Nazi Persecution and Genocide of Roma and Sinti communities

Introduction for teachers

This resource has been produced to provide context, information, and historical narrative to assist in the teaching of the Nazi Persecution and genocide of Roma and Sinti communities (Porajmos), which have often been described as the ‘forgotten victims’ of the Holocaust.

It is estimated that more than 500,000 were murdered during the Second World War, with some sources stating up to one million deaths. According to a YouGov research in 2019, **55% of British adults surveyed are unaware of this**.

According to research published by the Equalities and Human Rights Commission National Barometer of Prejudice, Romany Gypsy, Roma and Irish Travellers were the only protected characteristic groups for which the most frequent response was openly negative (44%).

It is important before introducing the genocide of Roma and Sinti people, students have some understanding of the Holocaust and are familiar with the rise of National Socialism, the Nuremberg Laws, propaganda, and the methods by which targeted and persecuted communities were treated and disposed. These included forced sterilisations, medical experimentation, killings (Einsatzgruppen) and death camps.

Often the Roma and Sinti Genocide is hidden in the category of ‘other’ groups persecuted by the Nazis, thus failing to acknowledge and name the loss, grief, and sheer scale of the genocide.

This resource will explore the experience of Roma and Sinti communities using a variety of case studies, images, and written articles.

The discussions and materials may lead to students feeling a whole range of emotions. Be aware that within your class/student group there may be students for whom this history is very personal and emotive. Additionally, the majority of students are likely to know very little and they may need time to reflect on the prejudice and racism faced by Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities today.

There are many excellent resources produced by The Holocaust Education Trust to guide you in the development of teaching and learning strategies for Holocaust Education which can support you as you develop your pedagogy for teaching and knowledge development about the Porajmos.

In 1991, England was the first European country to make Holocaust education a mandatory and a prescribed part of the National Curriculum for History for Key Stage 3. However, whilst the Government has stressed its commitment to ensuring that the Holocaust is never forgotten and that its lessons are learned by the current and future generations, it has failed to make specific and explicit recommendations to the teaching of the Roma and Sinti Genocide.

Friends, Families and Travellers sent a letter with the support of 40 charities to the Education Secretary in February 2022, calling for the genocide of Roma and Sinti people to be included as a mandatory part of Holocaust teaching in schools in England.

Including the histories of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities in educational curricula would improve the understanding of these communities as integral to societies here and abroad, and would act as an effective tool to combat hatred, discrimination and prejudice.
‘Gypsy, Roma and Traveller’ is often used to describe a diverse range of communities. While this term has been helpful in gaining recognition for the issues facing nomadic communities, the groups that fall under this category are separate ethnicities and communities, with different histories and cultures. The acronym ‘GRT’ should be avoided. Below is a description of the varying groups:

**Gypsy**

‘Gypsy’, ‘Romany Gypsy’, and ‘Romany’ are terms used to describe Romani people who have migrated to various countries around the world. Romani people left India around 1500 years ago. Fleeing persecution, Romani people settled in various countries before reaching the United Kingdom around 500 years ago. In the United Kingdom, Romany people often refer to themselves as Gypsies or Romany Gypsies. The word ‘Gypsy’ has been largely reclaimed by Romany people in the United Kingdom as a point of pride, but ‘Gypsy’ can be considered a racial slur and so it’s best to use ‘Romany Gypsy’.

**Traveller**

‘Traveller’ refers to a range of diverse groups, such as Irish Travellers, New Travellers, Showmen and sometimes Boaters. Irish Travellers are considered Ireland’s indigenous people and form a distinct ethnic group. Irish Travellers have their own culture, language and dialects. ‘New Traveller’ is a community of nomadic people in the United Kingdom, born out of the free festival and peace convoy movement of the 1960s, and continuing into present day. Many are now in third-generation New Traveller families.

**Roma**

‘Roma’ mainly refers to the overarching description of all sub-groups of Roma communities across the world. Whilst some Romani people continued onto the United Kingdom and formed present-day Romany Gypsy communities, many Romani who stayed in mainland Europe are considered ‘European Roma’ and form part of local communities across the continent. Roma people often have shared forms of culture, language and heritage, but many European Roma have also adopted cultural elements from the places they have lived and continue to live in.

‘Sinti’ people form a sub-group of Romani ethnicity, with their own traditions and customs. Sinti communities experienced extreme marginalisation in pre-WW2 Europe, and this was further ramped up during the Nazi Regime. Sinti people suffered alongside Roma and Jewish people, and entire Sinti communities were wiped out during WW2.
It is estimated that more than 500,000 Roma and Sinti people were murdered during the Second World War, though the true number may be as many as one million. According to research by YouGov in 2019, 55% of British adults surveyed are unaware of this. Many died in the death camps while others were murdered elsewhere or died of disease and starvation.

The Roma genocide by the Nazi regime is often known as the Porajmos, which comes from the Roma word for ‘devouring’.

2nd August was chosen as Roma Holocaust Memorial Day to commemorate the victims of the Romani Genocide. On this date in 1944, 2,987 Roma and Sinti people were murdered in the ‘Gypsy Family’ camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau. This date was given official recognition in 2015 by the European Parliament.

In 1938, Heinrich Himmler, the Chief of the German police and Head of the SS, issued a decree called “The Fight Against the Gypsy Menace”, which required all Sinti and Roma people to register with the police. In December 1942, Himmler issued an order to send all Gypsies to concentration camps.

Josef Mengele, the doctor infamous for brutal experiments on hundreds of twins, was the head physician in the Gypsy camp at Auschwitz from May 1943 to August 1944. He had a particular fascination for Roma and Sinti children and conducted fatal experiments on them.

No Roma or Sinti were called to testify at the Nuremberg Trials, and no-one testified on their behalf. In 1979, the West German Federal Parliament finally identified Nazi persecution of Roma people as racially motivated.

The Romani Genocide was not widely acknowledged until 1982. It wasn’t until 1987 that a Roma person was allowed to join The US Holocaust Memorial Council.

In 2012, a memorial to the Sinti and Roma people murdered during the Holocaust was erected in Berlin. A photo can be seen on the following page.

Notes for teachers

It is important that before exploring these resources students already have a clear understanding of what the Holocaust is and are familiar with some of the terms. Here we are looking at the impact of the Holocaust on Roma and Sinti communities who are often described as the ‘forgotten victims.’

You may also want to consider reading the following guidelines from The Holocaust Education Trust:

- A guide for primary school teachers
- Exploring the Holocaust: teachers guide

A useful exercise would be to ask some questions to students as reminders for what they have previously learnt about the Holocaust. Some examples of this may be:

- When did the Second World War start?
- Do you remember who the victims of the Holocaust were?
- What happened to victims of Nazi persecution?

Roma and Sinti communities originated from Northern India as early as the 6th century. From there, they made their way through Europe, seeking work and fleeing persecution. Life had been very difficult for the Sinti and Roma communities; even before the Nazi occupation of Europe began, laws had been in place that had compromised their way of life.

Roma and Sinti people made a living in several ways, such as wood carvers and basket weavers, grinders, and horse-traders. Many worked on the land as seasonal farm labourers. Many still travelled to markets and fairs during the summer, but as time went on the majority settled in one place. There is a strong tradition of music in the Roma and Sinti communities, and some worked as professional musicians, supplementing their incomes by playing at dances and fairs. Family was integral to their way of life but maintaining traditions and culture against a backdrop of discrimination, suspicion and hatred became increasingly difficult.

As the Second World War escalated during the 1940s, Roma and Sinti people were systematically forced into camps and ghettos. Some hid in forests, moving from place to place in fear of their lives. In 1942, an order was issued to send all Roma and Sinti people to concentration camps. The Nazi regime despised Roma and Sinti communities, who were viewed as ‘racially inferior’ and a threat to the purity of the White Germanic race.

Activity for students

In the following activity, we will focus on contrasting biographies and chronological reports of young people from the Roma and Sinti communities who were victims of the Holocaust in Europe. Each story is unique and will help pupils learn about the Holocaust while offering insight into these young people’s lives and the challenges they faced.

Zekia’s story

**Ethnicity:** Roma  
**Born:** c.1933  
**From:** Serbia  
**Lived:** Nis, Serbia  
**Siblings:** Four including one sister Dudjia  
**Parents’ Occupation:** Seasonal farm workers

Zekia is the young girl Crystal meets in the play ‘Crystal’s Vardo’. Zekia lived in Serbia during the Second World War. Serbia was part of the former Yugoslavia at the time and was occupied by the Nazis. Zekia was born in the city of Nis, where she lived in the Roma quarter of a small neighbourhood called Stocni with her three brothers and one sister. We have little information on the background of Zekia’s family, but it was estimated that she was born in 1933.

Image source: Robert Dawson https://www.robertdawsongallery.co.uk/

Image of anti-bullying play ‘Crystals Vardo’

Find out more here: https://www.gypsy-traveller.org/our-flagship-projects/theatre-for-change/about-crystals-verdo/
At the start of the Nazi occupation, 150,000 Roma lived in Serbia. They were all made to wear yellow armbands with ‘Zigeuner’ (Gypsy) inscribed on them. Trams and buses bore placards saying ‘No Jews or Gypsies’. Many Roma people had their heads shaved by German soldiers.

Shortly after the Nazi occupation of Nis, Zekia’s parents and brothers were arrested. Zekia, who was only eight at the time, was left alone and went to live with some of the women whose husbands had been taken away by the Nazis. One day when Zekia was at the market, she was recognised by a Serbian farmer called Milan from a neighbouring village. Milan knew Zekia as her parents had helped him with the harvest on his farm. On learning that Zekia’s family had been arrested, he took her back to his village, where his wife Lepa dressed her to look like a Serbian girl so that the German soldiers would not recognise she was Roma. It was a capital offence for anyone to provide refuge to Jews or Roma.

Each day the Germans would come to Milan’s farm to collect eggs and hens. Zekia would have to spend the day tending to the sheep in the fields so as to not be noticed.

Zekia’s family had been sent to the concentration camp in Crveni Krst (meaning Red Cross). Her sister Dudjia was shot whilst pushing some bread through the barbed wire to feed her brothers. Conditions were extremely harsh in the camp; winters were cold and prisoners often had to work outside. Food was rationed - consisting of coffee for breakfast with only soup and a piece of bread for both lunch and dinner. Over the course of the occupation, more than 10,000 people were thought to have been killed in this camp.

It is believed that Zekia was eventually captured and sent to Crveni Krst, where she was killed. We can surmise this as only one brother of the five children survived the war.

Life was hard for Roma living in Serbia even before the outbreak of war, and discrimination against the Roma people was rife. Even after the war ended, many Roma people that survived were unable to resume their trades because their belongings had been destroyed or confiscated. Across Europe, Roma continued to be discriminated against after the war, which is one of the reasons it took so long for the genocide of Roma during the Holocaust to be recognised.

1. Name the country where Zekia was born.
2. What was the city called where Zekia lived?
3. How old was Zekia when her parents were arrested?
4. In Nis, Roma people were made to wear a yellow armband with the word Zigeuner on it. Why do you think the Nazis made this rule?
5. Every day the Germans came to the farm. What did they come to collect?
6. Zekia had no choice but to stay hidden behind the haystack for an entire day. How would you feel if you had to stay hidden in these conditions? Answers should show empathy for Zekia’s situation.
7. Zekia’s brothers were starving hungry. What did their meals consist of?
8. Why did Milan and his wife want to help Zekia?
9. Many people during the Holocaust acted extremely bravely and risked their lives to help others. What might the risks have been when Milan and his wife helped Zekia?
Settela Steinbach was born in Limberg in the Netherlands on the 23rd December. She was born under the family wagon, as was the Roma custom at the time. Her family originally came from Germany before moving to the Netherlands. Her father, Heinrich, worked as a horse trader and violinist in a Sinti orchestra in cafes and at festivals and fairs. Her mother, Emilia, ran the household and raised ten children, whilst also sometimes selling her wares from village to village. The family regularly moved around Limberg, staying at different camps in search of work.

For a very long time, the striking image of Settela pictured peering out of the door of a train was thought to be the face of a young Jewish girl. She was often referred to as 'the girl in the head-dress'. It wasn't until 1994, after careful and painstaking research, that the Dutch journalist Aad Vardgenaar correctly identified her as the Sinti girl, Settela Steinbach.

In May 1940, the Nazis occupied the Netherlands, but it wasn't until 1943 that all Roma and Sinti people were forbidden from travelling by wagon and forced into guarded camps. Settela's family tried to escape the order but were eventually caught and deported to the central assembly camp in Eindhoven. On 14 May 1944, the Dutch police were ordered to move all Roma families to Westerbork transit camp. Settela, along with all the other Roma and Sinti women, had her head shaved under the pretext of it being a measure against catching lice. This was a horrific experience for a young Roma girl, as her culture values long hair tremendously. Her mother wrapped a torn white sheet around her head to cover her up. They were also scrubbed with disinfectant and fed rotten potatoes, watery soup, and carrots.

On 19 May, the family were put on a cattle train to Auschwitz-Birkenau, 675 miles away. Settela stuck her head out of the train, apparently staring out at either a passing dog or the German soldiers. It was this moment that was captured on film whilst her mother shouted, “get away from that door, your head will get stuck”. Upon arrival, they were taken to the Roma family camp – but those fit enough to work were sent to labour camps.

Settela and the rest of her family were murdered a few months later at Auschwitz, likely on the night of the 2nd August 1945, when the entire Roma family camp was killed. Settela was only nine years old. Settela’s father was the only family member to survive the war, dying in 1946. The 2nd August is now marked as Roma Holocaust Remembrance Day.
Karl Stojka was born on 20 April 1931 in Wampersdorf, a small village in Lower Austria to parents Karl and Maria Stojka. Karl was the fourth of six children and his family worked as itinerant horse traders during the summers, travelling from town to town. Until 1937, Roma people travelled relatively freely in Austria and were accepted as part of the community.

After the Nazi occupation of Austria in 1938, it became increasingly difficult for the family to travel. They were forced to give up travelling and move to a working-class district in Vienna. They used the wood from their caravan to build a very small house for the family to live in. Consequently, they had to learn to cook with an oven instead of an open fire. Karl said, “I wasn’t used to having permanent walls around me”. At first, Karl’s sister and father went to work in a factory, but in 1940 Karl’s father was arrested and taken to Dachau concentration camp. He was later transported to Mauthausen where he died of a heart attack three months later at the age of 31.

In March 1943, mass deportation began of the last Roma and Sinti people to Auschwitz. On the 3rd March 1943, Karl was sitting in his classroom as normal when the door opened and in walked his head master, the caretaker, and four Nazi soldiers wearing heavy leather coats. Everyone, including Karl, stood up and shouted ‘Heil Hitler’. The men whispered to each other. Soon after Karl’s teacher came up to him and announced, sadly, that he must collect his things and go with them. Karl collected his satchel and was escorted downstairs to where a police car was waiting to take him to where he lived. There was also an open truck filled with hundreds of Roma and Sinti, including his family. They sat on benches in the side of the truck, his mother clutching a giant cloth filled with clothes for the children. They had been made to leave the rest of their belongings behind. From here they travelled to a military barracks and eventually to Auschwitz.

Karl remained at Auschwitz until 3rd August 1944, following the day of the mass murder of the Roma family camp. Roma and Sinti people who, like Karl, were deemed fit and old enough to work were transported to other labour camps. Although Karl was only 13, his uncle and brother persuaded the soldiers that he was 14 by claiming he had dwarfism. Instead, Karl was sent to Buchenwald labour camp and eventually Flossenbürg, where he was freed on the 24th April by US soldiers at the end of the war.

Karl was lucky enough to survive the war and be reunited with other members of his family. He eventually became a successful businessman, a Roma rights activist, and painted pictures of his experiences during the Holocaust.

On what date and where was Karl born?
What were the names of Karl’s parents?
Why did Karl’s family convert their caravan into a small house?
Before they moved into the house where would Karl’s family have done their cooking?
Describe something that happened that made life harder for Karl and his family.
Imagine the day Karl was arrested in his classroom and how you would feel if this had happened to one of your classmates; how would you feel and what would you do?
Who are the bystanders in this story?
Now imagine you are Karl’s teacher; how would you have felt?
How did Karl manage to survive in the concentration camp?
Write a short paragraph in chronological order on what you have learnt about Karl’s life.
What do you think Karl’s feelings would have been when he was reunited with his family?
The painting on the opposite page is by Karl Stojka, what does the image say to you?
Thinking about the Holocaust

How does the treatment of the Roma and Sinti people mentioned above relate to the treatment of Gypsies, Roma and Travellers today?

How does the treatment of the Roma and Sinti people mentioned above relate to the treatment of other groups, such as refugees today?

Can you relate these stories to other people and communities you have learnt about in the Holocaust or other genocides?

Looking at each of the testimonies again, find examples of the following.
Take a moment to discuss the meaning of each word:

- Bravery
- Resistance
- Racism
- Loss of human dignity
- Joy
- Resilience
- Persecution
- Courage
- Nurture

Impact of Nazi laws

The Roma and Sinti were stripped of many of their rights and privileges:

- Banned from travelling.
- Prevented from going to school.
- Forced to register and carry identity cards.
- Had to be home before dark.
- No longer allowed to keep dogs and cats.
- Exclusion from cinemas and dances.
- Only allowed to shop at certain times of the day.

Think about the impact of losing these basic rights and freedoms and how this would affect your everyday life today. How would this make you feel?

How could these be seen as a violation of human rights?

If we become aware that a particular group was being targeted today by either government or individuals, what should our response be?
Life before the Second World War

It is important to reflect on life before the war and what was lost because of it.

Despite years of persecution, slavery, and anti-Roma legislation throughout Europe and for hundreds of years, the Romani communities still showed tremendous resilience and strength in maintaining traditions and cultures. Before the war, life was hard, but there was still much joy to be had. Family life, hard work, and culture was celebrated among the different communities. It is important to reflect on the richnss and diversity of the Roma and Sinti communities.

Below is a Testimony of life before the war told by a survivor to her grandson (see Travellers Times):

“We travelled from spring to autumn. From one place to another across Poland. We would rent a house during winter from the Poles, but once it was getting warmer, we were on the road again. Before the war, my dad was a horse trader. He was very well known and respected.

Our caravan was stunning. It had floral paintings all over it and wooden dragon statues; you know, to protect us from bad luck. I remember us kids playing in the forest.

Women would take care of their families. They would cook and do laundry in the river. A lot of women were fortune-tellers. They told fortunes to the Poles, not for money, but for some food. Evenings were the most beautiful: a lot of singing and dancing around the bonfire.

Older people told stories about ghosts and old fairytales. We kids would sit and listen, eating together from one plate. Then everything changed.”

These photographs were taken several years before the war.

What does this photograph say about the lives of these people?

Describe what you think might be happening in these photo’s and the emotions of the people in them.

Can you tell the nationality, ethnicity, or religion of people in the top photo’s and if not, what does that tell us?
Geography activity

Find a map of 1940's Europe, and do the following:

1. Label on the map each country where Zekia, Settela and Karl lived.
2. Label on the map which country you live in.
3. Where did the Second World War start?
4. What is the capital of Germany?
5. Can you name a neutral country in the war?
6. Can you put a circle around the area where the Sinti people may have lived?
7. Can you put a circle around an area where Roma people would have lived?

Poem by Italian Rom Santino Spinelli

Sunken in face
Cold lips
Silence
A torn heart
Without breath
Without words
No tears

1. What does this poem say to you?
2. What does this poem suggest to you about the effects of the Romani Genocide?
3. Can you explain the poem’s structure and style?
4. Think about the emotion and the mood within the poem, how does the style of the poem make its impact?
5. If you were to read the poem aloud, can you explain how you might do this to evoke the atmosphere of the poem?
6. You could create your own poem from one of the testimonies or use one of the artefacts or photographs shown in the worksheets as a stimulus for a poem with a similar style.
History of resistance

It’s important for students to learn that the Roma and Sinti people are not just seen as victims. There were people who performed enormous acts of heroism trying to resist their perpetrators. Below are two examples of resistance, but there are more that could be researched.

On 15 May 1944, the 6,000 Roma in the Zigeunerlager camp were warned that the Nazis were planning their execution. On 16 May 1944, more than 600 Roma prisoners did not show up for the usual morning roll call, but barricaded themselves into their barracks. They had broken into an equipment warehouse and armed themselves with hammers, pickaxes, and shovels, and taken apart the wooden sections of the bunks they slept on to make weapons. As a result of their defiance, no Roma or Sinti died in the gas chambers on that day.

This act of resistance troubled the Nazi Regime. Fearing a camp-wide revolt, 3,000 Roma were transferred to other camps. On 2 August 1944, the Nazis gassed the remaining 2500 Roma prisoners in the Family Camp.

The courageous revolt of 16 May 1944 – a fight for the right to life and humanity is now used as the date for Romani Resistance Day.

Alfreda Markowska was a Polish Roma who saw her parents, siblings and members of her community massacred by the Nazis in 1941. She was the only survivor. She managed to avoid arrest and became involved in saving Jewish and Roma children. After hearing news of a massacre, she would travel to the sites to look for survivors. She then took them into hiding, procured false papers and found families or guardians to take care of them. Some she brought up herself. Alfreda is thought to have saved at least 50 children in this way and in 2005 she was awarded the Commander’s Cross with Star of the Order of Polonia Restituta for heroism and exceptional courage.

Resources

https://rm.coe.int/168070309f
http://genocide.leadr.msu.edu/a-male-perspective-karl-stojka/
https://www.ushmm.org/m/pdfs/2000926-Roma-and-Sinti.pdf
http://genocide.leadr.msu.edu/a-male-perspective-karl-stojka/
https://rm.coe.int/168070309f
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