Book Review

***Der Völkermord an den Sinti und Roma und die Bundesrepublik. Der lange Weg zur Anerkennung 1949–1990*. By Sebastian Lotto-Kusche. Berlin: de Gruyter Oldenbourg. Schriftenreihe der Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte, 125. 2022. viii + 264 pp. €24.95/£22.50 (paperback/e-book).**

A key dimension of scholarly and community understanding of the persecution of Sinti and Roma in the 1930s and 1940s is the dispiriting failure of postwar societies to acknowledge the genocide and the claims of its victims. This delayed *Aufarbeitung* stands in a dialectical relationship with the discrimination that Romani communities continue to suffer. In West Germany, notoriously, the courts adjudicating on postwar compensation claims submitted by Sinti and Roma maintained until 1963 that whatever they had suffered at the hands of the German state before 1943—internment, immiseration, denial of rights, forced labour, deportation to German-occupied Poland, sterilization, medical experiments—did not qualify them for compensation. This was because it was only at the beginning of 1943 that the mass deportation of Sinti and Roma to Auschwitz began, and in the eyes of the courts the deportation marked the beginning of their persecution on racial grounds. Before that, it was argued, they had suffered as 'asocials', 'morally feeble-minded', 'habitual criminals' and the like—subject to measures that were within the law, not specifically Nazi, and probably deserved. For decades after 1945, the correlate of this in everyday police practice was to treat Sinti and Roma as a special category of potential criminals, working with material and applying the principles that had been laid down even before 1933 and developed by the Nazis into instruments of genocide. It was only in 1982 that Chancellor Helmut Schmidt declared publicly that the Sinti and Roma had been victims of a genocide, and President Roman Herzog's proclamation fifteen years later that '[t]he genocide of the Sinti and Roma was carried out […] with the same intention and the same will to the planned and final annihilation as that of the Jews' remained controversial even among scholars sympathetic to their case for many years.

In *Der Völkermord an den Sinti und Roma und die Bundesrepublik*, based on his 2020 doctoral dissertation, Sebastian Lotto-Kusche asks why the public perception of the genocide and its victims was so slow to change and what precipitated change when it came. In his terms, there was a shift from the *kriminalpräventiv* (preventative policing) approach to a *genozidkritisch* one in the prevailing understanding of the Nazi persecution (p. 200). The term *genozidkritisch* is distracting in its ambiguity; in the book, it refers simply to the acknowledgement that what Sinti and Roma suffered was not just racial persecution, but a genocide/*Völkermord*. In a characteristically scatter-shot methodological introduction, Lotto-Kusche describes his approach to this 'long road to acknowledgement' as an exercise in Foucauldian discourse analysis, framed in terms of a 'cultural history of the political' that also invokes Ludwig Fleck's concept of 'styles of thought [*Denkstile*]' (pp. 18–24). Put practically, he sets out to explore what was knowable, what was sayable, and who said what to whom about the persecution of Sinti and Roma at critical points over the life of the Federal Republic, taking into account all of the relevant social actors and their interactions.

Key elements of the story that Lotto-Kusche tells have been addressed in monographs by other authors. These include Julia von dem Knesebeck's study of *The Roma Struggle for Compensation in Post-War Germany* (2011), Ari Joskowicz's work on the discursive interactions between Jews and Roma during and since the Holocaust, published in monograph form as *Rain of Ash* (2024), and Ulrich Opfermann's overview of West German judicial proceedings against the perpetrators (*'Stets korrekt und human': der Umgang der Westdeutschen Justiz mit dem NS-Völkermord an den Sinti und Roma*, 2023). Gilad Margalit's *Germany and Its Gypsies: A Post-Auschwitz Ordeal* (2002) is closest to Lotto-Kusche's work in its project of providing a kind of psychogram of German attitudes since 1945, but Margalit's preoccupations were characteristic of the turn of the present century: testing propositions about continuities between National Socialism and the West German polity and picking at the elements of discursive mirroring and victim competition between Jewish and Romani survivors (and the associated question of comparability) that had become virulent in the late 1990s.

By contrast, Lotto-Kusche writes from the perspective of a new generation of German scholars engaged in detailed empirical research on the Romani genocide, whose approach is coloured among other things by the ethics of cooperation with the survivors. Despite this intellectual and ethical engagement with the subject, his book is refreshingly free of any denunciatory tone. And at its best it realizes its methodological ambitions by going wider and (especially) deeper than Margalit's study, tracing the rhythms of micro-interactions among an extended range of *dramatis personae*. These include Romani survivors and activists as well as non-Romani actors: lawyers and politicians, academics and missionaries, and also the activists who disseminated facts and testimony about the genocide as early as the 1970s and the scholars at the margins of the academic establishment who in the late 1980s began to produce foundational studies. In doing so, he has made adventurous use of underexplored published sources, correspondence in the archives of state and regional governments and universities and research institutes, and the personal papers of historians and politicians, and has also carried out interviews with some key protagonists.

Lotto-Kusche provides persuasive evidence that there was a real shift in knowledge and understanding over the decades, hesitant and uneven though it was, and he is able to show that in some cases, micro-interactions had significant impacts. Particularly striking is his account of the background to Schmidt's 1982 declaration, in terms not only of the detail of political conversations that immediately preceded it but of a longer process by which lobbying and direct approaches from advocates of the Romani cause promoted awareness in administrative and governmental circles. Significantly though unsurprisingly, his research confirms and elaborates how important Romani voices, both individual and organized, were to driving forward the process of acknowledgement at every key stage. Conversely, Lotto-Kusche shows that the 1982 declaration had resonance in (among other things) school textbooks. Conscious at the same time that polity and public have yet to fully realize the lessons of the genocide, Lotto-Kusche is equally clear in identifying particular failures and aporias. Thus while he sees the late 1960s as a watershed, in the wake of the 1963 judicial acknowledgement of racial persecution, he shows how momentum was lost as the genocide research done by international scholars went unreceived in Germany. At the same time, there was a rehabilitation of *Zigeunerforschung*, which enabled the networks of racist actors like Hermann Arnold to exert influence at the political level in spite of the emerging doubts of critical social science.

The book is better at tracing the vicissitudes of acknowledgement than at explaining them. There would have been scope in such an ambitious study to reflect on ways in which the European imaginary has persistently situated Roma in a moral and political blind spot,

without necessarily succumbing to a simplistic narrative of antigypsyism *en permanence*. And Lotto-Kusche's concluding answer to his own question, that in the end acknowledgement was the result of changes in wider public attitudes and the emergence of a new generation of historians, is an anticlimax.

In view of its ambitions, the book might have been both longer and richer than it is, and some lapses of copy-editing (unusual in this series) give the impression that it was completed in a hurry. This may also explain the fact that the study is nominally limited to the Federal Republic and its lifetime. In fact, Lotto-Kusche has used his conclusion to address the 1990s, since (as noted above) it was in that decade that scholarly research began to establish the true scope and nature of the persecution. By challenging some of the detail of the claims of the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma, the publication of Michael Zimmermann's groundbreaking *Rassenutopie und Genozid. Die nationalsozialistische 'Lösung der Zigeunerfrage'* (1996) fired up the debate about its comparability with the Shoah. That debate engaged not only historians and activists but also the wider interested public, and gave impetus to the growing understanding of 'Holocaust' as a complex of interrelated modes, rationales and targets of persecution and exploitation rooted in racial thinking but encompassing a broad category of *Gemeinschaftsfremde*. Similarly, in spite of himself, Lotto-Kusche does make some interesting observations in passing about developments in the GDR. His approach is certainly one that could fruitfully be applied to East Germany, not least in tracing interactions among policy-makers, activists and scholars across the German–German border, bearing in mind (among other things) the pivotal role of the East German dissident Reimar Gilsenbach.

https://doi.org/10.1093/gerhis/ghaf020

Eve Rosenhaft
University of Liverpool, UK