryan descent. By arguing that the vast majority of contemporary Gypsies (about ninety percent) were of mixed ancestry (*Mischlinge*), and hence of an inferior race, Ritter and his staff were able to play the race card against the Gypsy minority. The passing of this decree resulted in a significant reduction of Gypsy movement, and many were forced to move into supervised municipal camps where they had little or no opportunities to support themselves.

With the outbreak of the war, the Nazis intensified their harassment of Gypsies. In addition to further restricting the latter's mobility, the regime developed a grand scheme in 1939-1940 to rid Germany of these unwanted people. This initiative called for the deportation of

all Gypsies to the newly acquired territories in eastern Poland. For a variety of reasons, however, (for instance, the opposition of Hans Frank, and a lack of transportation), this venture failed. In the end, only about 2,500 of the approximately 30,000 Gypsies in Germany were deported during this campaign. In this discussion, by exposing numerous inconsistencies in the way that officials implemented policy, Lewy underscores his recurring argument that the Nazis were unable to fully coordinate their policies on the Gypsy question. One key example of such an inconsistency is that officials when deciding whom to deport sometimes let social behavior take precedence over racial status. Albeit in a small minority, some Gypsies were allowed to stay in Germany because they had a permanent place of residence, held regular jobs, and kept their homes in an orderly manner.

Searching for a new solution to the "Gypsy problem," Heinrich Himmler announced a new and supposedly more coherent policy in December 1942. As early as 1935, Himmler had taken a personal interest in the racial status of Gypsies, and he officially supported Ritter's ideas concerning the racial differences between pure Gypsies and *Mischlinge*. These ideas clearly served as basis for the "Auschwitz Decree" as it called for the deportation of the latter to Auschwitz, while the former was to be largely exempted. The decree provided specific guidelines for which groups that were to be exempted: racially pure Sinti and Lalleri (but not Roma), *Mischlinge* who had been adopted by a racially pure group, Gypsies who were legally married to persons of German blood, and "socially adjusted" Gypsies.

By uncovering the fates of Gypsies who were exempted from deportation to Auschwitz, Lewy provides new and revealing insights into the sometimes uneven application of Nazi racial policies toward the Gypsies. He points to numerous examples of Gypsies who, by living what the Nazis defined as socially well-adjusted lives, were able to avoid expulsion despite their supposedly inferior racial status. Conceding that reliable documentation is scarce, he still maintains that the number of exempted Gypsies ranges from 5-15,000, which, considering that the total number of Gypsies amounted to about 30,000, constituted a significant part of the Gypsy community. In this discussion, Lewy presents a picture of the Third Reich as an often cumbersome polycracy, where

Nazi officials applied racial policies to different degrees (not surprisingly, many were adamantly opposed to the exclusion of certain Gypsies from deportation). While maintaining that it is incorrect to assume that all Gypsies were treated in the same manner, the author stresses that those who escaped deportation were still exposed to extreme hardship and brutality. Nazi officials often subjected them to forced sterilization--a measure frequently used as incentive to avoid expulsion--and they were forced to live under very close supervision with the possibility of being sent to concentration camp ever present.

The first large transport of Gypsies arrived in Auschwitz in early 1943. Lewy insists that the purpose of sending Gypsies to Auschwitz and other camps seems to have been to remove them from Germany rather than to annihilate them. The deportations to Auschwitz probably "...represented the lowest common denominator among various Nazi officials concerned with policy toward the Gypsies" (p.165). The author speculates that it is not inconceivable that the Gypsies were to be kept in Auschwitz until the end of the war, when they were to be resettled in the newly acquired eastern territories. Eventually, about 23,000 people were to be incarcerated in the Gypsy camp, not all of them Gypsies. Lewy claims that the fact that Gypsies were not subjected to selection at their arrival, but instead placed into a so-called family camp indicates that no blue print for their extermination existed. Despite the fact that many other prisoners were envious of the Gypsies for being able to remain with their families, Lewy demonstrates that life in the Gypsy camp was extremely harsh. Starvation and disease was rampant, and the few doctors present could or would do little to assist the Gypsies in their suffering. In addition, regardless of the fact that no scheme for genocide existed, mass murders did take place. Both in 1943 and 1944, thousands of Gypsies were gassed, probably in order to make room for the arrival of Hungarian Jews. Lewy estimates that up to ninety percent of the Gypsies sent to concentration camps perished due to starvation, disease, murder, and overwork. This number is indicative of how effective the Nazis, even without a plan for annihilation, were in destroying the Gypsy community.

Lewy's discussion of the aftermath of the war clearly demonstrates that the conditions of the Gypsy minority did not automatically improve

after 1945. He insists that even as Germany was de-nazified, harassment continued, and in 1946, the German police were again complaining that special measures had to be adopted to deal with roaming Gypsies, who allegedly stole from and created unrest among the local population. Notwithstanding that the Allied Control Commission ruled that Gypsies could not be subjected to special means of control, it was evident that old attitudes remained.

As an example of such attitudes, Lewy discusses how Gypsies frequently failed to receive restitution. Many of these cases were dealt with in a blatantly discriminatory manner, where sometimes the same officials who had ordered deportations were called in as expert witnesses to corroborate the allegedly flawed character of the Gypsies. The compensation law of the Federal Republic, enacted in 1953 and passed in a final version in 1965, provided compensation to those persecuted on basis of political opposition, religious beliefs, or race, however, Gypsies were not covered under these provisions, though clearly they should have been. Many who sought restitution, especially in the first two decades after the war, were turned down on the basis of the dubious argument that most of the laws that the Nazis had imposed upon the Gypsies had existed prior to 1933. Even after 1963, when the *Bundesgerichtshof* finally conceded that racial persecution of the Gypsies had begun "at the latest" in 1938 (p. 204), many Gypsies were hesitant to apply for restitution because of the shame they experienced for having been forced to violate cultural taboos while incarcerated or because of a more general apprehension that new investigations would lead to harmful consequences. The Gypsies who sought compensation for forced sterilization initially achieved little success, as the German courts long argued that this operation had not significantly impaired the victim's ability to make a living. It was not until 1980 that the West German government offered a one time payment of 5,000 Marks to those exposed to this heinous surgical procedure.

In his conclusion, Lewy takes issue with much of the previous scholarship on Gypsies, arguing that it has often been influenced by charged political and emotional discourses. The author cites several fully or partially incorrect notions about Nazi treatment of Gypsies that has been transformed into common knowledge. As a

prime example, he quotes Johannes Rau's speech to a special session of the upper house of the German Parliament commemorating the anniversary of the Auschwitz decree in 1994, where the latter stated that the SS "carried off all the Sinti and Roma they could get hold of" (p.149). By disclosing the fate of Gypsies who were exempted from deportation, Lewy cautions us against making sweeping generalizations in these matters, though he remains mindful to point to the harassment and brutality that Gypsies had to face, whether expelled or not. He also questions the theory that the Nazi actions toward the Gypsies should be labeled "genocide." In his discussions of the mass murders that occurred in Auschwitz, the author maintains that these gassings did not take place "...in order to annihilate the Gypsies as a defined group" (p. 223). Lewy contends that these murders indicate that the Nazis considered Gypsies to be an dispensable group of people, however, he claims that they occurred more in order to achieve Nazi-type solutions to specific local situations (to provide room for Hungarian Jews, for instance) than as part of a plan to annihilate the Gypsies as such. Asserting that no documentation exists that the Nazis possessed a blue print for Gypsy extermination, the author still stresses that his arguments should not be viewed as an attempt to downplay the "criminality and utter depravity of the Nazi's actions," (p.149), which caused the Gypsies such enormous suffering and hardship.

*The Nazi Persecution of the Gypsies* constitutes a welcome contribution to the scholarship on the Third Reich and Nazi policy toward Gypsies. Lewy should be especially commended for attempting to clear this scholarly discourse from much of the emotional and political overtones that has characterized it in the past. The author's painstaking analysis of thousands of sources enables him to present a well-documented account that displays both historical accuracy and compassion regarding the tragic history of this minority. Through extensive use of police files, he has been able to juxtapose collective and individual experiences of Gypsies, which provides the reader with an overall context in which to place the situation of this people during the Third Reich, as well as intriguing insights into the personal lives of many victims. In addition to highlighting the unfortunate fate of the Gypsies, Lewy's work is also a further contribution towards a richer understanding of the complex nature of the Third Reich. By carefully appraising policy statements of

local as well as national Nazi leaders, and analyzing the extent to which they were carried out, he displays that though perhaps not as efficient as it wanted to portray itself, the Nazi state was still terribly effective in destroying groups deemed to be its enemies.

Copyright 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).

**Library of Congress call number:** D804.5.G85 L49 2000

**Subjects:**

- Romanies -- Nazi persecution
- World War, 1939-1945 -- Atrocities
- Romanies -- Germany -- History -- 20th century
- Gypsies -- Nazi persecution
- World War, 1939-1945 -- Atrocities
- Gypsies -- Germany -- History -- 20th century.

**Citation:** Pontus Hiort. "Review of Guenter Lewy, *The Nazi Persecution of the Gypsies*, H-German, H-Net Reviews, June, 2001.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=32604996604903>.

Copyright © 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).