

***Roma and Sinti Activism and Holocaust Memory Politics in
the Federal Republic of Germany, 1985-1995.***

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¹ *Dokumentationszentrum und Museum über die Migration in Deutschland*, official translation given by institution.

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Introduction

On 9 November 1988, a ceremony commemorating the Jewish victims of the *Reichspogromnacht*¹ in Cologne was interrupted by a dramatic protest advocating Roma civil rights. This incident triggered what became known as the *Novemberstreit*,² a heated debate about the politics of commemorating the Nazi genocide of Roma and Sinti between local Romani and non-Romani activists, leaders of the emerging Sinti and Roma civil rights movement, as well as other observers, including the prominent feminist journalist, Alice Schwarzer. The protest rarely features in histories of the Romani civil rights movement in the Federal Republic of Germany (henceforth FRG), which typically focus on the emergence of the Heidelberg-based Central Council of German Sinti and Roma,³ led by Romani Rose. This dissertation argues that the history of local Romani activism in Cologne between 1985 and 1995, of which the *Novemberstreit* was one important example, offers a powerful lens through which to understand the tensions and complexities within Roma and Sinti struggles for remembrance and civil inclusion in Germany during the pivotal decade spanning German unification. To this end, this study aims to centre the voices and actions of Roma activists and community members, thereby demonstrating that the victim community itself exhibited a robust sense of independent political and social agency in its struggle.

Cologne's Rom e.V., where much of the research for this dissertation was conducted, has been active since late 1985. This Roma community organisation grew out of Cologne's more informal 'Roma Initiative' (henceforth RI), which was founded by volunteers as an ad hoc response to the large numbers of Roma refugees arriving from Eastern Europe, many of whom settled at Cologne's *Butzweilerhof* site.⁴ According to founding members of the RI, Elisabeth Klesse and Thomas Bischofs, between 400 and 500 Roma from former Yugoslavia were occupying the area from 1985,

¹ Also referred to as 'Kristallnacht'.

² 'November dispute', transl. from German, all translations by the author of this dissertation, unless stated otherwise.

³ 'Zentralrat Deutscher Sinti und Roma', transl. from German.

⁴ 'Wir über uns', Rom e.V., last accessed 14 March 2026, https://www.romev.de/?page_id=116.

sleeping in damaged trailer homes or outdoors beneath plastic sheets, with children being ‘nibbled on’ by rats in their sleep.⁵ The founding of Rom e.V. itself, as a community centre and archive for the history of Roma activism, thus represents an ideal case study for understanding archival purpose, exemplifying how social and political rights are interwoven with a people’s right to its own history. The act of archiving, of remembering, is political – it is itself a form of activism.

Developments concerning refugees in Cologne took place against the backdrop of rising *Pogromstimmung*⁶ throughout the FRG, with those excluded from the category of *Volksdeutsch*⁷ facing increased xenophobia and racial violence, not despite, but precisely *because* of the democratic unification of Germany. The extent to which the right to remembrance and the right to citizenship and membership of the national community are conflated, both socially and politically, is uniquely powerful in Germany. For the Eastern European, particularly the Yugoslav, Roma community this issue was, and remains, particularly prevalent: Its members were refused the right to Holocaust memory and to German asylum, while grappling with the memory of their own personal traumas, having been direct victims of the return of genocide and ethnic conflict to the European continent in the Balkan wars. As a de facto stateless, continent-wide minority, they were and continue to be exposed more readily to xenophobic attacks than other groups, reduced to the status of the universal foreigner, without claim to any form of homeland. This dissertation demonstrates how Roma activism in Cologne between 1985 and 1995 used interventions in Holocaust memory culture as a strategy to demand asylum rights and civic belonging in the Federal Republic

Cologne, a major West German metropolis in North Rhine-Westphalia, was a critical pressure point in this regard. The city was a key destination of Turkish labour migration in the latter half of the twentieth century, as well as fertile soil for the post-1968 new German Left, an eclectic mix of ecological activists, feminists and pacifists who entered parliament through the newly powerful Green

⁵ Interview with Thomas Bishofs, conducted by Lisa Willnecker, on behalf of Rom e.V. 10 August 2022.

⁶ ‘Pogrom-mood or -atmosphere’, transl. from German.

⁷ ‘Ethnically German’, transl. from German.

Party in 1983.⁸ Andrei Markovits and Philip Gorski, in their 1993 monograph *The German Left: Red Green, and Beyond*, asserted that the Green Party was, by the 1980s, redirecting the Left ‘towards a set of new issues and a new political orientation devoted to protecting the most vulnerable members of society’,⁹ a demographic which naturally encompasses the country’s Roma refugees. Such political direction comes as no surprise when one considers that the New Left of the 1980s and 1990s was largely made up of Germans who had been the students of 1968, and the children of the early post-war years, constantly reckoning with the complexities of generational guilt.

While Holocaust remembrance forms the central pillar of post-war German memory culture, that of the Roma Holocaust is underdeveloped and understudied. Several explanations have been offered to fill this gap. Michael Stewart has critiqued the commonly held assumption that this stems from collective amnesia within the Roma community. He argues instead that Roma memory operates through ‘implicit’ forms embedded in daily life and cultural practice, rather than formal commemoration, and that such erasure is systematically enabled rather than self-imposed.¹⁰ This builds on Maurice Halbwachs’s foundational understanding of collective memory as socially constructed, dependent on frameworks such as family, religious community, or social class.¹¹ Slawomir Kapralski has further linked the absence of formal memory culture in Roma and Sinti communities to the psychological effects of trauma, noting that survivors often subconsciously limit their temporal horizons to the immediate present, neither retaining memories from the past nor anticipating and preparing for the future. This phenomenon, he posits, has contributed to the stereotype of the Roma as a ‘people without a history’,¹² and therefore unworthy of civil rights and citizenship. Kapralski, to underline Stewart, further notes that institutional barriers within Germany

⁸ Stephen Milder and Konrad H. Jarausch, ‘Introduction: Renewing Democracy: The Rise of Green Politics in West Germany.’ *German Politics & Society* 33 (2015), 3–24, p.4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.6.

¹⁰ Michael Stewart, ‘Remembering without commemoration: the mnemonics and politics of Holocaust memories among European Roma’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 10 (2004).

¹¹ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

¹² Slawomir Kapralski, ‘The Consequences of the Genocide for Roma Memories and Identities’, in *The Legacies of the Roma Genocide in Europe since 1945*, ed. Celia Donert and Eve Rosenhaft (Abingdon, Oxon ; Routledge, 2022.), p.290.

and Europe more broadly have blocked the natural processes of memory and grieving for many Roma.¹³

Traditional frameworks have therefore often treated collective memory as ‘competitive’—a ‘zero-sum struggle’ over limited resources and the ‘right’ to remember. In his seminal monograph *Multidirectional Memory*, Michael Rothberg argues that memory should instead be seen as productive, negotiated, and cross-referential.¹⁴ The *Novemberstreit* illustrates the tensions that arise when Holocaust remembrance is understood through a competitive framework of memory, in which the push for Roma rights stands in direct conflict with Jewish remembrance. Ari Joskowitz has examined asymmetrical entanglements of Jewish and Romani accounts in considerable detail, arguing that testimonies of the Romani Holocaust are often ‘filtered through the lens’ of Jewish survivors or stored in archives dedicated to the Jewish Holocaust.¹⁵ This results in one minority controlling a significant portion of the public memory of another. This dissertation seeks to complicate Joskowitz’s argument, which risks painting a picture of Roma as a passive people.

Beyond this, I extend the use of Rothberg’s *Multidirectional Memory* framework beyond the commemoration of the wartime past, into the realm of social and political inclusion in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The ‘zero-sum game’ which Rothberg warns of appears and reappears in this discussion, both in the tensions between Jewish and Romani Holocaust memory, as well as between factions of the Sinti and Roma community itself. Opposition between the established German Sinti (represented by Romani Rose and the Central Council) and the Eastern European Roma refugees (represented by the Roma and Cinti Union (henceforth RCU), Roma activists and their non-Roma supporters) created tensions in the struggle for civil and citizenship rights. Thus, the dynamic of ‘competitive memory’ also applies to the struggle for rights, recognition, and asylum within the

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional memory: remembering the Holocaust in the age of decolonization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

¹⁵ Ari Joskowitz, *Rain of Ash: Roma, Jews, and the Holocaust* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023).

European Roma and Sinti community. Ultimately, however, successful episodes of Roma and Sinti cooperative activism, as well as support lent by non-Roma advocates during this period represent multidirectional memory in its purest form; casting aside historical and contemporary social differences in favour of holistic commemoration and social justice for all.

The situation of the Roma must also be placed within the context of post-communist marginalisation. Zoltan Barany has provided a comprehensive overview of the social, economic, and political marginalisation of Roma in Eastern Europe after the collapse of communism, asserting that these difficulties persist despite regime changes.¹⁶ Adam Warnke has examined the specific issues of statelessness and systemic discrimination in post-communist Eastern Europe, detailing how laws regarding citizenship caused many Roma to become de jure or de facto stateless.¹⁷ The RCU has therefore argued that Roma should be exempt from immigration restrictions because there was no state in which Roma were granted full protection and peaceful settlement status.¹⁸

By examining conflicts over commemoration, refugee activism, and the creation of activist archives, this dissertation demonstrates that Roma actors did not merely seek inclusion within existing memory structures but actively reshaped them. The chapters that follow analyse three arenas in which this struggle unfolded: public memory debates, civil rights mobilisation, and the construction of archival institutions. Focusing on Cologne allows this study to analyse these processes at the local level, where national and wider European debates over memory and migration were translated into concrete political conflicts. The first chapter centres on the *Novemberstreit* controversy and the relevant discussions within the memory studies field. I draw on the public debate between Kurt Holl and Alice Schwarzer concerning the morality of the original opera house protest, fought out on the pages of the local Cologne newspaper *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger*. Furthermore, photographs and

¹⁶ Zoltan D. Barany, 'Living on the edge: The East European Roma in postcommunist politics and societies', *Slavic Review* 53 (1994).

¹⁷ Adam M. Warnke, 'Vagabonds, tinkers, and travelers: statelessness among the East European Roma', *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 7 (1999), 335–67.

¹⁸ Ruzdija Sejdovic, personal interview, 7 August 2025, Cologne.

interview materials collected by Rom e.V. further elucidate the local atmosphere during the protest. In 2022, Rom e.V. volunteer Lisa Willnecke conducted interviews with Christiane Hoss, Secretary of the *Cologne Society for Christian-Jewish Collaboration*, as well as Elisabeth Klesse and Thomas Bischofs, both founding volunteers of the original RI. Finally, private correspondence by Romani Rose, chairman of the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma, sheds light on the tensions between the German Sinti community and Eastern European Roma and their supporters.

The second chapter follows the concerted efforts of Romani political activism throughout the early 1990s against the backdrop of refugee overcrowding and lack of state support in Cologne. News clippings from what Thomas Bischofs has characterised as the ‘smear campaign’¹⁹ waged against Eastern European Roma refugees by the *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger*, as well as material from the national paper *Die Tageszeitung* provide an understanding of the situation of refugees in Cologne. To allow for the expression of Roma voices themselves, I also draw on various editions of the Roma community magazine *Romano-LIL*, as well as an interview with author and journalist Ruzdija Sejdović, a Roma man who himself fled from Yugoslavia in 1989 and was a driving force behind the establishment of the Rom e.V archive. Both the latter sources illustrate the story of the Roma *Bettelmarsch* of January 1990, in which 1,500 Roma, most of whom had fled from conflict in the Balkans, together with their supporters walked across the Ruhr in peaceful protest, hoping to attain the right to remain in Germany.

The final chapter draws once again on national and local German language newspapers, as well as on the history of the Rom e.V. itself, drawing together the threads of argument and source to show that overall, the act of archiving and constructing a rich memory culture is crucial to the continued development of Roma civil rights in Germany. The extent of the agency exercised by Roma refugees in this regard is not to be understated, nor is their role in the development of a broader

¹⁹ ‘Hetzkampagne des Kölner Stadt-Anzeigers gegen die Roma’, Thomas Bischofs, interviewed by Lisa Willnecker, 10 August 2022, Rom e.V. interview archive, Cologne.

Holocaust memory culture in Germany in the 1980s and 1990s, such as the earliest developments of Gunter Demnig's Stolperstein-project.

I will, where appropriate, differentiate between the terms 'Sinti' and 'Roma': The former refers to members of the minority group who settled in Western and Central Europe from the Middle Ages onwards, whilst the latter have resided mostly in Eastern and Southeastern Europe. However, outside the German-speaking area the latter term is often used to denote the whole minority, despite it representing a very heterogenous group, with key distinctions based on different languages and religions, among other factors.²⁰ According to the RomnoKher study, conducted by Daniel Strauß and published in 2021, 41.2% of the minority surveyed within Germany referred to themselves as 'Sinti', 22.9% as 'Roma', 2.5% used the double form 'Sinti and Roma', while 9.2% rejected such a self-designation.²¹ While some members of the minority proudly consider the term 'Zigeuner' ('Gypsy') a reappropriation of a once externally imposed term and thus encourage its use, this dissertation does not refer to the minority with this name at any point. Finally, I also deliberately avoid use of the Romanes term 'Porrajmos', instead referring to the atrocities committed against the European Roma and Sinti community by the Nazis as the 'Roma Holocaust'. While the introduction of the former term into the literature by linguist and Romani Studies Scholar Ian Hancock in 1997 signified the linguistic agency of the minority in some ways, it was considered offensive in others: From a linguistic perspective, the Kalderash term '*porrajmos*' comes from the root verb (*te*) *porrav-e*. Particularly in Slovak Romanes and dialects of Lovari Romanes, this verb is understood to mean 'to open wide, to pop, to bug (one's eyes), or one's mouth', or 'revealing, uncovering the genitals', while as a noun in some varieties of Romanes this term can express the meaning of 'hole, rape, vagina'.²² Due to these

²⁰ Stiftung Erinnerung, Verantwortung und Zukunft, 'Antigypsyism', 2026 (<https://www.stiftung-evz.de/en/topics/antigypsyism/>, accessed 15 March 2026).

²¹ Ibid.

²² Renata Berkyová, 'Concept of the Porajmos as a reflection of the marginalization of Roma in historiography', *Romea.cz*, 2018 (<https://romea.cz/en/world/renata-berkyova-concept-of-the-porajmos-as-a-reflection-of-the-marginalization-of-roma-in-historiography>, accessed 11 February 2026).

connotations with sexual violence, activists and international institutions – such as the Council of Europe – consider the term offensive and, like this dissertation, avoid its use altogether.²³

²³ Adrian Marsh, 'The mechanics of marginalisation; the Gypsies and genocide, 1900–2011 (O Baro Porrajmos): the story of Anna Maria "Settela" Steinbach', *Romani Cultural & Arts Company*, 2020 (<https://www.romaniarts.co.uk/the-mechanics-of-marginalisation-the-gypsies-and-genocide-1900-2011-o-baro-porrajmos-the-story-of-anna-maria-settela-steinbach/>, accessed 11 February 2026).

Chapter 1: ‘Not anymore’, not ‘never again’;¹ unresolved memory of the Roma Holocaust and continued discrimination.

This chapter draws on the events and public debate surrounding Cologne’s *Novemberstreit* controversy, illustrating the presence of Roma agency within German Holocaust memory culture, and the tensions surrounding interwoven, and at times competing, processes of remembrance of diverse groups of victims. The *Novemberstreit* ensued following the interruption of the memorial service held on 9 November 1988 by the *Kölnische Gesellschaft für Christlich-Jüdische Zusammenarbeit*,² to mark the 50th anniversary of the *Reichspogromnacht* in Cologne and honour its Jewish victims. Led by non-Roma activist Kurt Holl, the protesters—both Roma and their supporters—interrupted the service with shouts and banners, calling for adequate attention to be paid to Roma suffering during the Holocaust, and for the German state to grant asylum to the Yugoslav Roma refugees in the city at the time. In particular, the protesters opposed the city council’s plans to forcibly relocate Eastern European Roma to the *Glauschdorfgelände*, a site with both emotionally and physically traumatic associations: The area in question had been a Nazi ‘collection camp’ for German Sinti in the Third Reich, at which Sinti had remained even for some years after the allied liberation. More recently, the area had been deemed chemically hazardous, due to toxic waste deposited there by a nearby oil refinery.³ Nevertheless, the city council believed that the *Glauschdorfgelände* constituted the best solution to their Roma ‘burden’,

This chapter does not seek to make a moral judgement on Holl and the Roma he spoke for; that debate has been fought out publicly and at length in the December 1988 issue of the *Kölner Stadt-Revue* by Alice Schwarzer, journalist and founder of the feminist journal *Emma*, and Roma rights activist Kurt Holl. Rather, this chapter uses this episode in contemporary German history to illustrate wider issues of Roma Holocaust remembrance, the minority’s access to civil rights, and the question

¹ Joskowicz, *Rain of Ash*, p.187.

² ‘Cologne’s Association for Christian-Jewish Collaboration’, transl. from German.

³ Bischofs, interview by Willnecker, 10 August 2022, Rom e.V.

of ‘competitive’ suffering and commemoration for an atrocity such as the Holocaust, with reference to Michael Rothberg’s concept of *Multidirectional Memory*.⁴ Ari Joskowitz, who has written extensively on the co-existence of Jewish and Roma Holocaust remembrance and reparation, argues that Romani collective memory is often filtered through Jewish archives and histories.⁵ Ernst Tugendhat, as a German Jew himself, has gone as far as to ‘confess’ that German Jews have at times shared the German non-Jews’ prejudices towards Roma and Sinti, thus positioning the former Nazi victims alongside their persecutors.⁶ In his introduction to the 1979 series of articles entitled ‘“In Auschwitz Vergast, bis Heute Verfolgt”’, Tugendhat discussed the interactions of Jews and Roma, whom he described as ‘brothers in fate for centuries in Europe’, describing however, that ‘after Auschwitz their paths separated’.⁸ In contrast to such narratives of Jewish monopoly over German Holocaust memory culture, I contend that, from the 1980s onwards, both German Sinti and Yugoslav Roma pushed for independent Roma Holocaust remembrance, and by extension, civil rights, first within the respective halves of divided Germany, and later within the unified FRG. This public campaign for civil rights frequently drew upon the title of Tugendhat’s aforementioned series in the justification of its struggle.

The memorial service of 9 November 1988 serves to anchor these debates in a tangible chronology. The event was held in the Cologne opera house, the site of the city’s main synagogue before its destruction on 9 November 1938.⁹ Speeches by Shoah survivor Elie Wiesel and Minister-President of North Rhine-Westphalia Johannes Rau, as well as a reading of the original minutes of the meeting concerning the ‘Discussion of the Jewish Question’, chaired by Göring on 12 September 1938 constituted the beginning of the ceremony.¹⁰

⁴ Rothberg, *Multidirectional memory*.

⁵ Joskowitz, *Rain of Ash*.

⁶ Gilad Margalit, *Germany and Its Gypsies: A Post-Auschwitz Ordeal* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), p. 188.

⁷ ‘Gassed in Auschwitz, persecuted to this day’, transl. from German.

⁸ Margalit, *Germany and Its Gypsies*, p.187.

⁹ Alice Schwarzer, ‘Novemberstreit: Die Affäre Holl, Oder: Vertreter und Stellvertreter’, *Kölner Stadt-Revue*, December 1988, p. 24.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

According to the journalist Alice Schwarzer, taking public position in the *Kölner Stadt-Revue*, details that Rau's speech began within the 'expected framework; pastoral and smooth, but correct',¹¹ before being interrupted by exclamations concerning not the Jewish past or present, but the rights of the Roma. For instance, when Rau lamented that 'the Jews are dead', a voice from the audience exclaimed 'but the Roma live!'.¹² There is some uncertainty surrounding this exclamation, with Hoss claiming that Holl seized the microphone in the midst of the Rabbi's Kaddish prayer to say the words in question,¹³ while Klesse claims the shout came from a student member of the RI.¹⁴ Bischofs, at the time the youngest member of the RI, avoids this detail entirely, stating the importance of not interrupting the Rabbi during prayer.¹⁵ Schwarzer goes on to describe the various protest banners strung around the space and held up by Roma activists, as well as their leather-clad comrade-in-arms, Kurt Holl. Holl supposedly stepped onto the stage and grasped the microphone to deliver his own speech, condemning continued antiziganism in Germany. Regardless of the narrative inconsistencies, all sources conclude that Holl spoke of the 'scandals of Roma treatment, and of the capitalist interests and racist indifference which facilitate this',¹⁶ emphatically framed by the projected image of the old Synagogue on the wall behind him.

The event reignited a debate which has characterised post-Holocaust historiographical landscape, reaching beyond German borders to the rest of Europe and, notably, across the Atlantic to heated discussion in the United States: namely, the question of how best to honour and commemorate the traumas of a diverse range of victim groups, inflicted by the same perpetrator, Nazi Germany. Discussions of this kind develop into a moralising debate of which community's suffering was greatest, and who therefore dictates the morally correct methods of remembrance. In this spirit,

¹¹ 'Die Rede bewegte sich im Rahmen des üblichen: pastoral und glatt, aber korrekt.' Ibid., p. 24.

¹² 'An der Stelle, an der Rau sagte "Die Juden sind tot" schrie eine Männerstimme aus dem Publikum: "Aber die Romas leben!"' Ibid., p. 24.

¹³ Interview with Christiane Hoss, conducted by Lisa Willnecker, on behalf of Rom e.V. 21 July 2022.

¹⁴ Interview with Elisabeth Klesse, conducted by Lisa Willnecker on behalf of Rom e.V. 5 August 2022.

¹⁵ Bischofs, interview by Willnecker, 10 August 2022, Rom e.V.

¹⁶ 'Skandal der Behandlung der Roma, über die kapitalistischen Interessen und die rassistischen Gleichgültigkeiten, die das alles zulassen.' Schwarzer, 'Novemberstreit', p. 24.

Michael Rothberg has stressed that the conceptual framework through which we have addressed the relationship between memory, identity, and violence is flawed.¹⁷ His *Multidirectional Memory* enters the debate to oppose a framework which understands memory of trauma as competitive - a zero-sum struggle over the scarce resource of the 'right' to remember and to mourn atrocities such as the Holocaust.¹⁸ Rothberg argues that memory, of trauma or otherwise, should be *multidirectional*, as 'subject to ongoing negotiations, cross-referencing, and borrowing'; and as productive and enhancing of cross-cultural connection, rather than being privative and divisive.¹⁹ In Cologne, and the wider federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia, these discussions, pertaining to the competing memories of the Roma and Jewish community are focused through the lens of the *Novemberstreit*. As Klesse commented on the incident, German society reduced Roma to 'second-class citizens' in questions of remembrance.²⁰ The disruption caused in the name of Roma and Sinti civil rights and Holocaust recognition stands in direct conflict with Jewish remembrance in this instant and thus presents a key example of Rothberg's observations – the competing of traumas in the zero-sum game of memory.

Existing scholarship concerning the activism of Roma and Sinti communities in Germany in the late twentieth century focuses overwhelmingly on the work of the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma, established under the leadership of Vincenz and Romani Rose in the early 1970s, and initially known as the Association of German Sinti.²¹ The group organised the 1973 erection of a memorial at the former 'Gypsy family camp' at Auschwitz Birkenau,²² as well as a commemoration service for the Roma and Sinti Holocaust victims at Bergen Belsen memorial site in 1979, which represented the first time that Romani victims of the Third Reich were honoured by the German government.²³ In 1981, the organisation staged an occupation of the University of Tübingen archives,

¹⁷ Rothberg, *Multidirectional memory*.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.6.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 3.

²⁰ 'Es gab eine "Zweiklassengesellschaft von Verfolgten", Juden und Roma.' Klesse, personal interview, 5 August 2022.

²¹ 'Verband Deutscher Sinti', transl. from German.

²² Celia Donert and Eve Rosenhaft, *The Legacies of the Romani Genocide in Europe since 1945* (London: Routledge, 2021), p. 294.

²³ Ibid., p. 295.

which contained over 20,000 files collected during the Third Reich by Robert Ritter's Institute for Research on Racial Hygiene and Population Biology – files that had been used not only during the Third Reich itself, but which West German authorities continued to refer to until as late as 1965, often to justify the denial of compensation to victims, or to support police in their search for and harassment of particular Roma and Sinti families.²⁴ The files comprised fingerprints, photographs, genealogies, medical records and personal histories of the Nazi regime's Roma and Sinti victims and had thus far been kept inaccessible to victims and their families.²⁵ After the occupation, the material was relocated to the German Federal Archives, where it could be accessed to corroborate individual testimony and compensation claims.²⁶ The early 1980s saw not only the renaming of the organisation as the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma in 1982, but also the recognition of members of the minority as victims of the Nazi regime, in part as a result of a hunger strike held at Dachau by 12 Sinti activists in 1982.²⁷ Celia Donert and Eve Rosenhaft have traced a shift in the nature of Roma and Sinti activism in this decade, arguing that the generation of Romani leaders emerging at the time was free from the fear experienced by the survivor generation, and immune to a sense of 'passivity related to a lack of faith in state institutions', all of which resulted in more concerted and effective activism.²⁸ However, while the efficacy of these Central Council campaigns has been discussed extensively, it must be noted that Romani activism was much more plural than the narrative of this singular association allows.

Alice Schwarzer's article, titled *The Holl-Affair, or Representatives and Deputy Representatives*,²⁹ while acknowledging the need for a continued fight for Roma civil rights, condemned the opera house protesters' actions as insensitive and as conducted 'at the wrong time and the wrong place'.³⁰ Schwarzer described the incident as 'one of the most shameful episodes I've ever

²⁴ Ibid., p. 294.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 295

²⁶ Ibid., p. 295.

²⁷ El-Tayeb and Lauffer, 'Roma, Sinti, and the Question of German Guilt', p. 98.

²⁸ Donert and Rosenhaft, *The Legacies of the Romani Genocide*. p. 294.

²⁹ 'Die Affäre Holl, Oder: Vertreter und Stellvertreter.' Schwarzer, 'Novemberstreit', p. 24.

³⁰ 'Dies war der falsche Zeitpunkt und der falsche Ort.' Ibid., p. 25.

experienced'.³¹ She took particular issue with Holl's personal positioning within the affair: As a non-Jewish, non-Roma, white German man, she argues, he should have known his place on 9 November 'not as part of the group of victims, but as part of the group of perpetrators'.³² In his interview, Bischofs added a darker dimension to this facet of the story, pointing out that the title of Schwarzer's journalistic rebuke - '*Der Mann in Leder*' – likens Holl explicitly to a member of the SS, a particularly vicious description given that Holl's activism was driven in part by his desire to undo the emotional legacy of his father, who had been an SS cavalryman.³³ More broadly, this criticism plays into complex issues of identity and the ensuing right, or lack thereof, to remembrance. Should, on a day of remembrance as sombre as 9 November 1988, all members of the mainstream German population, the children of the perpetrators, be ashamed and silent, no matter who or what they would otherwise be advocating for?

In Holl's written statement, printed alongside Schwarzer's and titled '*From helpless to perfidious antifascism? Or: On the politics of contemporary rituals of intimidation*',³⁴ he emphasised the suffering of a diverse range of groups under the Nazi regime. The activist described visualising, alongside the Jewish victims, the 'asocials and prostitutes, the communists, socialists and mentally ill,



Figure 1: Activist gathering in front of the opera before the protest, 9 November 1988. (Photo: Martin Zielinske, Rom. e.V.; reproduced with permission).



Figure 2: Activists hoisting a banner reading 'Johannes — where is your brother ROMA?', 9 November 1988. (Photo: Martin Zielinske, Rom. e.V.; reproduced with permission).

³¹ 'eine der beschämtesten Aktionen, die ich je erlebt habe.' Ibid., p. 25.

³² 'nicht zur Gruppe der Opfer, sondern – zur Gruppe der Täter gehört.' Ibid., p. 25.

³³ Bischofs, interview by Willnecker, 10 August 2022, Rom e.V.

³⁴ 'Vom hilflosen zum perfiden Antifaschismus? Oder: Zur Politik zeitgenössischer Einschüchterungsrituale.' Kurt Holl, 'Novemberstreit: Vom hilflosen zum perfiden Antifaschismus? Oder: Zur Politik zeitgenössischer Einschüchterungsrituale', *Kölner Stadt-Revue*, December 1988, p. 25.

the Jehovah's Witnesses and Edelweiss Pirates, the gay men and the church martyrs, and finally, representatives of those Roma and Sinti who disappeared into the camps alongside the others in 1940, accompanied by the applause of Cologne's population'.³⁵ Holl criticised the weaponisation of philosemitism by the contemporary far right, characterising the 'former victims as convenient new victims of West German Reason of State'³⁶ concerning the question of the existence of the state of Israel. He further attacked the manner in which the 'celebrated reconciliation with the Jewish victims obscures the increasingly aggressive exclusion and expulsion of refugees from the south (...) and, in Cologne especially, that of the Roma.'³⁷ Fatima El-Tayeb has also contended that, while the Holocaust is central to Europe's culture of remembrance, 'there is surprisingly little interest in the reconstruction of everyday Jewish life beyond the context of the Shoah',³⁸ underlining this alleged exploitation of philosemitic sentiment in Germany. Beyond this, Holl was clear in his attacks on the political, intellectual and social elite of the city, noting that the key guests gathered at the memorial service are also precisely those who 'in articles, letters, ordinances, party- and council rulings,



Figure 4: Kurt Holl addressing the audience after seizing the podium, 9 November 1988. (Photo: Martin Zielinske, Rom. e.V.; reproduced with permission).



Figure 3: Audience members, 9 November 1988. (Photo: Martin Zielinske, Rom. e.V.; reproduced with permission).

³⁵ 'Neben den Juden saßen die Penner und Prostituierten, neben den Kommunisten und Sozialisten die Geisteskranken, neben den Zeugen Jehovas die Edelweißpiraten und neben den Schwulen die Märtyrer der Kirchen und schließlich saßen dort auch Vertreter jener Kölner Sinti und Roma, die unter dem Beifall der Kölner Bevölkerung 1940 mit allen anderen in den Lagern verschwanden.' Ibid., p. 25.

³⁶ 'Die ehemaligen Opfer wurden brauchbare neue Opfer der westdeutschen Staatsraison.' Ibid., p. 26.

³⁷ 'Heute soll die zelebrierte Versöhnung mit den jüdischen Opfern des Faschismus eine immer aggressivere Ausgrenzung und Ausweisungspraxis gegen die Flüchtlinge aus dem Süden (...) und hier in Köln vor allem gegen die Roma, vernebeln.' Ibid., p. 26.

³⁸ Fatima El-Tayeb and Elisabeth Lauffer, 'Roma, Sinti, and the Question of German Guilt', in *Un/German: Racialized Otherness in Post-Cold War Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2025), p. 83–101, at p. 86.

conjured or silently tolerated the racism against the Roma which has become so embedded in the city.’³⁹

The tense atmosphere of the event radiates from a series of photographs taken by Martin Zielinske, an RI activist. They show a determined-looking Kurt Holl addressing the political and social elite of the city, while members of the Roma community, dotted throughout the hall, hold up banners and signs advocating for their own Holocaust memory and civil rights in the West Germany of 1988. According to Holl, Johannes Rau, Minister-President of North Rhine-Westphalia, positioned himself squarely behind the argument for ‘Holocaust uniqueness’, originally seen as the left-wing position under Habermas in the original *Historikerstreit* of 1986/87. As the decades of the later twentieth century have passed however, and the historical and political horizons of the academy have expanded to encompass a range of comparable atrocities, both in Europe and in the Global South, this argument has become the unprogressive, narrow-minded, conservative and right-wing stance to take. While Holl stated that Rau’s accusation of a comparison and hierarchising of suffering between Jews and Roma is vapid and baseless, he noted that the Minister-President utilised the sense of ‘historical impossibility of comparison to depict all other forms of racist discrimination as irrelevant and unworthy of mention’.⁴⁰

It must be noted that the Holl-Schwarzer debate, and a large proportion of protests staged in the name of the Roma were conducted by non-Roma members of the RI. Bischofs has commented that the insecure asylum status of the Roma and their families prevented them from participation in activism which might risk their being recorded and deported. Klesse’s memory of the event goes as far as to exclude Roma completely,⁴¹ painting the protest as one exclusively driven by non-Roma advocates. Hoss’s account of the incident includes the presence of Roma, though she paints the

³⁹ ‘...auch fast alle Namen versammelt, die in Artikeln, Briefen, Verordnungen, Partei- und Ratbeschlüssen den konkret gewordenen Rassismus gegen die Roma herbeigeredet, herbeigeführt oder mit Schweigen toleriert haben.’ Holl, ‘Vom hilflosen zum perfiden Antifaschismus?’, p. 26.

⁴⁰ ‘Das Rau’sche Argument benutzt aber diese historische Unvergleichbarkeit, um jede andere Form rassistischer Diskriminierung als belanglos, als nicht erwähnenswert hinzustellen.’ Ibid., p. 26.

⁴¹ ‘Ich kann mich nicht erinnern, dass Roma dabei gewesen wären.’ Klesse, personal interview, 5 August 2022.

situation as exploitative and immoral, asserting that ‘the Roma always seemed to be being towed along’ by those with more agency than themselves, thus rendering them as unaware of the protesters’ intentions, leading to their exploitation by Holl and his supporters.⁴² The risk posed by recording information which might have led to deportation significantly affects the historical record, diminishing the prevalence of Roma voices concerning their own struggle.

A private letter by Romani Rose, head of the Central Council, written originally to the Richard Ahren, chairman of the Cologne Synagogue Community and circulated to the head of the city’s Community for Christian-Jewish cooperation two weeks later, sheds light on the gulf between the established German Sinti community and the Eastern European Roma asylum seekers. Representatives of the former, such as Rose, believed they were sustaining a more rational, diplomatic approach, in opposition to what was perceived as the more abrasive activism of the latter. Thus, while both subgroups suffered and continue to suffer similar criminalisation, marginalisation, expulsion and murder, there were strong tensions between them, as Rose’s correspondence marking the end of the ‘moving year of remembrance 1988’⁴³ shows.

In his letter, Romani Rose emphasised that the protest led by Holl was not authorised by, nor associated with the Central Council, and on its behalf, ‘condemns with indignation this type of undignified disruption, no matter from which side it may stem’.⁴⁴ He emphasised that the protesters ‘have nothing to do with our organisation’,⁴⁵ and that they ‘set themselves independent tasks concerning the humanitarian care for the families who have fled from Southeastern Europe, whose representatives they see themselves as’.⁴⁶ While Rose also acknowledged the suffering endured by his

⁴² ‘Roma waren eindeutig immer mit jemandem in Schlepptau.’ Hoss, interview by Willnecker, 21 July 2022, Rom e.V.

⁴³ ‘bewegenden Gedenkjahrs 1988.’ Romani Rose, letter to Richard Ahren, Chairman of the Cologne Synagogue Community, 24 November 1988, circulated to the head of the Community for Christian-Jewish Cooperation, December 1988, Central Council of German Sinti and Roma (Cologne: Rom e.V., 1988), p. 1.

⁴⁴ ‘Wir verurteilen deshalb mit Empörung derartige würdelose Störungen, egal von welcher Seite sie erfolgen.’ Ibid., p. 2.

⁴⁵ ‘haben mit unserer Organisation nichts zu tun.’ Ibid., p. 1.

⁴⁶ ‘Sie setzen sich eigenständige Aufgaben bei der humanitären Betreuung von aus Südosteuropa geflüchteten Familien, als deren Sprecher sie sich sehen.’ Ibid., p. 1.

own people in the Holocaust, he does not let this sentiment overshadow his condemnation of the disruption of a memorial service. Rose presents himself as a skilled diplomat, a peacekeeper who understands that the road to Roma and Sinti civil rights and societal integration is not paved with disruptive protest, but with benevolent cooperation. He is the compromise-striking diplomacy to Holl's anger and activism. His letter demonstrates that the movement towards Roma and Sinti civil rights and Holocaust recognition was far from a united front, and that the German Sinti community felt undermined by the efforts of Eastern European Roma asylum seekers. While Rose's diplomatic motivations might be interpreted as pragmatically reasonable, Christiane Hoss commented in her interview with Lise Willnecker that the Roma and Sinti in Germany were 'badly represented' by what was de facto the Rose 'family business', and that she believed that Rose had no business speaking for a faction of the movement which was not his to represent, and which he had instructed his own followers not to support.⁴⁷

This chapter has used the lens of the *Novemberstreit* controversy of 1988 to focus and examine questions of Roma agency, Holocaust memory and civil rights in the Federal Republic of Germany during the late 1980s and early 1990s Germany. The disruption of the memorial service held for Shoah victims and the virulent public debate it ignited illustrates that the fight for Roma Holocaust recognition and inclusion in the German civil community was a significant, while at times internally fractured, field of activism. Personified by Kurt Holl and Roma asylum seekers on the one hand, and Romani Rose and the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma on the other, two diverging strands and strategies of activism come into view. Rothberg's concept of Multidirectional Memory serves as a theoretical framework for this history, both when considering the tensions between Jewish and Romani memory culture, and when regarding the internal divisions discussed between more established German Sinti and Roma asylum seekers. This chapter has also demonstrated the material limits to Roma agency, showing how precarious asylum status and constant risk of deportation diminished the voices of Roma themselves in their struggle for recognition.

⁴⁷ Hoss, interview by Willnecker, 21 July 2022, Rom e.V.

Chapter 2: Roma asylum activism and the politics of belonging in unified Germany

In January 1990, 1,500 Roma and their supporters traversed the Ruhr district in what became known as the *Bettelmarsch*¹ protest, appealing to the German government to grant them exemption from standard German immigration restrictions and thus, the right to remain. The march, organised by the RCU, stretched from Cologne to the North Rhine-Westphalian federal state parliament in Düsseldorf, and continued from there through Ratingen, Lintdorf, Duisburg and Oberhausen to Essen.² Three years later, in the *Bleiberechtskämpfe*,³ the Roma and their supporters continued to fight for the same causes. Their demands must be understood against the backdrop of recurring generational grievances and traumas: Roma refugees had been caught in the crossfire of the Yugoslav Wars, then confronted with hostility upon fleeing to Germany and other Western European countries. These experiences interacted against the ever-present backdrop of Holocaust trauma, both directly in the case of older generations, and indirectly through intergenerational transmission, in the form of what Marianne Hirsch has termed *postmemory*.⁴ In addition to these traumas, the Roma suffered disproportionately when European immigration restrictions became more stringent due to their status as an unprotected nomadic minority, without a native state to return to.⁵ This chapter thus examines Roma struggles for asylum in early 1990s Germany, providing an investigation of the causes, processes, and results of the movement, predominantly through Roma voices themselves. Activism for Roma and Sinti civil rights and the recognition of the genocide perpetrated against them in the Third Reich, has thus far been conducted primarily through non-Roma channels, whether Jewish or otherwise, as has been touched upon in the previous chapter of this dissertation. I aim to complicate

¹ 'Begging march', transl. from German.

² Marie Reyter, 'Bettelmarsch der Roma – eine Replik', *Romano Lil – Romablatt*, Cologne, April 1990, p. 14.

³ 'battles for the right to remain', transl. from German.

⁴ Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

⁵ Yaron Matras, 'The Development of the Romani Civil Rights Movement in Germany 1945–1996', in *Sinti and Roma in German-speaking Society and Literature*, ed. Susan Tebbutt (Providence, RI: Berghahn Books, 1998), pp. 49–64, p. 59.

these histories by examining both verbal and written accounts by Roma themselves, thus demonstrating a sense of agency both through provenance and content of source material.

Ruzdija Sejdović took part in the 1990 *Bettelmarsch* as the representative delegate of Cologne and has since continued his work as an active advocate for the city's Roma community. In a personal interview, Sejdović explained that the apparent sudden influx of Roma to Germany in the 1990s came as a demographic shock, as most arriving Roma had initially been recorded as nationals of Yugoslavia upon arrival. In subsequent years their nationality was amended to 'Roma and Sinti' in relevant state censuses, which resulted in a perceived Roma 'invasion' due to a sharp increase in recorded numbers in North Rhine-Westphalia.⁶ According to Sejdović, the *Bettelmarsch* began with the occupation of Cologne Cathedral by the Roma and their supporters, including children and senior citizens, and later developed into the occupation of roads and highways. He recounted the support of the Christian community, with the Catholic church in Cologne having granted the refugees church asylum, and the Protestant church even providing him with a small office.⁷ However, he also noted the forced eviction of at least six Roma families, with their homes emptied of furniture and belongings while they took part in the month-long protest.⁸ Thus, Cologne's non-Roma population was spread along a wide spectrum, ranging from support for the minority to reinforced bigotry against it. The *Bettelmarsch* itself was led by Rudko Kawczyński, chairman of Hamburg's RCU, who himself was a stateless Roma man.⁹ Marie Reyter, a Roma woman and author of a detailed account of the protest in the community magazine *Romano-LIL*, described a mounting sense of 'solidarity and community'¹⁰ amongst the steadily growing crowd of protesters, as well as the 'unconditional trust'¹¹ afforded to Kawczyński.

⁶ Ruzdija Sejdović, personal interview, 7 August 2025, Cologne.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Matras, 'The Development of the Romani Civil Rights Movement', p. 57.

¹⁰ '(...) ließ unter den Roma das Bewusstsein von Zusammengehörigkeit und Solidarität entstehen. Ihr Führer, Rudko Kawczyński genoss uneingeschränktes Vertrauen.' Reyter, 'Bettelmarsch der Roma', p. 15.

¹¹ Ibid.

The energies that fuelled the *Bettelmarsch* had been building over the previous decade, even before the largest waves of refugees arrived from Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. Yaron Matras notes that in the early 1980s, Romani refugees, mostly from Yugoslavia, and later from Poland, were approaching Romani organisations for support in preventing deportations and attaining residence permits in Germany.¹² Once again, the Central Council, acting on behalf of German Sinti under Romani Rose, instructed its member associations *not* to support ‘foreign’ Romani refugees, fearing that the growing number of ‘foreign’ Roma who ‘abused their guest status in our country’¹³ would harm the image of German Sinti and undermine the achievements of the German-based movement.¹⁴ Margalit has noted that the German authorities took a ‘cautious line’ in the late 1980s and early 1990s,¹⁵ fearing that they might be obliged to absorb a ‘multitude of Gypsy refugees’ after President Weizsäcker’s 1985 speech, in which he acknowledged German responsibility for the Roma Holocaust.¹⁶

Beyond the *Bettelmarsch*, the 1993 *Bleiberechtskämpfe* represented a continuation of the Roma fight for civil rights in early 1990s Cologne. The latter ensued against the backdrop of the early unification years, and the final collapse of Yugoslavia, driving hundreds of thousands of Eastern European Roma to seek asylum and the right to remain in Germany after fleeing violence in the Balkans. This episode marked the culmination of Eastern European refugee waves which had begun in 1989, when Communist regimes were being undermined, and Roma immigrants from Eastern Europe, especially from Romania, made their way westwards.¹⁷

¹² Matras, 'The Development of the Romani Civil Rights Movement', p. 57.

¹³ Ibid., p. 57.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 57.

¹⁵ Margalit, *Germany and Its Gypsies*, p. 211.

¹⁶ Ibid., p.201; Richard von Weizsäcker, speech to the Bundestag, 8 May 1985, Bundespräsidialamt (<https://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Reden/2015/02/150202-RvW-Rede-8-Mai-1985-englisch.pdf>, accessed 17 March 2026).

¹⁷ Margalit, *Germany and Its Gypsies*, p. 211.

From June to December 1995, the number of refugees arriving in Cologne from the West Balkans was rising steadily by 50 people each month.¹⁸ According to Ursula Christiansen, a social worker, the city was at the time confronted with '4700 people from Ex-Yugoslavia, as well as an additional 1,500 asylum-seekers'.¹⁹ Thus, the city froze all refugee-admission in early November 1995.²⁰ Junta Graf, a representative of Cologne's refugee council, criticised the city's administration for its inertia, and its lack of 'political will' to make meaningful changes to the refugees' situation.²¹ The *Runde Tisch für Ausländerfreundlichkeit*²² criticised the 'lack of a long-term solution'.²³ Refugees were crowding into the city's abandoned buildings, including a former school, inhabited mostly by those fleeing war in the West Balkans, as well as asylum-seekers from China, Algeria and from the Ivory Coast.²⁴

Anti-Roma sentiment was reflected in the distribution of government subsidies: While the administration of North Rhine-Westphalia paid approximately 640 Deutsche Mark per asylum seeker to its cities to help mitigate the crisis, this amount was almost halved to 340 Deutsche Mark in the case of Bosnian immigrants, a large proportion of whom were Roma.²⁵ Sybil Milton has criticised this shirking of responsibility on behalf of the German state, drawing in particular on the argument that the violence and genocide from which these Roma were fleeing in the West Balkans were 'Nazi-inspired'²⁶ processes, taking place in the 'German occupation zones and satellite states of the Second

¹⁸ Anon., 'Rathaus ratlos', unidentified publication, December 1995, Rom e.V. archives, newsclippings collection E1329, 31j; PB-0195.

¹⁹ '4700 Menschen aus Ex-Jugoslawien suchen zur Zeit Schutz in Köln, ebenso 1500 Asylbewerber.' Barbara A. Cepielik, 'Zuflucht nur auf dem Flur', *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger*, 28 November 1995, Rom e.V. archives, newsclippings collection E1329, 31j; PB-0195.

²⁰ 'Anfang November von der Stadt verhängte Aufnahmestopp für Flüchtlinge.' Cepielik, 'Zuflucht nur auf dem Flur'.

²¹ 'Der politische Wille fehlt, etwas für die Flüchtlinge zu tun.' Ibid.

²² 'roundtable for friendliness towards foreigners', transl. from German.

²³ 'Runder Tisch: Langfristiges Konzept fehlt.' Cepielik, 'Zuflucht nur auf dem Flur'.

²⁴ 'zur Hälfte Kriegsflüchtlinge aus Ex-Jugoslawien, aber auch Asylbewerber aus China, Algerien und von der Elfenbeinküste.' Ibid.

²⁵ Anon., 'Der Stadt droht ein Strafgehalt von 50 000 DM', *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger*, 28 November 1995, Rom e.V. archives, newsclippings collection E1329, 31j; PB-0195.

²⁶ Sybil Milton, 'Sinti and Roma in Twentieth-Century Austria and Germany', *German Studies Review* 23 (2000), pp. 317–31, at p. 325.

World War', ²⁷ and drawing on Nazi terror tactics. By contrast, ²⁸ in the case of Jewish migrants from the former Soviet Union, Germany exhibited an 'unusual sensitivity'.²⁹ In the case of Roma, however, Germany's actions were governed 'neither by guilt nor by concern for foreign opinion'.³⁰ Milton, writing in 2000, predicted that the German treatment of Roma and Sinti would be 'the touchstone by which we can judge German democracy in the next century'.³¹

This influx of Roma refugees came at a time in which German public sentiment was growing increasingly xenophobic and racist, as will be discussed further in the final chapter of this dissertation. Eastern European Roma represented an ideal novel target, a group whose discrimination was accepted not just in right-wing extremist discourse and neo-Nazi circles, but in 'respected', 'educated' company. Antiziganism was, and still is, considered a substantiated opinion, based often on claims of Roma stealing and begging, a practice thought by many to be simply part of 'Roma culture'.³² As El-Tayeb and Lauffer have noted, Roma and Sinti represented the epitome of the 'bogus asylum seeker', in part because the biases associated with that stereotype were the same that Roma and Sinti had been unable to shake for centuries: 'that, collectively, they were unwilling to work, lazy, dishonest, and irrevocably foreign.'³³

As Margalit has commented, the early 1990s saw a distinct shift in German attitude towards the Sinti and Roma, with a sense of renewed public hostility towards them in the wake of increased Eastern European immigration.³⁴ This was the case even in left-wing circles, with Hoki Heck, a member of the Green party and head of the party's local office in Bremen pronouncing his distinct

²⁷ Ibid., p. 325.

²⁸ Though this is certainly not to be understood as a comparative value judgment, see Rothberg's *Multidirectional Memory*.

²⁹ Milton, 'Sinti and Roma in Twentieth-Century Austria and Germany', p. 325.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 325.

³¹ Ibid., p. 325.

³² Birgit Rambalski, "'Betteln gehört zur Kultur der Roma'", *taz*, 13 January 1993, DOMiD archives, newsclippings collection P-8969.

³³ Fatima El-Tayeb and Elisabeth Lauffer, "'We Are the Volk": From Racist Terror to Terrorized Germans', in *Un/German: Racialized Otherness in Post-Cold War Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2025), pp. 102–32, at p. 112.

³⁴ Margalit, *Germany and Its Gypsies*, p. 211.

aversion to providing asylum to Yugoslav Roma.³⁵ In an interview with the leftist daily *Die Tageszeitung* in August 1990, he stated emphatically that ‘what infuriates me is the false and fanatic way of people who now come with bombastic humanism, liberals from here to eternity, and say: they (Roma asylum seeker) should stay (in the FRG) because of the German guilt of the past. With all the best intentions, I wish to have nothing to do with this matter. I am not responsible for Christ’s crucifixion, and I also do not feel myself guilty for what happened between 1933 and 1945.’³⁶

Despite acknowledging the tremendous injustice inflicted on Sinti and Roma during the Nazi dictatorship, the German government maintained a cautious line, avoiding any statement suggesting a special responsibility towards the Roma people, or agreeing to the UN resolution that would have recognized them as an ethnic minority, thus absolving itself from the otherwise implied responsibility to provide asylum.³⁷ On the federal level, North Rhine-Westphalia’s Minister of the Interior initially responded to the *Bettelmarsch* and *Bleiberechtskämpfe* by granting de facto stateless Roma the right to apply for residence permits outside the formal framework of asylum or immigration procedures, yet revoked this decision as soon as the public’s attention had been directed elsewhere.³⁸ Further crackdown came in the form of a new refugee and asylum law in 1993, intending to drastically reduce the number of asylum claimants in the Federal Republic.³⁹ This involved the amendment of the German constitution, denying applications for asylum to anyone coming overland through other ‘safe’ countries in which could ‘take on the hosting burden’ from Germany. This amendment disproportionately affected Roma fleeing Southeastern Europe.⁴⁰ Ultimately, the community’s civil rights movement was built on shaky foundations due to ongoing public hostility, shifts in asylum law, and the state’s persistent reluctance to grant full recognition.

³⁵ Margalit, *Germany and Its Gypsies*, p. 212.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 212.

³⁷ Kai von Appen, ‘Roma verklagen die BRD’, *Die Tageszeitung*, 23 June 1993, DOMiD archives, newsclippings collection P-8971.

³⁸ Matras, ‘The Development of the Romani Civil Rights Movement’, p. 57.

³⁹ Barany, ‘Living on the edge’, p. 340.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 340.

Thus, from the *Bettelmarsch* to the *Bleiberechtskämpfe*, Roma activists in Cologne demonstrated remarkable agency and organisational capacity between 1985 and 1995, occupying buildings, marching hundreds of kilometres and articulating their demands in independent magazines and pamphlets. They were, however, consistently met with a state apparatus which refused to translate its acknowledgement of Holocaust responsibility into meaningful legal protection or political recognition. This pattern was compounded by the hostility of the broader political culture, which rendered and continues to render antiziganism acceptable across the political spectrum, from neo-Nazi to Green Party circles, as well as the legal architecture of asylum reform, which disproportionately burdened refugees who, like Roma, lacked the protection of a native state. These struggles ultimately expose not only the failures of German asylum policy in this period, but also the broader inadequacies of German politics of belonging, with Roma positioned as perpetually foreign. Thus, their civil rights movement unfolded in a country which, while mourning their genocide, was unable to develop appropriate asylum policies.



Figure 5: Roma activists and supporters, with far-left banner reading 'recognition as a European people.' (Photo: Rom. e.V.; reproduced with permission).



Figure 6: Roma activists and supporters with banners reading: 'never again deportation' and 'FRG is the only European country to deny the Roma protection' (Photo: Rom. e.V.; reproduced with permission).

Chapter 3: The archive as activism in post-Cold War Europe

Despite its persistent marginalisation, the fight for the adequate commemoration of the Roma Holocaust was central to the development of a wider European Holocaust memory culture. In fact, it played a seminal role in one of the most prominent commemorative art projects in Europe and ‘the largest grassroots memorial in the world’,¹ namely Gunter Demnig’s *Stolpersteine*.² Over the course of the 1990s, Demnig initiated a range of Holocaust memorial projects, all resting on the concept of direct engagement with the stories of individual victims, rather than en masse anonymous commemoration. The first steps towards what would later become the *Stolpersteine* were taken in the form of a temporary installation in Cologne in 1990, which, with the help of his friend Kurt Holl, materialised out of Demnig’s work with Rom e.V.³ The installation in question was formed by the words ‘May 1940 — 1,000 Roma and Sinti’⁴ inked by Demnig and Holl onto the streets of Cologne using dispersion paint, a semi-permanent medium. The text followed the direction of the path that more than 1,500 Roma and Sinti had walked on 6 May 1940, as they were herded into the city’s central deportation site.⁵ The installation, which in March 1993 was granted permission for permanent installation in the form of concrete plaques with brass lettering, was intended to provoke questions and discussions concerning the extent of Nazi violence.⁶ While many informally referred to Demnig’s work as the *Leidensweg*,⁷ a nod to the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem, the artist’s official name for the installation was *Stolpersteine*, a name he continued to recycle for a series of subsequent projects, most notably for the small brass-capped cobblestones that monopolise the term’s meaning today.

¹ Jennifer L. Allen, *Sustainable Utopias: The Art and Politics of Hope in Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), p. 202.

² ‘Stumbling stones’, transl. from German.

³ Allen, *Sustainable Utopias*, p.203.

⁴ ‘Mai 1940 —1000 Roma und Sinti’, transl. from German.

⁵ Allen, *Sustainable Utopias*, p.204.

⁶ Ibid., p.204.

⁷ ‘way of sorrows’, transl, from German.

In 1993, Demnig was invited to contribute a project to an edited volume of conceptual art titled ‘Delusions of Grandeur: Art Projects for Europe’,⁸ which solicited 200 contributions from artists across Europe.⁹ The convenors of the project sought entries that would ‘guide post-Cold War Europe through an era of political reconfiguration, in an attempt to bridge politics and art through a dialogue about their shared investment in the creation of a united Europe’.¹⁰ Demnig’s submission to ‘Delusions of Grandeur’ marked the beginning of the *Stolperstein* project as we know it today: Based on archival materials acquired from Rom e.V., he created the first 250 ‘stumbling stones’ commemorating individual Holocaust victims amongst the cobblestones in front of their last freely chosen residence before deportation.¹¹ Thus, victims were commemorated not as an anonymous mass, but as ‘discrete individuals, torn one by one from the fabric of European society’.¹²

Demnig’s decision to focus on the Roma community as the first group of Holocaust victims named in his commemorative projects, and his reliance on the Rom e.V. and Kurt Holl to realise these early projects, are not widely acknowledged, yet are crucial to the development of a Europeanised Holocaust memory throughout the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. By choosing to focus on Roma and Sinti in the initial stages of his Holocaust memorial work, the artist made a defiant statement in favour of a community which, as this dissertation has discussed, otherwise occupies the lowest level of the memory hierarchy. Since the initiation of Demnig’s copper cobblestone project as a response to the ‘Delusions of Grandeur’ project in 1994, more than 80,000 mini monuments have been installed in twenty-six European countries, a feat made possible only through a massive transnational network of participants.¹³

If Demnig’s *Stolpersteine* represent one mode of insisting on the historical recognition of Roma suffering, namely the aesthetic and commemorative, then the 1990s also witnessed two further,

⁸ Größenwahn: Kunstprojekte für Europe, transl. from German.

⁹ Allen, *Sustainable Utopias*, p. 205.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 206.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 208.

¹² Ibid., p. 206.

¹³ Ibid., p. 202.

intertwined modes: the legal and the archival. The deteriorating socio-political position of Roma refugees within Germany, set against the backdrop of rising xenophobia and a nationwide shift to the right, gave fresh urgency to the 'Europeanisation' of rights discourse. Thus, Roma activists and their supporters increasingly turned towards the language of human rights and international legal frameworks to press their claims. Simultaneously, the work of scholars such as Karola Fings and organisations such as the Rom e.V. began to construct a scholarly and archival foundation for Roma historical memory, an act that was itself a form of activism, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

That Demnig's commemorative project, which was made possible through the work of Kurt Holl and the Rom e.V., was taking shape precisely in the same moment in which living Roma in Germany faced heightened levels of antiziganism speaks to the structural contradiction at the heart of post-reunification German society: A culture increasingly dedicated to Holocaust commemoration and the promise of 'Never Again' was simultaneously failing to protect Roma and other marginalised groups in the wake of an escalating climate of xenophobic violence. Kawczyński, chairman of the RCU, captured something of this paradox when he observed that 'German unification began to pass us by'¹⁴ and 'the more the border to the East opened up, the more people sort of melted together, the more we fell behind, and people turned to open brutality, lost all shame'.¹⁵ The more established a coherent and unified German identity became, the more uncomfortable, downright dangerous it was to be excluded from being 'Volksdeutsch'. This sentiment, combined with a considerable increase in migration to Germany, with the number of refugees per year rising from 100,000 to 440,000 between 1988 and 1992,¹⁶ proved a virulent combination. Murderous arson attacks in the West and pogroms in the East of the country shocked parts of the German public, but ultimately prompted a nationwide shift to the right, making 'nationalistic and racist views more acceptable in polite society', as Fatima El-Tayeb and Elisabeth Lauffer have discussed.¹⁷

¹⁴ El-Tayeb and Lauffer, "'We Are the Volk'", p. 103.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 103.

¹⁶ Barany, 'Living on the edge', p. 340.

¹⁷ El-Tayeb and Lauffer, "'We Are the Volk'", p. 111.

In November 1992, 100,000 anti-right protesters gathered on Cologne's Chlodwigplatz to stand against this escalating racism.¹⁸ Commenting on the march, Kurt Bachmann, who had been a member of the resistance during the Third Reich, warned that while '1992 is not 1933, it is certainly heading in that direction, if our people does nothing to prevent it.'¹⁹ Notably, there was also significant support from the church, with pastor Kurt Werner Pick warning that 'In remembrance of our failure, of our complicity, of the responsibility we carried in the Nazi dictatorship, the churches must today stand decidedly against any and all forms of racism',²⁰ describing the period in question as a time in which 'the ghost of far-right extremism is once again crawling out of the cracks'.²¹ Neither the DOMiD nor the Rom e.V. archives revealed participation or channelled the voices of the Roma on this occasion, a fact which can once again be attributed to the precarious settlement position which many Roma refugees found themselves in, blocking them from participation in any high-visibility activist activity.

The refugee crisis and ensuing antiziganism in Germany acted as a driving factor for the 'Europeanisation' of the 'Roma question', both from an emotional and from a legislative perspective. Former dissident and first post-communist President of Czechoslovakia Václav Havel, who was a staunch advocate for an integrated Europe, noted that Roma rights would be a 'litmus test for civil society',²² as well as a reflection more broadly on the process of transformation of post-socialist states into liberal democracies. He was, of course, referring specifically to the treatment of Roma in their Eastern European home countries in this case. However, the question of transition in post-Soviet European states was inextricably intertwined with the Roma question in Western European contexts. Julija Sardelić has observed that it was during the 1990s that the shift in treatment of Roma by EU

¹⁸ Andreas Damm and Horst Piegeler, '100,000 protestieren gegen rechts', *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger*, November 1992, Rom e.V. archives, newspaperclippings collection E0946, 0023; PB-0241.

¹⁹ '1992 ist nicht 1933. Aber es ist auf dem Weg dahin, wenn unser Volk das nicht verhindert.' Damm and Piegeler, '100,000 protestieren gegen rechts'.

²⁰ 'In Erinnerung an unser Versagen, an unser Mitläufertum, an unsere Schuld während der Nazidiktatur müssen die Kirchen heute jeder Form von Rassismus entgegenreten.' Ibid.

²¹ '(...)in der das Gespenst des Rechtsextremismus wieder aus seinen Schlupflöchern krieche.' Damm and Piegeler, 'Ibid'.

²² Julija Sardelić, 'The Exclusion of Roma and European Citizenship', *Current History* 120 (2021), pp. 100–104, at p. 100.

institutions occurred, with the latter finally seeing the community as an ethnic minority deserving of human rights protection. For instance, from the first years of this decade, the Council of Europe began to show more sustained interest in the 'Roma question', referring to the community as a 'truly European minority' for the first time in 1993. It was also acknowledged, however, that they had 'not benefited from the oft-stated European values of liberal democracy based on the rule of law and the protection of minorities and human rights'.²³

The Roma fight for asylum and residence in the Federal Republic must be situated within a normative Europeanised framework of human rights. The RNC intended appeals to the European Court of Justice and United Nations (UN) demonstrate an adoption of this modern 'rights-talk'.²⁴ Bonn's attitude towards the Roma on the national policy level was clearly indicated by the fact that Germany was the only state to decline signing a Council of Europe resolution which urged improvement to the situation of the Roma.²⁵ Furthermore, the German government's refusal to sign a UN resolution which included an explicit clause for the protection of Roma rights demonstrates the state's reluctance to acknowledge a 'special responsibility' towards the community,²⁶ despite the a contradictory message in German President Von Weizsäcker's 1985 speech at the Bundestag.²⁷ Similarly, in April 1991, Ursula Jelpke, a representative of the Party of Democratic Socialism in the Bundestag submitted a query concerning the right of stateless Roma refugees to remain in the Federal Republic. In its reply, the government avoided stating that they shared Jelpke's attitude that Germany bore a special responsibility towards the Roma people. Instead, it asserted that 'it had already stated on several occasions in the past that the Nazi dictatorship had inflicted tremendous injustice on the Sinti and Roma'.²⁸

²³ Ibid. p. 100.

²⁴ Von Appen, 'Roma verklagen die BRD'.

²⁵ Barany, 'Living on the edge', p. 340.

²⁶ Von Appen, 'Roma verklagen die BRD'.

²⁷ Richard von Weizsäcker, speech to the Bundestag, 8 May 1985, p. 2.

²⁸ Margalit, *Germany and Its Gypsies*, p. 211.

The RNC's turn to international legal frameworks can be contextualised within a continent-wide shift in the language of political claim-making. Samuel Moyn has situated the historical advent of 'human rights' as a legal and sociological concept in the 1980s, writing in his defining 2010 monograph *The Last Utopia* that 'if there ever really was a "global human rights revolution", it has occurred only since the 1980s, when a variety of groups around the world, and all governments, learned how to speak the language'.²⁹ He also acknowledges that 'the slow but sure move towards a politics of human rights was most visible in Western Europe starting in the 1980s, where human rights NGOs proliferated, and the newly prominent European Court in Strasbourg symbolised the great strides a rhetoric of human dignity and rights made at every level of the continent's affairs'.³⁰ Moyn also draws attention to the Cambodian genocide of the 1970s and the resurgence of 'ethnic cleansing' on the European continent by the mid-1990s as key foci through which genocide prevention moved up to be 'among the first items on the human rights agenda'.³¹ It was precisely within this 'rights revolution' that the Roma cause, accelerated by the renewed spectre of ethnic violence on the European continent, found a viable international platform.

Sardelić has noted that the European Union's focus on minority rights protection grew in the 1990s, coinciding with Eastern enlargement.³² She notes that the improved treatment of Roma by EU institutions, namely as an ethnic minority deserving of human rights protections, coincided with rising expectations that the Union would expand to include the post-socialist states of Central and Eastern Europe. Thus, the 1993 Copenhagen Criteria for accession emphasised that countries aspiring to join the EU would be required to prove that they could 'guarantee the rule of law, human rights and the protection of minorities'.³³ Since a large proportion of European Roma were citizens of post-socialist states, their status naturally became the focus of attention in the time leading up to the enlargements of 2004 and 2007. Candidate countries vying for EU membership had to report on progress made in

²⁹ Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 218.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

³² Sardelić, 'The Exclusion of Roma and European Citizenship'.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

the enactment of anti-discrimination legislation and the implementation of other measures to protect Roma minorities.³⁴ Ironically, however, countries with established EU membership were under no obligation to prove their own implementation of minority protection policies for Roma and other groups. For example, Spain, a country of 40 million with a Roma community of over 1 million, the United Kingdom, and France, were exempt from these measures, despite gross human rights violations in all three countries.³⁵

The focus of such legislation on Eastern European candidate states can be attributed to xenophobic ‘migration panic’.³⁶ Older member states feared that freedom of movement without the supposedly normative framework of European human rights would mean the mass migration of Roma and other persecuted minorities westwards. Sardelić has emphasised that Roma were no more likely to leave their home countries than non-Roma citizens of post-socialist countries, yet has also noted the ‘strenuous effort of western EU member states to curtail Roma mobility’.³⁷ Ultimately, such patterns in attitude and policy, both on the national and the European level, demonstrate that the failures of the early 1990s were not just a failure of memory politics, but a failure of unified German democracy, supposedly a beacon of the utopian European spirit, to integrate and protect a marginalised population.

Despite the curtailments of their rights and silencing of their voices, the development of scholarship and public institutions concerning Roma in Cologne blossomed from the mid-1980s onwards as a form of activism in its own right. In 1990, Karola Fings co-organised an exhibition with the Rom e.V. illuminating the story of Sinti and Roma under National Socialism in Cologne, titled ‘Nur wenige kamen zurück’.³⁸ This collaboration, between an emerging historian and a community organisation campaigning for the right of its members to remain in Germany, exemplifies how the

³⁴ Ibid., p. 102.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 102.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 102.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 102.

³⁸ ‘Only few returned’, transl. from German, see: Karola Fings and Frank Sparing, *‘Nur wenige kamen zurück’: Roma und Sinti im Nationalsozialismus* (Köln: Selbstverlag, 1990).

production of historical knowledge and the practice of local activism are inseparable. From these beginnings grew a body of scholarship that would provide the intellectual foundations for Roma rights claims for decades to come, culminating in Fings and Sparing's 1991 article '*Das Zigeunerlager in Köln-Bickendorf 1935-1958*',³⁹ and their 2005 monograph '*Rassismus, Lager, Völkermord: Die Nationalsozialistische Zigeunerverfolgung in Köln*'.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, the institutional dimension of this archival activism was consolidated in Cologne when Rom e.V. established its own formal archive and library in March 1999, a project initiated by Ruzdija Sejdović himself.⁴¹ Yet even since late 1985, Cologne's Rom e.V. has existed as an active community hub, supporting members with applications for asylum, the right to remain, citizenship, as well as through other social, political, and pedagogical efforts.⁴² In a political climate in which Roma testimony had been systematically excluded from mainstream memory culture, and in which Eastern European Roma refugees were denied the residential stability that civic participation required, the construction of an institutional archive by Roma individuals themselves represented an assertion of selfhood.

Taken together, the three modes of claim-making examined in this chapter, namely the aesthetic and commemorative, the legal and discursive, and the archival and scholarly, can be understood not just as parallel but as mutually sustaining: Demnig's Stolpersteine were made possible by the records gathered by the Rom e.V.; Fings's scholarship was also grounded in the exhibitions and archives that activism collaboration had produced; and the rights language adopted by the RNC gained force from historical evidence that scholars and archivists had assembled. All three flourished in defiance of escalating antiziganism, and precisely in the moment in which the European project as revealing the limits of its own proclaimed values. Together, they laid the foundations upon which any

³⁹ 'The Gypsy camp in Cologne-Bickendorf 1935–1958', Karola Fings and Frank Sparing, 'Das Zigeunerlager in Köln-Bickendorf 1935–1958', 1999: *Zeitschrift für Sozialgeschichte des 20 und 21 Jahrhunderts* 6 (1991), pp. 11–40.

⁴⁰ 'Racism, Camps, Genocide, The National Socialist Gypsy persecution in Cologne', Karola Fings and Frank Sparing, *Rassismus, Lager, Völkermord: Die nationalsozialistische Zigeunerverfolgung in Köln* (Cologne: Emons Verlag, 2005).

⁴¹ 'tgr', 'Archiv zur Geschichte der Roma in Köln eröffnet', *Der Tagesspiegel*, 2 March 1999, DOMiD archives, newspaper collection P-8965/P-9023.

⁴² 'Wir über uns', Rom e.V.

more equitable reckoning with Roma history and rights would, in time, have to be built. In doing so, they demonstrated that the archive is not the aftermath of activism, but its instrument.

Conclusion

For the Roma and Sinti of late twentieth-century Germany, the fight to be remembered was inseparable from the fight for the right to belong. Striving for acknowledgement and inclusion of Roma Holocaust memory in the public discourse and consciousness functioned as a form of political activism. This dissertation has examined political activism in Germany to this end between 1985 and 1995 through the lens of memory, asylum, and archival practice, with a focus on the voices of the Roma community itself.

The analysis has shown that Roma and Sinti activism was neither passive nor derivative, but strategic, confrontational, and embedded in the contemporary political language of rights and recognition. Episodes such as the *Novemberstreit* in 1988, the *Bettelmarsch* in 1990, and a range of asylum protests in the early and mid-1990s reveal how Roma activists deliberately inserted themselves into German memory culture at moments in which remembrance was being consolidated as a foundation of democratic legitimacy. These interventions unsettled established hierarchies of victimhood and exposed the limits of a memory culture that claimed universality while reproducing exclusion in practice. In doing so, Roma activists demonstrated that Holocaust remembrance was not a settled moral consensus, but an ongoing site of political struggle.

At the same time, memory politics cannot be separated from material questions of protection and rights in the present. Roma asylum seekers in the late 1980s and early 1990s confronted a state that acknowledged their historical persecution to some extent, while refusing to translate that acknowledgement into contemporaneous responsibility. Conflicts between German Sinti and Eastern European Roma further illuminate how recognition was unevenly distributed, shaped by citizenship, legal status, and proximity to national narratives of belonging. Extending theories of competitive memory beyond the symbolic realm, this study demonstrates how struggles over remembrance intersected directly with struggles over asylum, residence, and social inclusion.

The final chapter argued that Roma-led archival and commemorative initiatives should be understood as political interventions in their own right. Institutions such as Rom e.V., along with practices like the original Roma *Stolpersteine*, did not simply preserve pre-existing histories but actively carved out political space where state and European institutions failed to do so. The very existence of the sources that underpin this dissertation constitutes evidence in its own right. By asserting historical presence, documenting persecution, and making Roma lives legible within dominant memory frameworks, these initiatives challenged and continue to challenge narratives of Roma ahistoricity and marginality. Archiving thus emerges not as a neutral scholarly endeavour but as an outcome of sustained activism and a tool of political claim-making.

By foregrounding Roma and Sinti agency, this study has aimed to complicate narratives of German democratic consolidation. It shows that even as remembrance became a central pillar of post-war political identity, access to its protective and legitimising effects remained uneven. Thus, memory concerns not simply the past, but also the question of who is recognised, protected, and allowed to belong in the present.

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