
Maps, and the borders they illuminate, are of great importance in understanding the Habsburg monarchy and its successor states. Even while transnational historians have challenged the primacy of borders in constructing historical narratives and the Schengen Agreement has made crossing them in large parts of Europe rather perfunctory, the last several years have highlighted the renewed importance that populations and politicians put on them, both in the United States and Europe. In both areas, it is migration that has reignited this interest, and migrants who cross national borders face a range of reactions from benevolence to blind hatred.

This is nothing new. Throughout history, some migrants have been welcomed, others shunned. András Bereznay's recently released book, Historical Atlas of the Gypsies: Romani History in Maps (2021), provides a visual representation of the migration of Romani people as well as the reactions that migration evoked. Unsurprisingly to those familiar with the history of the Roma in Europe, those maps reveal how, after an initial period of relatively peaceful interactions in the fifteenth century, these encounters became steadily more negative and violent, culminating in persecution and genocide of the Roma under Nazi German auspices. Since the fall of communism, relations between the Roma and the ethnic majorities in European states has fluctuated from tense to violent. This is despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that the Roma have gained more rights and official recognition and continued to organize more effectively socially and politically.

Bereznay opens the book with a short introduction that places his work into the larger corpus of Romani studies. As is typical for such works, he defines his terms (who is a “Gypsy,” why he uses the term “Gypsy,” when and why he uses the term “Roma”). He discusses the dynamics of creating an atlas for a stateless people when such works can often be beholden to the nation-state paradigm. As he argues, while Roma never had a state of their own, they were keenly aware of the ways that different states treated them and used movement to better their lives. While he presents no overall argument to the work (in fact Bereznay says each map is “independent”), the sense one gets from reading the introduction and the rest of the volume is a sympathetic presentation of the
Roma’s experiences in Europe, both good and bad. While showing agency (their movement being the most prominent example of it), the maps show that they also were the victims of circumstances largely out of their control (local xenophobia, discriminatory police, paternalistic governmental policies).

The maps provide an excellent medium to present the history of this often mobile people. As the maps highlight, this mobility was both chosen and forced. In fifty-two maps, Bereznay explores the history of the Roma from their emigration from the Indian subcontinent to their expansions and retractions across Europe to recent migrations to the United States and beyond. Each map is accompanied by a descriptive text that helps place the map into historical context. Arranged thematically, generally by location (Western Europe, Central Europe, etc.), and chronologically, the maps function as a history of the Romani people told spatially. The maps themselves are full of information. Some maps highlight when Roma appeared in a location. Other maps show reported occupations or famous Romani artists. Still, others highlight discriminatory laws or the locations of violence against Roma. Importantly, Bereznay includes and highlights information that has been discredited, and why it was, which greatly adds to the research value. In a map of the Balkans (map 5, “Onto the Wider Balkans”), for example, instances where faulty translations were interpreted as dates of first contact are noted, allowing researchers to avoid the same pitfalls.

Naturally, this book is of use to those interested in the history of the Roma in Europe. There are around thirteen maps that depict Europe broadly. Map 47, “Finding a Voice” is a map of Cold War Europe from Spain to the Urals depicting the differences between policy in the West (increased rights and recognition for Roma) and the East (laws aimed at sedentarization). For HABSBUR-Gists in particular, there are around nineteen additional maps that include information on the monarchy itself or the successor states, broadly defined. Map 23, “Sent Underground,” for example, highlights anti-Roma legislation and activity in the Holy Roman Empire in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The maps of Hungary are particularly strong. Map 37, “A Survey,” for instance, visualizes the Roma of Hungary based largely on an 1893 survey of their population. The accompanying text includes further information on how the survey, and previous ones, were conducted and additional results not mapped (e.g., number of Romani speakers among ethnic Roma, perceptions of criminality, literacy rates, etc.). In addition to these maps of Central Europe and the successor states, there are maps of India, the Iberian Peninsula, France, Great Britain, Russia/Soviet Union, the United States, and the world.

In sum, Bereznay has produced a fantastic volume of maps related to Romani history. The maps are beautifully done and highly informative. The book is a great example of how to combine traditional historical research with visual components. Unfortunately for the Roma, Bereznay’s work highlights that although imperial and national borders change, discrimination remains much the same.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/habsburg

**Citation:** Tim Olin. Review of Bereznay, András, *Historical Atlas of the Gypsies: Romani History in Maps.* HABSURG, H-Net Reviews. April, 2024.

**URL:** https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=60365

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