



**Oliver Seifert.** *Roma und Sinti im Gau Tirol-Vorarlberg: Die "Zigeunerpolitik" von 1938 bis 1945.* Innsbruck: StudienVerlag, 2005. 227 pp. EUR 19.90 (paper), ISBN 978-3-7065-4164-0.

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## **Annals of Destruction: Roma and Sinti in Tirol and Vorarlberg during the Third Reich**

Oliver Seifert's study of Nazi policies towards the Roma and Sinti in Tirol and Vorarlberg during the "Third Reich" constitutes a valuable contribution to our knowledge of the discrimination and persecution that both groups faced before and after the *Anschluss*. By carefully investigating the lives of Roma and Sinti in these areas, the author demonstrates how local, regional and national authorities cooperated to eliminate "Gypsies" from their regions.[1] Building upon the discriminatory legislation in place before 1938, local authorities imprisoned, deported to concentration camps or executed the vast majority of Roma and Sinti. Seifert's work enhances our understanding of the hardships these groups faced before, during and after National Socialism.

An introductory chapter outlines the origins and history of the Roma and Sinti. The author notes that the commonly used term "Gypsy" did not originate within the Roma and Sinti communities, but rather from outsiders who applied this appellation to various ethnic groups including the Roma, Sinti, Lalleri and Yenische. Although Seifert does not reach any new conclusions on the origin or history of these groups, his brief description of the often tragic history of these peoples highlights the injustices they have faced over the centuries.

Following his introduction, Seifert analyzes the discriminatory policies towards Roma and Sinti in Tirol and Vorarlberg dating to the eighteenth century. With the rise of nineteenth-century nationalism, Roma and Sinti were labeled nationless peoples who did not deserve a

place in the subsequent Austrian nation-state. Especially after Hitler seized power in 1933, which caused an increased influx of Roma and Sinti into Austria, local authorities became determined to remove these groups from their territories. Provincial authorities often encountered difficulties accomplishing this goal, mainly because neighboring provinces failed to coordinate their actions. One province would forcefully expel Roma and Sinti, only to have the neighboring province return them. Roma and Sinti were constantly under the watchful eye of the police, who often assumed, despite evidence to the contrary, that they would cause trouble if permitted to remain in one location. Communities also feared allowing Roma and Sinti to settle locally due to often misplaced concerns that they would burden the welfare system.

The National Socialist annexation of Austria opened new possibilities for local authorities to deal with the "Gypsy problem." Although persecution and discrimination had already characterized Austrian policies before 1938, the more comprehensive Nazi approach to these issues promised local authorities efficient ways of removing Roma and Sinti from their territories. As early as 1938, many members of these groups were classified as asocial and deported to concentration camps. Despite deportations and arrests, itinerant groups remained in Tirol and Vorarlberg, much to the consternation of the local authorities. Seifert points out that when officials realized that they were unable to solve the "Gypsy problem" on the local and provincial level, they often approached higher authorities, including Heinrich Himmler, with re-

quests for national policies that would remove these unwanted people from their territories once and for all.

In a fascinating discussion, Seifert chronicles how Himmler's 1938 command to "combat the Gypsy plague" (p. 59) forced authorities to categorize all non-sedentary peoples, by race, as pure "Gypsies," mixed-race "Gypsies," or itinerants not racially related to the "Gypsies." He notes that the Nazis believed that 90 percent of the "Gypsies" were of mixed race; such people constituted the gravest danger because of their alleged asocial nature. Seifert notes that this decree carried relatively little weight in Austria and even questions how quickly local authorities in Tirol and Vorarlberg became aware of its existence, since no complete racial investigation of the Roma and Sinti was carried out. Although the majority of the Roma and Sinti were spared this humiliating experience, it did not ease their lives. On the contrary, the lack of an "official" racial classification allowed local authorities to continue to categorize people as "Gypsies" according to their own preferences, further enabling arbitrary discrimination.

Seifert's analysis of the first attempts of local Nazi authorities to use the new laws to remove Roma and Sinti from their territories illuminates how difficult it was to reach a consensus on this perceived problem. Although local authorities attempted on several occasions to send the "Gypsies" to camps in and outside Austria, other provincial or state authorities always rejected these requests for various reasons. Most of the local Roma and Sinti remained in Tirol and Vorarlberg until 1943 under increasingly difficult circumstances. Although the author notes that cordial relations often existed between local populations and the Roma and Sinti, constant police attention ensured continued harassment from the authorities. After the German invasion of Poland in 1939, Roma and Sinti were forced to settle in one place. Although they were never interned before deportation to Auschwitz in 1943, they were not allowed to leave their communities and remained under supervision. The author notes that despite the fact that many Roma and Sinti men held regular jobs during this time, which they performed to the satisfaction of their employers, they were frequently accused of sabotage and other crimes. While concrete evidence of wrongdoing rarely existed, Roma and Sinti were sentenced to disproportionately harsh sentences for their alleged crimes.

Late in 1942, Himmler decreed a new racial division among the "Gypsies." Sinti and Lalleri were declared racially pure "Gypsies," but members of the Roma and

other groups were deemed racially unfit and sentenced to concentration camps. This decree might have implied that Sinti and other more "racially pure" groups were exempt from Nazi persecution, but Seifert clearly demonstrates that this was not the case. First of all, many of those not sent to concentration camps were sterilized. Secondly, because no complete investigation had determined the exact racial status of the Roma and Sinti in Tirol and Vorarlberg, local authorities were left to determine group membership. Thus local officials were given an opportunity to achieve the end they had sought since the early 1930s: the elimination of these groups from their regions. In April 1943, the majority of the Roma and Sinti in Tirol and Vorarlberg, seventy-six people, were arrested and deported to Auschwitz. Six more individuals arrived with later transports, bringing the total in the concentration camp to eighty-two Roma and Sinti from Tirol and Vorarlberg.

Conditions in Auschwitz made it difficult for the Roma and Sinti to survive. Roma and Sinti families from Tirol and Vorarlberg were kept together, a measure that did not, however, alleviate their suffering. Diseases, overwork, starvation and gas chambers claimed the lives of the majority. Seifert concludes that at least two-thirds of the eighty-two deportees perished, but cautions that insufficient documentation regarding the fates of the Roma and Sinti suggests that the actual number of victims was likely even greater.

One of the many strengths of this book is Seifert's analysis of the postwar treatment of the Roma and Sinti. Austrian law long rejected reparations for Roma and Sinti although they endured mistreatment during the Third Reich. Indeed, citing pre-1938 laws that prevented "Gypsies" who lacked Austrian papers from remaining in Tirol and Vorarlberg, local officials continued to discriminate against them—sometimes expressing a desire to keep Roma and Sinti in camps to restrict their movements. Moreover, officials' persisting preconceived notions about the supposed bad character of the Roma and Sinti made it difficult for the latter to convince the authorities of their wartime maltreatment. Fearing further abuse, many Roma and Sinti were reluctant to press their claims, which, of course, did not make it any easier to receive any compensation. An increased complication for the Roma and Sinti was that few officials were tried for crimes that they had committed against members of these groups.

Oliver Seifert has written a clear, concise and important study on Nazi policies towards the Roma and Sinti in

Tirol and Vorarlberg. His detailed description of individual fates, juxtaposed with a broader picture of the difficult situation these communities faced, constitutes a useful addition to the literature on this still under-researched topic. By illustrating how Nazi policies built upon already existing laws and how quickly discrimination resumed after 1945, Seifert has illuminated important aspects of the treatment of Roma and Sinti in Austria. Furthermore, the author's argument that though the bureaucracy of the Third Reich did not always function perfectly, it worked well enough to cause the death of the vast majority of Roma and Sinti in the regions under consideration, provides illuminating insights into the Nazis' deadly effectiveness in destroying entire communities. A more detailed treatment of the existing historiography would have improved the book and maps and illustra-

tions would also have helped the reader locate the events the author describes. These minor flaws notwithstanding, Seifert's study will be of much interest to a wide variety of scholars. He should be commended for his efforts to uncover another aspect of the tragic history of the Roma and Sinti during the Third Reich.

#### Note

[1]. The term "Gypsy" is placed in quotation marks because the term does not adequately represent the various ethnic groups that the Nazis conflated under it and includes some groups whose members were not ancestors of today's Roma and Sinti. It is used in this review because the Nazis employed it. Seifert punctuates the term in the same manner.

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