

Austro-Hungarian Empire

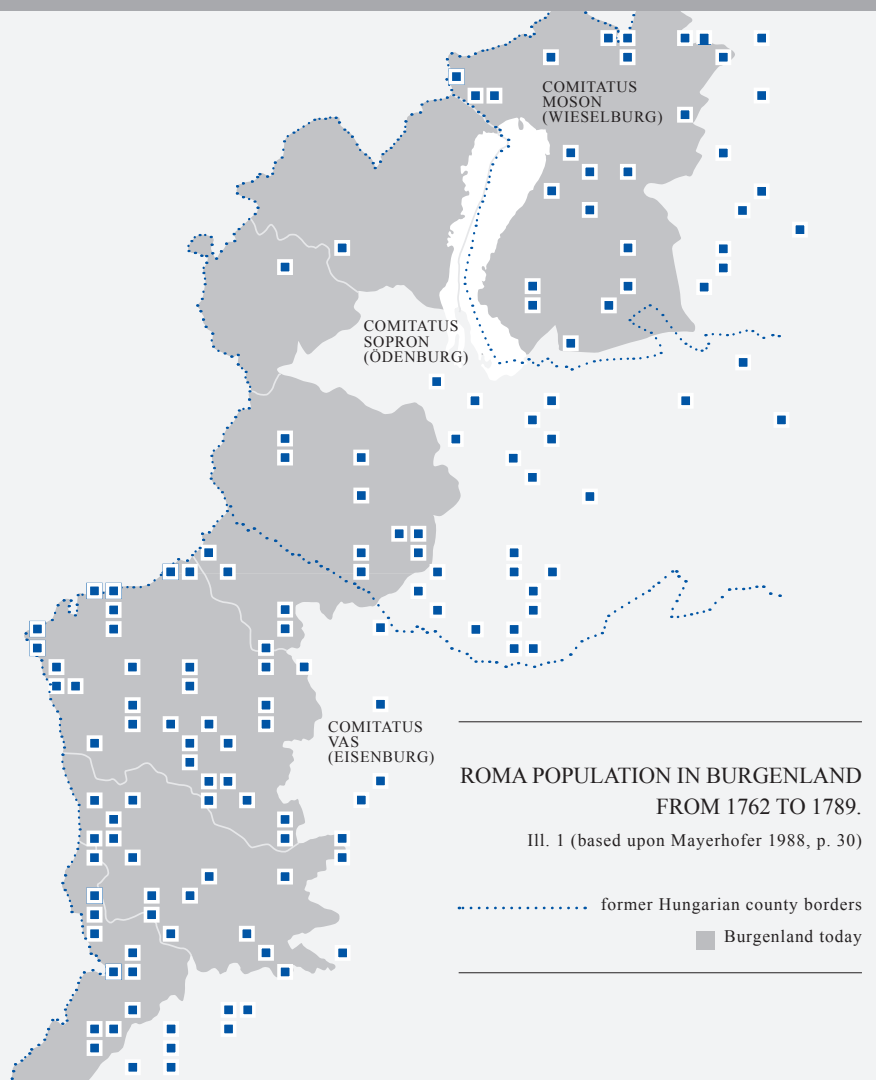
compiled by the editors

A New Method: Assimilation | The Four Decrees of Maria Theresia | Little Success | Failed Attempts in Spain and Germany

➤ *Already at an early stage, people had tried to stop the Roma from living their way of life and culture. On a larger scale, however, policies of assimilation to the majority population were only pushed ahead by rulers in the Age of Enlightened Absolutism. Empress Maria Theresia and her son Joseph II in particular pursued programs which aimed at the Roma's settlement and assimilation. Instead of physical violence a new form of cruelty was used in order to transform the uncontrollable and, to the state, unproductive "Gypsies" into settled, profitable subjects: the Roma were given land, they were no longer allowed to speak Romani and marry among each other, they were registered, and finally their children were taken away. However, these measures succeeded only in Western Hungary, today's Austrian Burgenland and adjacent areas. In the other territories of the Empire, as well as in Spain and Germany, where the pressure for assimilation was likewise increased, the rulers' policy of assimilation failed.*

INTRODUCTION

The Age of Enlightened Absolutism was characterised by essential changes in the sovereigns' 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 onwards. Therefore, assimilation by decree of the state was added to the methods of expulsion and persecution of the Roma that are being practiced to this day.

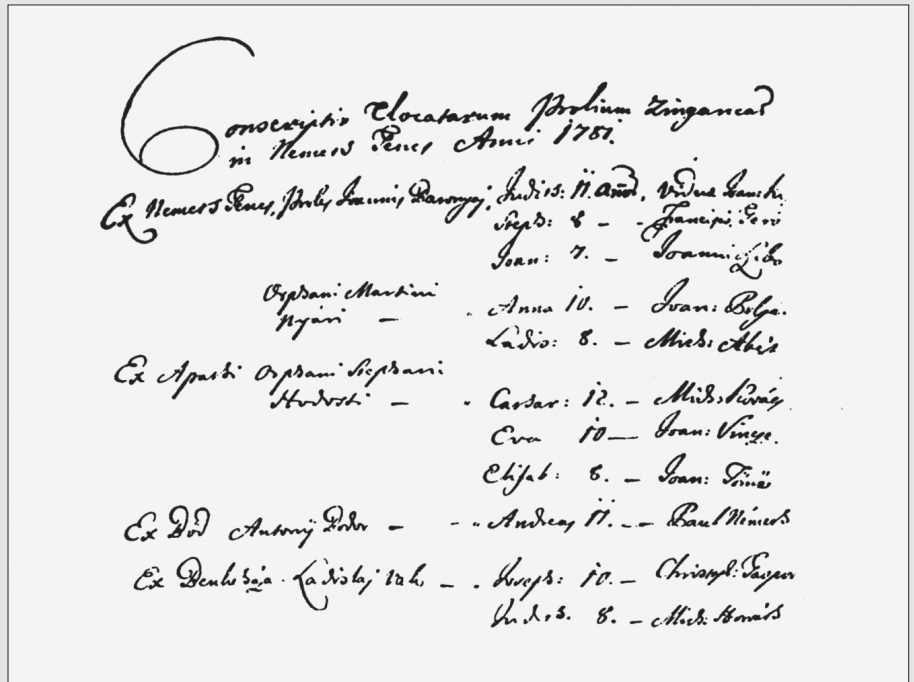




III. 2

Maria Theresia, Empress of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

(from Vacha 1992, p. 295)



III. 3 (Detail)

List of "Gypsy" children "resettled" to Nagyecs in the year 1782.

(from Mayerhofer 1988, p. 29)

**A NEW METHOD:
ASSIMILATION**

Measures forcing the Roma to give up their way of life were taken, in order to do away with an "uncontrollable nuisance" and to transform so-called "unproductive" parts of the population into "respectable, obedient and diligent people". The most important aim of these measures was 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 to integrate the Roma into the existing economic system. However, the religious beliefs of a few sovereigns also played a role. They saw an honourable duty in the "civilisation" of the "Gypsies" by enforcing their "re-education" into becoming "good Christians".

The policies of assimilation during that time were based on the way 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 in 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 seen 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 settle, 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).

**THE FOUR DECREES OF
MARIA THERESIA**

Maria Theresia, the Empress of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, set an example with her policies of assimilation which

influenced many other sovereigns. Striving to make the Roma settle down as "new citizens" or "new farmers", she issued four great decrees altogether during her reign (1740-1780). By means of these decrees the Roma should be forced to give up their ways of life.

The first decree (1758) forced the "Gypsies" to settle. They were denied the right to own horses and wagons in order to keep them from "nomadising". Furthermore, the Roma were given land and seeds and became liable to pay tribute from their crops

THE “MANAGEMENT OF THE GYPSIES”

Some basic principles of the guidelines “De Domiciliatione et Regulatione Zingarorum” (About the settlement and management of Gypsies), published on October 9, 1783, by Emperor Joseph II:

- The Roma were no longer allowed to set up tents in the woods; rather, they should be urged to farm the land in towns in scarcely-wooded areas.
- The jurisdiction of the voivodes was replaced by that of the High Judge.
- The Roma were not allowed to keep horses for the sole purpose of selling them. Bondsmen were allowed to possess horses, but only for work, and couldn't under any circumstances trade them.
- 24 strokes with the cane were set as punishment for the use of the “Gypsy language”.
- The same punishment applied to those who ate carrions.
- Roma were not allowed to marry among each other.
- The “jurassores” (district judges) had to report monthly about the Roma's way of life.
- The number of Roma musicians was restricted.
- Roma children should, from the age of 4 onwards, be distributed among the neighbouring towns, at least every two years.

III. 4

(abbreviated and translated from Mayerhofer 1988, p. 27f.)



III. 5

Maria Theresa's son, Josef II

(from Vacha 1992, p. 322)

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 second decree (1761) the term “Zigani”, which was commonly used for the Roma at that time, was replaced by the terms “Ujpolgár” (Hungarian for “new citizen”), “Ujparasztok” (“new farmer”), “Ujmagyar” (“new Hungarian”) or “Ujlakosok” (or Latin “Neocolonus”, for “new settler”). They were supposed to give up their way of life, together with their old name, in order to accelerate the process of integra-

tion. “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 Theresa had the jurisdiction withdrawn from the voivodes and all “Gypsies” became subject to local jurisdiction (third 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 the Roma. Mixed marriages were encouraged by subsidies. 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 counsellors were of the opinion that the “civilisation” 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 Hungarian farmers' families who were supposed to take charge of their Christian upbringing against payment. The children should grow up isolated from their parents in different comitatuses, go to school and later learn a trade or become farmers. [III. 3]

LITTLE SUCCESS

Although Maria Theresa's successor, Josef II (1780-1790), released the Roma of Bukovina that had been living in bondage, he continued the policies of assimilation started by his mother. Issued in 1783, the guidelines “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 of 24 blows. Despite the sanctions ordered in case of offences, the coerci-

ve measures imposed by Maria Theresa and Josef 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 day. 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

A travelogue written by a French writer of the 19th century recounts the terrible impressions the “theft” of Roma children had left on her:

“On a certain day, terrible for that people, a day they still think of in terror, soldiers appeared with wagons and took away all children, from the newly-weaned infants to the newly-weds, still wearing their bridal dress, from the Gypsies. The poor people’s desperation cannot be described. The parents threw themselves on the ground in front of the soldiers, and clung to the wagons which took away their children. They were pushed away with sticks and rifle butts, and because they could not follow the wagons which held their most precious possessions – their little children – many parents immediately committed suicide. The Zigains (“Gypsies”) could not be convinced of the great moral they were preached, nor of their sacrifices’ usefulness.”

III. 6

(translated from Mayerhofer 1988, p. 26)

into a non-Roma family. 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 empire, 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. [Ills. 3, 4, 6]

FAILED ATTEMPTS IN SPAIN AND GERMANY

The liberal Spanish King Charles III (Carlos Tercero) tried to “civilise” the “Gypsies” 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 in 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 practising 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 state’s 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.

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