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Do French ‘Nomads’ Have a War History? A Review of Seventy-five Years of Historiography

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Abstract

Through a study of the historiography of the persecution of “Nomads” in France from 1939 to 1946, this article offers a critical analysis of methodological and thematic biases present in much historical research on the topic. Historical studies on “Nomads” have significant practical implications today: this article examines how the history of French Roma and Travellers during the Second World War was written. It shows how French institutions have relied on historical work to deny the racial character of the persecution of the so-called “Nomads”. The paper emphasizes that internment and enforced residence were not so much an absolute break but rather part of a particularly virulent moment in the long history of persecution of “Nomads” in the twentieth century in France.

Keywords

- France
- Genocide
- Historiography
- Internment
- Nomad
- Resistance
- Roma

Introduction: Why Historiography Matters

Via a telegram in July 1946 ending the enforced residence and internment of “Nomads” on French territory, the Ministry of the Interior urged the prefects to “benefit from certain positive results”^[1] of the policy targeting “Nomads” during the war. Why is such a document, indicating an objective continuity between the policies pursued after the war and during the Occupation, not at the centre of the historiography of “Nomads” in France? In fact, this historiography shows euphemisms and ellipses that can easily be identified through reading published works, especially over the Second World War period. My exhaustive reading of the studies carried out on that historical period did not allow me to sufficiently document the internment and enforced residence of “Nomads” between 1939 and 1946 and understand the consequences thereof. Many publications exist, often written by professional, outstanding amateur historians and students, sometimes by survivors, but the overwhelming impression is that the disaster that this period represented for “Nomads” has been missed.

Some will consider the term disaster is excessive, in comparison with the massacres in the territories of Eastern Europe (Snyder 2012). Internment in camps such as Montreuil-Bellay, Saliers or Arc-et-Senans, assigned residency in Maurs in the Cantal or in Saint-Astier in the Dordogne, is presented as a lesser harm. Although deaths occurred, the majority of internees and assignees survived. Such a notion is one of the main biases that has influenced the writing of the history of these so-called “Nomads”, *i.e.* Roma, Sinti, Manush, Catalan Gypsies, Yenish and *Voyageurs* [Travellers] up until now. The term “Nomad” already carries a constitutive ambiguity, since it does not refer to a well-identified ethnic or national group, but to the political project of controlling and surveilling a category of French citizens whose way of life of which the political majority disapproved. Yet this discriminatory treatment preceded the French military defeat of June 1940, as it was implemented under the Third Republic: As these populations could not be officially targeted by a republican regime according to racial criteria (Delclitte 1995), their supposed mobility was used as a basis for discrimination. The law on 16 July 1912 attributes a strong administrative meaning to the term “Nomad”: classified in this category effectively deprived you of your rights as a French citizen. Although they were not explicitly mentioned in the phrasing of the law, the implantation decree of 3 October 1913 removed the ambiguity around the categories of populations targeted: “Nomads are generally *roulottiers* [...] with the particular ethnic character of Romanichels, Bohemians, Gypsies and Gitanos.”^[2] The exceptional measures adopted during the Second World War would have had less effect if they were not a continuation of this long-standing discriminatory policy. This anteriority also partly explains why control of “Nomads” continued in France after the war. The period under review (1939–1946) is therefore embedded in a much longer history that goes on to this day.^[3] A methodical periodic review of the bibliography allows us to describe the thematic and methodological biases that have accumulated as the bibliography increased. These biases are not only related to the small number

1 Telegraph note from the Ministry of the Interior to the prefects. July 1946. Divisional Archives Côte d’Or, 3 Z 7 M14A.

2 Definition of “Nomads”. Decree of 3 October 1913 on the law of 16 July 1912 on itinerant professions and the movement of Nomads.

3 The administrative category “Nomad” was replaced in 1969 by one of “gens du voyage” [Travellers].

of professional historians working on this topic; they also depend on the theoretical perspective strongly influenced by a national framework that rejects the idea of ethnicity which dominates the study of public policies relating to “Nomads” in France. Articulating those approaches, identifying their implications, and measuring their impact to date, allows for a more rigorous examination of this history. In the first part we offer an analysis of the literature via methodical periodization; and, in the second cogent arguments that form a useful contribution to a critical historiographical study.

1. A Review of the Literature on ‘Nomads’ in France between 1939 and 1946

1.1 The First Testimonies of Persecution Suffered by ‘Nomads’ in France (1946–1948)

In 1946, although the Provisional Government of the French Republic (June 1944 – October 1946) had not stopped measures depriving the liberty of “Nomads”, the first two articles on the fate of the French “Nomads” during the Second World War were published in the *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society*. The first article, a testimony, dealing only with parts of France, appeared in French. It was written by Frédéric Max entitled “The Fate of Gypsies in Prisons and Concentration Camps in Hitler’s Germany” (Max 1946). After returning from Buchenwald, the author recounted his encounters with “Gypsies” whilst imprisoned in Bordeaux to the time of his deportation to the camp. The first meeting was in July 1943 in the Bordeaux military prison with a Manush named Paulo Weiss, known as “Balo”, then 19 years old, who had been arrested by the Gestapo for refusing the Todt organization’s enforced recruitment. He said that since the beginning of the war “Nomads” had been subject to assigned residency throughout French territory. When Frédéric Max was transferred from the Compiègne camp to Buchenwald, he met three distant cousins of Paulo Weiss; then, in German camps, as well as several people who told him of the abuse inflicted by the Germans on the Romani and Sinti people. This precious testimony is both a testimony of persecution and a source of ethnographic and linguistic information: Paulo Weiss is described as “an interesting type of primitive mentality”, one of the prisoners in Buchenwald is described as a “pure-blooded Gypsy”, and the “Gypsies of Eastern France” are described as “the least savage” (Max 1946, 26). The paper ends with the transcription of Romani songs collected in May 1944 in Buchenwald. Frédéric Max was not the only one who had a strong interest in the Romani language during his imprisonment in the Nazi camps; Germaine Tillon also composed a Romani vocabulary in Ravensbrück.^[4] The second article published in 1946 in the *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* was written by Matéo Maximoff (1917–1999) who later became a famous writer. Translated into English, this article is entitled “Germany and the

4 “The unfortunate Gypsies inspired deep pity in me. I often went to their Block and even started a small comparative vocabulary of the various [G]ypsy dialects in order to start a conversation without arousing curiosity with my questions. In this way I discovered two families of Belgian Gypsies and an old French Gypsy woman, women bewildered by their incomprehensible misfortune, but with a primary education and material life habits that made it unbearable for them to live together with the German Gypsies. The rest (with the exception of a few Czech Gypsies) were surprisingly wild, less so than some Ukrainian women but significantly more so than the women of African tribes where my profession as an ethnologist had led me” (Tillon 1973, 63).

Gypsies: From the Gypsy's Point of View". (Maximoff 1946) While one might expect Maximoff to recount his internment in France during the war at Lannemezan camp, he is silent about his personal experience and acts as a spokesman for Roma and Sinti, recalling that "we have fought side by side with you in the fierce struggle, and that hundreds of Gypsies joined the Maquis in France and in Belgium and gave their lives for the Allied cause: for freedom!" (Maximoff 1946a, 7). In the same issue, this four-page article is followed by a second paper by the same author on "some peculiarities in the speech of the Kalderash" (Maximoff 1946b). It is striking that the first two papers published in the *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* on the persecution of "Nomads" are also presented as linguistic studies.

It was not until 1948 that the first testimony dealing exclusively with French internment camps was published. The article written by Germaine L'Huillier was entitled "Reminiscences of the Gypsy Camp at Poitiers (1941–1943)" that appeared in the *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* (L'Huillier 1948). In 1941, after having seen families of "Nomads" passing by her window, she asked to visit the Poitiers internment camp and managed to work there as a schoolteacher. She found herself in the privileged position of observing on an everyday basis the ordeal of "Nomads" in the Poitiers camp, the deportation of men, and the subsequent despair of women and children. But here again, this testimony must be read knowing what Joseph Weill wrote about voluntary helpers in the camps: "Working for the improvement of the camps, even if one is exclusively concerned with the interests of the internees, has gradually, insensitively, led to the toleration and then acceptance of the camps as living conditions for certain categories of men."^[5] The 1946 article and 1948 paper constitute the totality of so-called scientific publications published in the immediate post-war period about the persecutions of "Nomads" in France.^[6] This silence went on until the late 1960s.

To understand this historiographical void, one should look back at certain post-war events that have not been the subject of any study so far.^[7] While Paris was liberated on 25 August 1944 and Germany capitulated on 8 May 1945, "Nomads" remained interned and under assigned residency in France until July 1946. Deprived of their liberties at the beginning of the war by the decree of 6 April 1940, they only regained their freedom when this decree was withdrawn in July 1946 by the Minister of the Interior who sent a memo to all the prefects. This telegraphic memo highlights the ambiguities of the sanctions lifting: "Decree 6 April 1940, recently annulled by decree cessation of hostilities, had assigned nomads to residence – STOP – to take advantage of some positive results of this text, please [...]".^[8] The recommendations made to the prefects are like-minded: To preserve the effects of enforced sedentarization, apply the law of 16 July 1912 rigorously,^[9] and reinforce the power of mayors to prohibit the stopping of caravans on public highways.

5 Joseph Weill, *Contribution à l'histoire des camps d'internement dans l'Anti-France*. Paris, Édition du centre, 1946, p. 177–179, quoted in Anne Grynberg, *Les camps de la honte. Les internés juifs des camps français 1939–1944*, Paris, La Découverte, 1999, p. 344.

6 It should be noted that the existence of camps reserved to "Nomads" is also mentioned in Joseph Weill's book on French internment camps (Weill 1946).

7 An article linked the postwar period to the policy of sedentarization (Reyniers and Williams 2000).

8 Telegraph note from the Ministry of the Interior to the prefects. July 1946. Divisional Archives Côte d'Or, 3 Z 7 M14A.

9 On the law of 16 July 1912 on the exercise of itinerant professions and the movement of nomads, see Declitte (1995).

A series of censuses specific to “populations of nomadic origin” were organized (1946, 1947, and 1951) and an executive order of 1 March 1949 established an Inter-ministerial Commission for the study of issues relating to populations of nomadic origin whose mission was “the voluntary sedentarization of most of the people concerned”.^[10] In April 1949, this commission suggested the creation of a scientific and social association to study these populations (Weinhard 2017, 29); the same year, the association *Études tsiganes* [Gypsy studies] and its newsletter were founded; they were the origins of one of the main French associations for “travellers” (today known as FNASAT) and the main journal on Romani studies in France, *Études tsiganes*, an active and respected journal. Until its dissolution in 1969, the Inter-ministerial Commission neither recommended any study on the period of persecution of “Nomads” in France nor requested any measure to compensate for the harms they had suffered. On the other hand, it supported the creation of “parking spaces”, the beginnings of the current dedicated caravan sites – locations now mandatory for all “Travellers” who do not own land.

The immediate postwar period did not recognise the persecution “Nomads” suffered during the war; instead a regain of control began, disguised as seeming freedom. It is only via historical studies on the genocide of the German Roma and Sinti that the issue was first raised.^[11]

1.2. Forgetting the Persecution of French ‘Nomads’ from a European Perspective (1967–1979)

Between the late 1960s and the early 1980s, at a time when European and national Romani political movements emerged, new research on the genocide of the Roma and Sinti was published in France.^[12] During this period, focus on the study of Nazi atrocities meant that France’s role in persecution was obscured.

The historiographical event of the early 1970s was the publication of the first book on genocide, *The Destiny of Europe’s Gypsies* by Donald Kenrick and Grattan Puxon (English edition in 1972). The authors devoted about ten pages to France: for the first time, the 6 April 1940 decree was briefly analysed and the existence of Nomad camps under French administration was established. Kenrick and Puxon explained the difficulty of writing on the subject: “The fact that twenty large camps and many smaller ones were under direct French administration has been concealed as much as possible, and often denied” (Kenrick and Puxon 1974, 131). On the basis of first-hand testimonies, they also described a phenomenon that was neglected for a very long time: the role of the Roma and Sinti in the French Resistance. It should also be mentioned that three years earlier, in 1967, Miriam Novitch’s research on “The Genocide of the Gypsies under the Nazi regime” (Novitch 1968) was partially translated into French by Maurice Colinon (Colinon 1967)

10 Circular from the Ministry of the Interior to the prefects of 16 March 1964.

11 On the use of the term genocide to characterize the extermination of German Roma and Sinti, see Fings (2013).

12 The 1960s and 1970s saw the emergence of a Romani movement with the Congress of the International Romani Union in 1971, but also of several national movements such as the French National Travellers’ Agreement Committee (1973) and the Gypsy World Community (1959).

The researches of Miriam Novitch and Kenrick and Puxon encouraged French scientific journals to dedicate issues to genocide: In 1975, *Monde Gitane* devoted an issue to the 30th anniversary of the liberation of the (German) camps; in 1978, the journal *Études tsiganes* published the transcription of an “international round table on Gypsies” – Miriam Novitch presented her research there (Novitch 1978). This symposium is interesting for three reasons: (1.) it is the first time that analyses of the genocide of the Roma and Sinti can be read in French; (2.) the French historian Henriette Asséo proposed “a review of historical studies concerning Gypsies”, concluding that a reliable assessment of the number of Roma and Sinti victims of the Second World War was important (Asséo 1978, 4); (3.) the conference ended with an unexpected discussion about “Nomads” in France during the Second World War. After Miriam Novitch’s speech, Henriette Asséo invited the representatives of each country to conduct “genuine investigations” and “not to limit oneself to the fact that this legislation was ordered and orchestrated by the Nazis” (Asséo 1978), implying that it was time to study France’s role in the deportation and internment of “Nomads”. Jean Fleury, a priest, then recounted that he had the register for the Poitiers camp, making it possible to count and name the so-called “Nomads” who were interned there, some of whom had been deported. Matéo Maximoff finally said that Miriam Novitch’s work had particularly moved him since he himself had been “for 31 and a half months in a concentration camp” in France. The acts of this symposium testified that, at the end of the 1970s, French historians realized the need to undertake in-depth research on the fate of “Nomads” in France during the war.

However, when the second historiographical event of the decade took place, with the publication in 1979 of a book by journalist Christian Bernadac, *The Forgotten Holocaust: The Massacre of the Gypsies*, it was negatively reviewed by critics (Bernadac 1979). In the review by the journal *Monde gitane*, the commentator said he was “very disappointed”, considering the book “hastily written”. The review published in *Études tsiganes* underlined that Bernadac exaggerated the persecution suffered by “Nomads” in France and insisted that “there is no comparison between the situation of the French and German camps” (Vaux de Foletier 1980, 31). The specificity of Bernadac’s book is that an entire 90-page chapter was devoted to what he calls “the French antechambers of Auschwitz”, that is, French internment camps (Bernadac 1979, 43). The publication of many documents discovered in French divisional archives shows that France did not wait for the Germans to intern so-called “Nomads”.

The truth is this last “discovery” – no “discovery” for any researcher – is embarrassing. In 1971, Pierre Join-Lambert, President of the Inter-ministerial Commission for the study of issues relating to populations of nomadic origin (1949), spoke at a symposium organized by the International Institute for Human Rights on the theme of “racial discrimination and Gypsies” (Join-Lambert 1971). Only one paragraph of his 22-page speech of a historical nature is devoted to the Second World War: this article suggested that persecution “should be replaced by a more comprehensive policy aimed both at allowing the normal human development of Gypsies and at eliminating, for the populations in whose environment they live, the disadvantages inherent to their presence” (Join-Lambert 1971). This last sentence reflected the position of the Ministry of the Interior of July 1946: it is necessary to put an end to the measures most directly contrary to human rights, but without ceasing to pursue the objective of controlling populations deemed dangerous for sedentary populations.

Two papers published in 1972 and 1978 are of a different order: an article by a priest Joseph Valet on “anti-Gypsy racism” reports for the first time of the summary executions of “Nomads” that occurred in France

during the summer of the Liberation by self-declared Resistance fighters (Valet 1972) and a one-of-a-kind testimony by Louis Reinard, in the Manush language, on his deportation from France (Calvet 1978). The 1970s were marked by an eloquent contrast between, on the one hand, Romani associations that were organized internationally and mobilized to claim compensation for war victims and, on the other hand, silence on the role played by French institutions in anti-nomad persecution from 1939 to 1946. It was not until the following decade that the first French studies on the internment of “Nomads” appeared.

1.3. A History of the Internment of ‘Nomads’ in France (1): A Modest Beginning (1983–1999)

The 1980s began with the publication of a pioneering study on the internment of “Nomads” in France by Jacques Sigot: *Barbwire Discovered by History. A Camp for the Gypsies ... and Others* (1983). The author wrote the history of the Montreuil-Bellay (Maine-et-Loire) internment camp, also called “concentration camp”, where more than 2,000 people considered as “Nomads” were held successively between 1941 and 1945. This book, not a result of a state commission or university research, is a solitary study carried out by an outstanding schoolteacher concerned about the history of the ruins of the camp which he frequently passed. Jacques Sigot is undoubtedly the person thanks to whom the internment of “Nomads” in France became a real historical concern. His book appeared in several versions and has been added to over the years with new archival discoveries and testimonies.^[13] Not only did Jacques Sigot examine documents from four divisional archives, the National Archives and municipal archives, but he also met former internees of the Montreuil-Bellay camp. The presence of these testimonies makes his book unique even today, as later academic research relies little on personal accounts. After 1983, Jacques Sigot, Jean-Louis Bauer, a former internee, and association members, such as Pierre Young, joined forces in a long struggle for the recognition of the responsibility of French governments in the internment of “Nomads”.^[14] This official recognition came late, in October 2016, when the President of the French Republic, François Hollande, gave a speech on the site of the Montreuil-Bellay camp.

Shortly after the release of Sigot’s book, three university theses (MAs) focused on internment camps for “Nomads”: in 1984, Francis Bertrand and Jacques Grandjonc published a chapter in a book on camps in Provence entitled “A Camp for Bohemians. Saliers”; a concentration camp for “Nomads” near Arles (Bouches-du-Rhône) in the free zone (Bertrand and Grandjonc 1984); in 1986, Arlette Dolo wrote a history thesis on the “Nomads cCamp in Rennes” (Dolo 1986); and in 1988, Pascal Vion’s history thesis focused on the Jargeau camp in the Loiret department (Vion 1988). Journals also began to publish articles on this subject: in 1987, *Études tsiganes* devoted an issue to internment, in which articles by Jacques Sigot appeared; in 1988, *Monde Gitane* published “Forgiving without Forgetting” by Matéo Maximoff in which he recalled the existence of numerous French camps exclusively for “Nomads” (Maximoff 1988); and all the 1990 issues of the journal *Monde Gitane* contained at least one article on this subject.

13 In 2011, the fourth edition with more than 340 pages is published.

14 Pierre Young is the head of the Research Committee for the Memory of the Genocide of French Gypsies.

In December 1992, probably inspired by these ground-breaking studies, the Secretary of State for Veterans and Victims of War, the General Secretariat of Integration and the Foundation for the Memory of Deportation asked the Institute for the History of the Present Time (IHTP) to conduct research entitled: “The Gypsies of France 1939–1946. Control and Exclusion”.^[15] The historian Denis Peschanski was appointed scientific head of this research; he was associated with Marie-Christine Hubert and Emmanuel Philippon, with the scientific committee being composed of Henriette Asséo, Jean-Marc Berlière, and Jacques Sigot. Two years later, a 120-page investigation report was published (Peschanski 1994). This study did not focus on the different types of persecution suffered by “Gypsies” during the war, as its title suggested – *Gypsies in France (1939–1946)* – but only on internment. The suggested figures were not the result of a rigorous count: The author referred to 3,000 internees, ignoring completely the fate of the people who were placed under assigned residency, some of them for more than six and a half years. The figure of 3,000 internees also largely underestimated the number of people who were interned as “Nomads” in France. Even if an accurate count is still missing, the mere addition of the lists of internees of the main internment camps (Montreuil-Bellay, Mulsanne, Arc-et-Senans, Rivesaltes, and Saliers) already exceeds 6,000 people. An aspect of this academic research is still surprising: while a preliminary study directed by Peschanski had been assigned to the IHTP, well known for its work in oral history, the resulting research omitted testimonies by “Nomads”.^[16] A few years later, in 1997, Marie-Christine Hubert defended a pioneer doctoral thesis on the internment of “Nomads” in France (Hubert 1997). In the years that followed, she published many articles and a monograph with Emmanuel Filhol entitled *Gypsies in France, A Unique Fate: 1939–1946* (Filhol and Hubert 2009).

The 1990s saw the recognition by academic historians of the internment of “Nomads”. In 1995, for the first time, a non-specialized journal, *Hommes & Migration*, devoted an issue to “Gypsies”, in which the Second World War was discussed. Meanwhile the journal *Études tsiganes* printed two issues on the question of internment alone: in 1995, it published 150 pages by Jacques Sigot; in 1999, it released the events of a symposium that took place at the Royal Salines of Arc-et-Senans in March of the same year on the site of a former “nomad internment camp”. But this historiographical overview is incomplete if two books are not also mentioned: a major testimony by Matéo Maximoff on his experience of the war (Maximoff 1993) and the story, translated into French, by Jan Yoors on the role he played with his Romani friends in the French Resistance (Yoors 1992). Matéo Maximoff’s book, *Roads without Caravans*, was self-published in 1993. It is a fascinating account of the writer’s first 27 years; he details with extreme care the years of the war. Jan Yoors’ book takes the form of a narrative, which tells how the author and his adopted Romani family joined the French Resistance. This book has not been taken seriously; it is nevertheless an extraordinary testimony, even if it does not give the names of people or places. Professional historians have found it too romantic. Neglect of this testimony also explains why the role of Roma and Travellers in the French Resistance has not been studied until recently.^[17] The last

15 1992. “Gypsies in France 1939–1945. Control and exclusion”. *Bulletin of the Institute of Present History* 50.

16 The few testimonies quoted by Denis Peschanski are those that Jacques Sigot had conducted as part of his research on the Montreuil-Bellay camp.

17 On the issue of resistance, see Raymond Gurême’s testimony, published in 2011, which is the second written testimony of such length to tell the life of a “Nomad” during the Second World War (Gurême and Ligner 2011).

period of our historiographical review is characterized by an increase in the number of studies and a popularization of scientific research.

1.4. A History of the Internment of ‘Nomads’ in France (2): Multiplication of Studies and Popular History (2000–2019)

From the 2000s a growing number of history theses and occasional articles on the theme of the internment of “Nomads” were written. With no pretence of exhaustivity, we can list major publications: the work of Mary Debelle on Languedoc-Roussillon (Debelle 2004), that of Sylvaine Guinle-Lorinet on the Lannemezan camp (Hautes-Pyrénées) (Guinle-Lorinet 2005), Emilie Jouand’s thesis on the internment in the Loire-Inférieure (Jouand 2006), or Théophile Leroy’s thesis on the Linas-Monthléry camp (Leroy 2016), including numerous innovative articles by Emmanuel Filhol (Filhol 2000, 2004, and 2007). It is interesting to note that since the 1980s, most of the literature on internment camps has been written by students who only researched for a few months in order to obtain a degree. Due to time constraints, these studies, however meticulous they may be, sometimes leave out large parts of unexplored archives and testimonies that have never been collected. For example, the 15-page article on the Lannemezan camp does not use the camp’s archives, which are reputed to have disappeared, even though they had simply not been properly classified by archivists. The fragmented nature of this research is not merely the responsibility of researchers in training but also of archivists. Having visited more than 60 French divisional archives, I can attest that the guides to the sources of the Second World War but also the general indexation of the inventories often prevents one from finding collections concerning “Nomads” during the war. For example, in the divisional archives of the North (AD Nord), the few boxes identified by archivists on “Nomads” and the Second World War are indexed under the racial term “Gypsy”, although the French administration did not use this term. One of the few exceptions is the divisional archive of the Mayenne (AD Mayenne), which published a very interesting guide on the question of persecution in which “Nomads” occupy a prominent place.^[18] Despite the 2015 national derogation concerning access to Second World War archives, it is sometimes difficult to access the documents necessary for an exhaustive study.^[19]

But the 2000s were also marked by an effort to popularize literature on internment: Photographs, books, films, documentaries, and comic strips complete the thin existing scientific bibliography. The most influential of these works was that of photographer Mathieu Pernot, probably because of its originality (Pernot 2001). His book, *A Camp for Gypsies. Memoirs of the Internment Camp for Nomads in Salières*, reproduced archival photographs of anthropometric booklets on former internees and portraits of the same people from the end of the 1990s. Mathieu Pernot’s initiative was based on a new approach:

18 Julien Lepage, *Persécutions en Mayenne, 1939–1945. Juifs, francs-maçons, nomades. Répertoire détaillé des sources conservées aux Archives départementales de la Mayenne*, Laval, Archives départementales de la Mayenne, 2012.

19 On 24 December 2015, a ministerial order was signed to open archives relating to the Second World War, including the archives of the courts and the judicial police.

meeting former internees.^[20] While previous written works on camps relied on archives, Mathieu Pernot highlighted the memory of witnesses. Documentary directors have also met witnesses: Jean-Luc Poueyto and Philippe Skaljac directed *Trapas men lé*, a documentary about two young Manush, Doulcia Doerr and Eric Schumacher (2004),^[21] and Raphaël Pillosio filmed about ten witnesses in his film *Des français sans histoire*. (Pillosio 2009). Inspired by this impulse and specifically by the release *Liberté* by director Tony Gatlif on internment, a collective of scientists and association members was formed at the initiative of Evelyne Pommerat, documentalist at the Médiathèque Matéo Maximoff (Paris 17e), *A French Memory: Gypsies during WWII*. Under this generic title, the year 2010 was dedicated to the memory of the internment in France.^[22] The purpose of this project was to make this forgotten history known to the public and to encourage local initiatives through the use of an exhibition and documentation. Such an initiative involving scientists and association members is sufficiently rare that it is worth mentioning. It is within this context that Raymond Gurême's testimony was published in 2011 (Gurême and Ligner 2011).

Nevertheless, this successful presentation of a segment of "Nomad" history in France has a downside: as a result of focusing on internment, the fact that the majority of them were not interned but were placed under assigned residency has been forgotten. Internment concerned only about a quarter of so-called "Nomads". A few studies have attempted to explore other forms of persecution: Monique Heddebaut's work on the deportation of "Nomads" in the north of France (Heddebaut 2008), the research on assigned residency conducted by Christophe Moreigne for the Creuse department (Moreigne 2013), and that of Shannon Fogg (which mentions assigned residency without focusing exclusively on it) (Fogg 2009). In the 2010s, even if humanities researchers did try to popularise the persecution suffered by "Nomads" during the Second World War, the history of this period in France was still far from being written. In their introduction to a volume containing several symposia's acts, Catherine Coquio and Jean-Luc Poueyto speak of a "historiographical breakthrough" concerning "the extermination of Gypsies" (Coquio and Poueyto 2014, 18) and dedicate the first part of the book to what Michael Stewart rightly calls an "invisible disaster" (Stewart 2010). In this large volume, two articles deal with France: one focusing on persecution in France and Belgium during the Second World War by Alain Reyniers (2014) and an article by Emmanuel Filhol on a topic that had never been addressed before: the years 1944 to 1946 (2014).

The end of 2010s has seen an interest in the French situation by foreign agencies allowing new perspectives to emerge.^[23] In 2016, an essential instrument of research on the genocide of the Roma and Sinti was published: A bibliography entitled *The Genocide and Persecution of Roma and Sinti. Bibliography and Historical Review* by Anna Abakunova, at the time a doctoral student at the University of Sheffield (UK), and Ilse About, a researcher at the CNRS (Abakunova and About 2016). In 2017, the Hungarian Tom

20 Jacques Sigot had also met with witnesses, particularly more intensively after the publication of the first edition of his book on Montreuil-Bellay.

21 *Trapas men lé* (« Ils nous ont attrapés »), *Mémoires de l'internement de Tsiganes d'Aquitaine, 1940–1946*, 26, Instep Aquitaine, 2004.

22 "A French memory. Gypsies during WWII, 1939–1946" (2010). Available online: <http://www.memoires-tsiganes1939-1946.fr/accueil.html>

23 Without forgetting to mention the many travelling exhibitions on the issue and the Paris Shoah Memorial exhibition held between 14 November 2018 and 17 March 2019.

Lantos Institute launched a call for projects on the theme of Roma and Sinti’s resistance during the Second World War – one of the contributions of this project is a 50-page study on the different types of resistance of “Nomads” in France during the Second World War, including findings on summary executions and ill-treatment of “Nomads” by people claiming to be Resistance during the Liberation in 1944 (Foisneau and Merlin 2018).^[24] European funding for this research was made possible by the Romani European movement of grassroots associations, which chose to focus on Romani resistance to commemorate the genocide. This movement has highlighted the need to collect testimonies even as the last survivors are disappearing.

2. Historiographical Perspectives and Critical Approaches

2.1. Major Historiographical Biases: Actors, Themes, and Political Assumptions

After this historiographical review, some observations can be made on how historians have addressed the question of the persecution of “Nomads” in France during the Second World War.

While French Roma and Traveller associations made the Second World War a theme of social struggles as early as the 1960s, professional historians only began to work on “Nomads” during the Second World War from the 1990s onwards. Indeed, when the first articles on “Nomads” and the war appeared in the late 1970s, they were classified as “activist history” (Asseo 1978). Whereas the word “genocide” was used to qualify the fate of Roma and Sinti in Germany, the persecution of “Nomads” on French territory was not designated by any specific expression or word. The history of “Nomads” in France during the Second World War was initiated by often excellent historians outside of academia or students who devoted a thesis to it. In 75 years, only one PhD thesis has been defended in France with the exclusive theme of “Nomads” during the war. This inventory speaks for itself: contemporary academic history has not devoted much attention to “Nomads”.

The first consequence of this lack of interest in this subject by French universities is that research has focused exclusively on the phenomenon of internment. In some respects, this is a perfectly justified choice, since the long-term imprisonment (sometimes up to six years) of children, women, and men is unprecedented in French history. However, the study of internment alone sometimes conceals a pernicious methodological presupposition and suspect political justification: the Occupation of France by Germans is said to be solely responsible for the deprivation of liberty of “Nomads” and, when the Vichy government’s responsibility was involved, internment in France would have allowed “Nomads” to be protected from Nazi camps. These assertions undoubtedly echo – but are not always aware of – the official discourse of the 1949–1969 Inter-ministerial Commission which explained that the wartime travel

²⁴ This project was the original idea of the French association *La Voix des Rroms*.

prohibition was a “hard and inevitable necessity”.^[25] In other words, internment of “Nomads” would have protected them from the fate of German Roma and Sinti. To refute these arguments, it is sufficient to recall that “Nomads” were placed under enforced residence and interned by the decree of 6 April 1940, signed by Albert Lebrun, President of the French Republic, and that this decree remained active until July 1946, two years after the country’s liberation. It should also be added that internment and enforced residence did not only concern the occupied zone but also the free zone. Moreover, if internment and enforced residence were applied, it was because the law of 16 July 1912 had already registered those designated as “Nomads”, *i.e.* more than 40,000 people (Filhol and Hubert 2009, 61).^[26] The fact that the postwar government was pleased – “positive results”^[27] – with the consequences of enforced residence and internment is another refutation that everything was the responsibility of the German occupiers: these two coercive measures were considered successful outcomes of enforced sedentarization of populations who lived, before the war, in caravans or tents. It can be considered that the objectives of the French administration were followed uncritically by some historical studies on the internment of “Nomads”.

The historiographical focus on internment has had two main consequences, which are also two types of concealment of the historical reality experienced by “Nomads” between 1939 and 1946. The first was to reduce the gravity and consequences of enforced residence, the second was a biased interpretation of the deportation of “Nomads”. Among the new perspectives that should be considered is, first and foremost, a rereading of the enforced residence of “Nomads” as a global phenomenon – that is not reduced simply to preparing for future internment. In fact, interpreting enforced residence as the antechamber to internment concealed the fact that a majority of assignees remained so until 1946. One task still to be accomplished is to understand the reasons for this concealment: one hypothesis is that the fate reserved for assignees appeared to historians as less terrible than that of internees; was it not also a softer way of achieving the French administration’s objective to sedentarize “Nomads”? It will therefore be necessary to launch a new investigation comprising at least two aspects: the first is to examine the conditions under which this measure is used in the broad sense and the choice to use it in the case of “Nomads”; the second is to study the reality of the restrictions imposed and their concrete consequences for assignees. One local study shows the dramatic effects of a measure that may seem relatively harmless to misinformed people: deprivation of resources related to itinerant businesses, relative isolation of family groups, increased stigmatization among local populations, and an increase in the number of prison sentences for violations of the decree of 6 April 1940 (Moreigne 2013; Foisneau and Merlin 2018).

As for deportation, it is necessary to analyse the biases that led to a reduction in its importance, qualifying it as “random”. The main bias is that the reason for the deportation was rarely the status “Nomads” but rather “convoy Z” (Heddebaut 2018), and two convoys from Poitiers are so described. Nevertheless, many

25 Pierre Join-Lambert, “Appel aux Lecteurs pour une histoire des Tsiganes pendant la deuxième guerre mondiale”, *Études tsiganes* 2/3, 1959, p. 17.

26 It is important to clarify that not all “Nomads” were Roma or Travellers and not all Roma and Travellers were “Nomads”. However, from 1940 onwards, a reclassification took place, whereby people who had been considered as “Gypsies [*romanichels*]” even if they had not travelled were included in the category “Nomad”.

27 Telegraph note from the Ministry of the Interior to the prefects. July 1946. Divisional Archives Côte d’Or, 3 Z 7 M14A.

“Nomads” were deported for various reasons that effectively concealed a racial motive. For example, among the “Nomad” deportees from the Fort-Barraux camp were commoner’s rights prisoners. Yet the reason for their internment and future deportation was nothing other than a repeated violation of the enforced residence measures that they were subjected to because of their status as “Nomads”. This example is no exception. It would therefore be appropriate to review the lists of convoys leaving France from this perspective.

One of the reasons for such blind spots in historiography points directly to the way in which the French Republic invented the administrative category of “Nomad” to target, without declaring it, a certain sector of the population considered from a “racial” point of view. We know that the mobility criterion was used to exclude from full French citizenship both very poor isolated people and those who were called “*romanichels*”. This ambiguity was used to full effect during the Second World War: By translating the administrative category of “Nomad” into the racial category of “Zigeuner”, the German administration of occupied France helped remove the ambiguity persisting in measures taken by the French administration. Vagrants, as well as Roma, Manush, Yenish, Sinti, Catalan Gypsies, and Travellers, all were imprisoned. This relative mix of populations was an argument to deny the racial character of the persecution since it remains in the in-between defined by the Republican legislator in 1912. As researchers have not always argued the racial nature of these persecutions, the ministerial department responsible for advising the legislature on Travellers still rejects this characterisation today. This lack of proper designation leads to approximations, such as considering that persecution targeted “family groups” and not individuals. Behind the notion of “family group” is the notion of “tribe” whose connotation is very clearly racist. We still must consider the methodological premises of these biases.

2.2. Methodological Weaknesses: Lack of Precise Figures, Not Enough Testimonies

Research on persecution of “Nomads” lacks a precise mapping of the places of persecution (internment and enforced residence) and correlatively an accurate record of the number of victims. The figures we have are, at best, local (lists of internees in some camps are available), and at worst, speculative, some estimates are too weak to justify. Seventy-five years after the events, the number of persons affected by the decree of 6 April 1940 prohibiting the circulation of “Nomads”, the number of internees, the number of persons under enforced residence and the number of deportees are still unknown. As for sites of internment camps, the list is not complete either: Recent research has shown that the first internment of “Nomads” took place in December 1939 at the Croisic (Foisneau and Merlin 2018). Regarding enforced residence areas, much work remains to be done. A recommendation to establish a memorial for “Nomad” victims of these various policies should be made. The naming of each of the victims, writing their names in a book or on a stele, would allow descendants to mourn the most tragic period in their history. On the Montreuil-Bellay camp memorial, Travellers spontaneously decided to engrave the names of their ancestors who were interned there, and thus carried them from the anonymity of the past to the present.

Another major methodological problem already mentioned above concerns the instruments used to write this story. While French twentieth-century historians have insisted on the importance of oral testimonies – an

almost exclusive source of the history of the Resistance— the historians of “Nomads” have had an almost exclusively administrative approach, as if “Nomads” were incapable of testifying and transmitting. This approach forces us to question the meaning and function of the historical work produced on this issue: we are far from a history made by the actors, as some representatives of Romani studies would like to see; it would be about ensuring that this history can answer the questions of the descendants of the survivors. It is a historiographical priority to collect the testimonies of the last survivors. A scientific project of this kind is currently being carried out, but the resources at its disposal do not allow a large-scale collection.^[28] Attempts have been considered in the past, but they were interrupted due to lack of resources.^[29] The absence of these testimonies has had consequences in terms of sources, since some events are unexplained and we do not have direct access to the daily lives of internees and assignees either. It also has had legal consequences because, without these testimonies, it is impossible to envisage a policy of reparation. Forced sedentarization in camps or places of detention has led to the loss of the belongings of the internees. These people had to give up their professional equipment (circus, cinema, metalworking or tin smithing tools, among others), their habitat (trailer, tent, and so forth), their animals and many personal effects. In 1946, all the internees found themselves impoverished, unable to travel again and pursue their former careers.

2.3. Historiographical Perspectives: Resistance, Uncontrolled Purges, Memory

The encounter with witnesses reveals themes that historiography has taken very little into account: among them, the resistance of “Nomads”, the tragic events of the summer of 1944 that remain unresolved, and the transmission of memory.

Witnesses do not only present themselves as victims but also as actors engaged in various ways to oppose the persecution policies they have suffered. A recurring problem is the way actions aimed at counteracting persecution policies are judged. Recently, historians have seen them as “solidarity” and “survival strategies”. These are partly correct: one does not oppose such policies alone, and it is clear that one must also demonstrate a real ability to evade death. However, these two qualifications are not specific: they overlook the particularity of the conditions imposed on “Nomads”, for which they had to work out new ways of resisting. For other categories of the French population, there were well-defined terms: young people who voluntarily dodged forced labour were called “refractories”, people who helped Jews risking their own lives were called “Righteous among the Nations”, those who, from the beginning of the war, considered concerted action against the German Occupier were called “resistance fighters”. But no suitable term exists for “Nomads”. The main reason for this, both during and after the war, is that persecution did not begin in June 1940 with France’s military defeat. While new forms of persecution emerged, including the racial categorization

28 “Testimonies of the persecution of the Nomads. Collection of oral archives and writings of persons interned as nomads in France (1940–1946)”, directed by Ilse About, with the help of Laurence Brandi, Lise Foisneau Théophile Leroy, and Valentin Merlin, CNRS/EHESS, 2019–2021.

29 Among the collection attempts, we can mention the one of the Mémorial des nomades de France (Available online: <http://memorialdesnomadesdefrance.fr>) and the project “Une mémoire française. Gypsies during the Second World War, 1939–1946” (2010).

of the Nuremberg laws and the intensification of internment practices, the general spirit of persecution of “Nomads” as defined in the 1912 Republican Act has not fundamentally changed. This relative continuation of a persecution policy makes it hard to study the specific forms it took between June 1940 and the summer of 1944. For the French Resistance, the periodization is clear: the first intentions to resist appear as early as June 1940, and the Resistance itself ends with the liberation of national territory. There is nothing like this for “Nomads”: the decree allowing for the forced sedentarization of “Nomads” was implemented before France’s military defeat and the summer of 1944 was not their liberation, which occurred for some only in July 1946. Historians have never used the term resistance to describe actions that certainly fall into this category. A striking example is the high rate of opposition to the April 1940 decree on enforced sedentarization: many people were imprisoned for escaping from internment camps or for not complying with the perimeters of enforced residence. These were clear acts of resistance to abusive measures. The same determination to break the law was at the very heart of the French Resistance: Resistance fighters, whose actions were recognized, were all outlaws. The difference between these two cases of resistance is that one opposed anti-nomad legislation and the other did not. On the one hand, French Resistance rebels were rewarded, on the other, “Nomads”, and their actions were considered crimes and appear as such in their criminal records even after the war. We must therefore highlight the ambiguous status given by researchers to anti-nomad legislation during the war period. By extending, in a sense, an old republican policy, it was probably more difficult to ascribe these repressive measures exclusively to the circumstances of the Occupation in the northern zone and the Vichy government in the southern one. We would like to suggest another perspective on these acts of insubordination: Just as the forced labour dodgers, many “Nomads” were refractory to the policy of enforced sedentarization implemented by the Third Republic, and considerably reinforced after June 1940.

The events of the summer of 1944 should be investigated by historians. An article published in 2018 analyses a series of arrests and summary executions of “Nomads” that took place in the summer of 1944 (Foisneau and Merlin 2018). In several cities, during uncontrolled purges, when some women were shaved,^[30] families of “Nomads” were targeted by local residents and their liberators. As this is the first study on this subject many questions remain. Was it to indicate to “Nomads” that the end of the war was not the end of their persecution? As with shaved women, was it to remind the sedentary population that their lifestyle was the only acceptable one? Far from recovering their freedom, those under enforced residence had to endure a new period of uncertainty concerning the fate they would face from the liberators. From an internment policy point of view, the same ambiguities can be observed: instead of being released at the same time as the town of Angoulême, internees at the Alliers camp only saw a change in the guards, as their custody was entrusted to the FFI (Free French Forces).

In France, historiographical gaps concerning the period of the war and the lack of reference to survivors’ testimonies have resulted in historians not studying the memory of the persecution of “Nomads”. The only studies concern the site of this history in the national memory (Asséo 2005). Up until now, researchers who met witnesses, particularly anthropologists, slanted their questionnaires in other directions: kinship, economics, the relationship to *gadje*, and so forth. In the field of French Romani studies, no methodological

30 In France, an estimated 20,000 women were sheared for alleged collaboration with the German occupier. Fabrice Virgili, *La France « virile ». Des femmes tondues à la Libération*, Paris, Payot, 2000, p. 392.

work similar to the one carried out by Alban Bensa has been done yet. He has shown in fact that certain symbolic constructions of the Kanaks, long considered as referring to an ancient past, were representations linked to the enforced conscription of 1917 (Bensa 2015). While the Romani and French Travellers' collectives have been the focus of numerous ethnographic studies, none of these works has considered the effects of persecution suffered during the war. For the ethnography of the Romani and Travellers' collectives, anthropology has not yet become historical, as if they were ahistorical collectives. Therefore, readers of Patrick Williams's major book on the relationship of Manush to death (1993) have retained the idea that Manush refused to talk about the dead, but neither were the reasons for this silence questioned nor was it put into any historical perspective. Yet some ethnologists who nowadays frequent Romani, Manush, Catalan Gypsy, and Traveller populations are investigating the transmission of the memory of war, as Jean-Luc Poueyto did with the Manush of Pau (Poueyto 2004). It is therefore necessary to shed light on contemporary ethnographic observations via knowledge of the past in order to understand the forms memory of war, persecution and deprivation of liberty, genocide, and resistance take.

Conclusion: A History in the Making

The historical sequence of our historiographical and critical review – between 1939 and 1946 – is a crucial period for at least two reasons: first, it throws a crude light on the underlying racial content of some of French Republican politics. The war opened a new way to marginalize a community whose major crime was to circulate freely on French territory. The racial prejudice publicly appeared when a Republican policy was enhanced by the Vichy regime and the German occupiers. If the latter did not object to what the Third Republic had done, was it not because the same racial criteria were operating on both sides, as far as Roma and Sinti were concerned?

But there is still another reason that makes those years 1939–1946 so crucial: they are a key to understanding the ambiguities of postwar policies applied in France to those who are now called “Travellers” [*gens du voyage*]. This wartime break between two republican sequences is likely, if properly studied, to better assess the policies applied by successive governments of the French Republic in peacetime to a group whose real heterogeneity has been purposely subsumed under a single category (“Nomads”, then “Travellers”). The administrative history of “Nomads” is now written, or partly so, but what is still missing is an understanding of why the discriminatory policies of the prewar period were maintained after the end of the Nazi and Vichy persecution. When the 16 July 1912 law, which created the category of “Nomad” was abrogated in 1969, it was only replaced by another category, that of “Travellers”, which allowed policies that continued previously implemented discriminatory policies. A critical inquiry into the long-standing consequences of the war would be equivalent to challenging 75 years of French public policies against Roma and Travellers,^[31] and the role of what may be called State racism.

31 For an analysis of the enduring dynamics of strong prejudice against Roma in French society, as well as the renewed interest emerging among the wider population on the Roma holocaust, see Nonna Mayer, Guy Michelat, Vincent Tiberj, and Tommaso Vitale. Section 6. *L'hostilité envers les Roms. La lutte contre le racisme, l'antisémitisme et la xénophobie*. Année 2018, La Documentation française, pp. 142–159, 2019.

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