



## Maria Theresia and Joseph II Policies of Assimilation in the Age of Enlightened Absolutism

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The Age of Enlightened Absolutism was characterised by essential changes in the sovereign policies toward the "gypsies". In the face of the complete failure of all attempts to banish them permanently from their dominion, the sovereigns of the Enlightenment were searching for new methods and ways to solve the "gypsy problem" from the second half of the 18th century on. Therefore, assimilation by decree of the state was added to the methods of expulsion and persecution of the Roma that have been practiced to this day.

Measures forcing the Roma to give up their ways of life were taken, to do away with an "uncontrollable nuisance" and to transform so called "unproductive" parts of the population into "respectable, obedient and diligent people". It was their most important goal to keep the Roma from wandering about and to make the hitherto "roving and vagabond gypsies" settle down permanently. The coercion to live rural lives or to learn civic trades, and the destruction of their cultural identity, was supposed to lead to an assimilation into society.

The primary motives behind the enforcement of assimilation at that time undoubtedly were the aspiration of the centralised state to control its subjects, and integrated Roma into the existing economic system. But the religious beliefs of a few sovereigns also played a role. They saw an honorable duty in the "civilisation" of the "gypsies", quasi Christian response to enforce their "re-education" into becoming "good Christians".

The policies of assimilation during that time were based on the way the Enlightenment viewed human beings: the individual was regarded as "capable of learning and improving". At the same time, the measures that were taken to assimilate the Roma rested upon the assumption that their culture was inferior on principle. The physical extermination of the "gypsies" was replaced by the destruction of their culture and traditional ways of life. Only in comparison to the brutal persecution of former eras could this new way of dealing with the Roma be possibly seem as progressive. Moreover, the methods applied in "civilising" the Roma - such as taking away their children - were in many cases more brutal and inhumane.

Very early attempts by the state to assimilate the Roma can be found in Spain. As early as in 1619 the authorities wanted to force the wandering Roma to sedentarise, and used methods of assimilation such as forbidding the use of Romani (1633), separating parents and children and committing the children to orphanages, and sending men and women to separate workhouses (1686, 1725).

Maria Theresia, the Empress of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, set an example with her policies of assimilation that influenced many other sovereigns. Striving to make the Roma settle down as "new citizens" or "new farmers", she issued altogether four great decrees during her reign (1740-1780). By means of these decrees the Roma would be forced to give up their ways of life.

The first decree (1758) forced the "gypsies" to sedentarise. They were denied the right to own horses and wagons in order to keep them from "nomadising". Furthermore, the Roma were issued land and seeds and became liable to pay tribute from their crops just like the other subjects of the crown. They were supposed to build houses and had to ask for permission and state an exact purpose if they wanted to leave their villages.



In the next decree (1761) the term "Zigani", which was commonly used for the Roma at that time, was replaced by the terms "new citizen" (Hungarian: "Ujpolgár"), "new farmer" (Hungarian: "Ujparasztok"), "new Hungarian" (Hungarian: "Ujmagyar") or "new settler" (Hungarian: "Ujlakosok" or Latin: "Neocolonus"). They were supposed to give up their old ways of life, together with their old name, in order to accelerate the process of integration. "Gypsy boys" would learn a trade or be recruited for military service at the age of sixteen if they were fit for service.

In 1767 Maria Theresia had the jurisdiction withdrawn from the Voivods and all "gypsies" became subject to the local jurisdiction (3rd decree). At the same time, they were ordered to register and - based on this registration - conscriptions were carried out for the first time.

The fourth decree issued in 1773 prohibited marriages between Roma. Mixed marriages were encouraged by subsidies. The permission to get married, however, was bound to an attestation of "a proper way of life and knowledge of the Catholic religious doctrine". Since the Empress and her counselors were of the opinion that the "civilization" of the "gypsies" was the basis for a successful "domiciliation", she ordered that all children over the age of five should be taken away from their parents and be handed over to a Hungarian farmer's family who were supposed to take charge of their Christian upbringing against payment. The children should grow up isolated from their own parents in different comitats, go to school and later learn a trade or become farmers.

Although Maria Theresia's successor, Josef II (1780-1790), released the Roma of Buchowina that had been living in bondage, he continued the policies of assimilation started by his mother. Issued in 1783, the guide lines "'de Domiciliatione et Regulatione Zingarorum" enforced assimilation even more rigorously. Not only were more restrictions - such as the compulsory adoption of the clothing and the language of the village people - imposed on the Roma, but they were also threatened with harsh punishment for offences against these restrictions.

For the use of the "gypsy language", for example, the law provided a flogging with 24 blows. Despite the sanctions ordered in case of offences, the coercive measures imposed by Maria Theresia and Joseph II were effective only to a certain degree. They only succeeded permanently in what is Burgenland today, where the Roma actually settled down and have stayed up to the present. A large number of Roma were successfully assimilated there: frequently children did not return to their own parents, stayed on the farms of their foster parents or learned a trade and married into a non-Roma-family. [Stereotypes and Folklorism] In a few towns the Roma assimilated completely into the village population. The process of assimilation is mirrored in the disappearance of the formerly multifarious family names in the conscriptions of the "gypsies".

In other territories of the monarchy, however, the Roma offered resistance against the way of life ordered by the state, they evaded the harsh compulsory measures and took to the road again. The state at this time lacked the necessary human resources to translate the regulations into action or to return the Roma that had escaped. Moreover, as they were generally completed according to the expectations of the authorities, the lists of conscription often did not show any need for action.

The liberal Spanish King Karl III (Carlos Tercero) tried to "civilize" the "gitanos" in the same year as Joseph II (1783). In the 44 articles of his "pragmatica" he prohibited their wandering, the use of their language ("el caló"), their typical clothing, and the horse trade as well as other itinerant trades. The King wanted the "gitanos" to settle down at a place of their choice and to practice "proper" trades. These measures were bound to fail because they were also rejected by the rest of the population -



towns and their citizens refused to take the Roma in and employ them. The "gitanos" continued practicing their itinerant trades but under even more difficult and impoverished circumstances.

In Germany similar measures, though on a smaller scale, were taken. A few sovereigns tried to make the "gypsies" settle down on their territories, such as the Count of Wittgenstein, who had the "gypsy settlement" Saßmannshausen erected in 1771. Friedrich II of Prussia, a contemporary and rival of Maria Theresia, founded the "gypsy settlement" Friedrichslohra in a remote area near Nordhausen in 1775 in order to make Sinti groups who had been "roaming the land as beggars and thieves" settle down permanently. The attempt to transform the Sinti into the States idea of "clean, proper, obedient and diligent" people failed miserably. After 1830 the adults were committed to workhouses and the Martinsstift in Erfurt (a convent) took charge of the children.



## References

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