



HOW I BECAME A PARTISAN



STUDY GUIDE

www.epfmedia.com

How I Became A Partisan

Numerous stories from WWII remain untold, and some might remain forever unknown. The fates of Roma partisans in the former Czechoslovakia is one such story. The fates of Roma partisans in the former Czechoslovakia is one such untold story. While uncovering her family's partisan past, director Vera Lacková learns about other forgotten Roma fighters. During her search, she comes up against deep-rooted prejudice, indifference, and hatred towards the Roma community. She aims to change the misconception that Roma were merely victims of the war and show that the heroic deeds of the Romani deservedly form a part of European history.

Czechoslovakia

Czechoslovakia was a country in central Europe that was created in 1918—after World War I—from parts of the Austria-Hungary empire. It was bordered by Austria, Hungary, Romania, Poland, Germany, and the Soviet Union. Czechoslovakia existed until 1993, when it split into two separate countries; Slovakia and the Czech Republic. The capital of Czechoslovakia was Prague, which is currently the capital of the Czech Republic. The capital of Slovakia is Bratislava. At present, the Czech Republic has a population of more than 10 million people, and the population of Slovakia is about 5.5 million.

Czechoslovakia and the Nazis

In 1933, the Nazis rose to power in Germany and Germany insisted that Czechoslovakia needed to return areas that had a primarily ethnic German population. It threatened to go to war if the land was not returned. French, British, and Italian leaders met with German leaders in 1938 and made an agreement called the Munich Pact, where they agreed to return the Sudetenland—which was an area on the border of Germany and Czechoslovakia—to Germany. Shortly after that, however, Germany invaded all of Czechoslovakia. The National WWII Museum explains that it used the country's resources to support its war efforts. It states, "Known to the Nazis as the 'arsenal of the Reich,' Czechoslovakia served Hitler for nearly seven years as a reliable source for industrial goods." In addition, it explains that German rulers treated Czech citizens harshly, particularly those who disagreed with Germany's policies. It says, "Though Czechoslovakia did not see much battle during the war, its citizens still faced the terrors of Nazism. Reinhard Heydrich, the SS official known for his role in the conception and implementation of the Holocaust, governed Prague, as part of a so-called Reich Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. From Prague, Heydrich enforced Nazi policy and fought against the Czech resistance. Heydrich ruled with terror—arrests, expulsions, deportations, and executions were all common in daily life, and he quickly became known as the 'Butcher of Prague.'"¹

In 1939, Germany allowed Slovakia to become an independent state, however, as explained by the National WWII Museum, that freedom depended on it maintaining a good relationship with Germany. The Museum says, "Slovak officials signed a friendship agreement with Nazi Germany,

¹ <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/prague-uprising-1945>

aligning the two countries politically, ideologically, economically, and militarily. Though Slovakia was a nominally independent state—not militarily occupied like the Czech lands—Germany also sent advisers to ministries, central offices, and the police. These advisers oversaw all operations in addition to the activities of domestic politicians.”²

After World War II, Czechoslovakia reestablished its former borders. Hundreds of thousands of ethnic Germans were expelled. In 1948, the Communist Party seized power in Czechoslovakia, and it remained in power until 1989.

Partisans

During World War II, groups of fighters known as partisans participated in guerilla campaigns throughout Europe, against the Nazis and their allies. They took various actions to sabotage the German war effort and to support the Allied forces. For instance, they raided Nazi supply chains, destroyed infrastructure, and openly fought against Nazi troops.

Partisans were active in Czechoslovakia. The National World War II Museum estimates that there were about 7,500 partisans in Czechoslovakia by 1945.³ The Slovak National Uprising, which happened in 1944, was the largest organized anti-Nazi uprising in that country, and lasted for about six weeks. During this time, thousands of resistance fighters led an uprising against the Germans. The uprising ultimately failed, and Germany responded by destroying villages and killing family members in retaliation.

Roma

The Roma originate in the Punjab area of northern India. Some people use the term “Gypsy” to refer to this group, however, this is largely seen as a derogatory term. The Roma were nomadic and eventually made their way into Europe. They were known for their skill in a number of crafts including jewelry making and metal working, and also for their music and dancing. While the Roma migrated to many parts of Europe, they maintained their nomadic lifestyle and their unique culture. To many Europeans, they had an aura of mystery, however because they were often seen as outsiders, they were often persecuted too, and accused of many different crimes including stealing, begging, and kidnapping.

The Nazis also persecuted the Roma. According to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “The Nazis judged Roma to be ‘racially inferior.’” It says, “Under the Nazi regime, German authorities subjected Roma to arbitrary internment, sterilization, forced labor in concentration camps, deportation, and mass murder. German authorities murdered tens of thousands of Roma in the German-occupied territories of the Soviet Union and Serbia and thousands more in the killing centers at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor,

² <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/slovak-national-uprising-1944>

³ <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/prague-uprising-1945>

and Treblinka.”⁴ The organization estimates that somewhere between 250,000 and 500,000 European Roma were killed by the Nazis during World War II. Further, it explains that the treatment of the Roma during the war had lasting effects. It says, “In addition to lives lost, numerous European Roma communities were destroyed. Romani people suffered from the psychological and physical traumas of deprivation, abuse, and the shattering of family. This made it extremely difficult to reconstruct Roma cultural and social networks after the war.”⁵

Fascism

In recent years, a number of critics have begun to worry that fascism has increased and is becoming normalized in Europe and many other countries around the world. For instance, they report that a number of the European political leaders and parties that have come to power have fascist roots. They point out that fascist leaders like Hitler caused widespread persecution and the murder of millions of people during World War II, and they worry that this current trend poses a serious threat to democracy and freedom.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the benefits of preserving the stories of the Roma partisans?
2. What are some of the stereotypes that exist about the Roma, as shown in the film?
3. The filmmaker talks about seeing Roma who are struggling to find their identity. Can you think of any reasons why this might be the case?
4. Some people in the film are reluctant to talk about the Roma. Why do you think this is?
5. The film discusses the fact that most people don't know very much about the experiences of the Roma during the war. What do you think has been the effect of this?

Additional Resources

Books

- Eliyana R. Adler and Kateřina Čapková, eds., *Jewish and Romani Families in the Holocaust and Its Aftermath*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2021.
- Ari Joskowitz, *Rain of Ash: Roma, Jews, and the Holocaust*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023.
- Donald Kenrick and Grattan Puxon, *Gypsies Under the Swastika*. Hatfield, Hertfordshire, England: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2009.
- Guenter Lewy, *The Nazi Persecution of the Gypsies*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

⁴ <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/genocide-of-european-roma-gypsies-1939-1945>

⁵ <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/genocide-of-european-roma-gypsies-1939-1945>

Online Sources

- Council of Europe, “Roma and Travellers: History and Holocaust.”
<https://www.coe.int/en/web/roma-and-travellers/roma-history/-/holocaust>
- Holocaust.cz, “The Genocide of the Roma and Sinti During the Second World War,” last updated October 16, 2020.
<https://www.holocaust.cz/en/history/the-genocide-of-the-roma-and-sinti-during-the-second-world-war/>
- Radio Prague International, “70th Anniversary Special--The Czech Resistance During World War II,” May 8, 2015.
<https://english.radio.cz/70th-anniversary-special-czech-resistance-during-world-war-ii-8260872>
- Vanda Rajcan, “The Slovak National Uprising of 1944,” National WW II Museum, September 12, 2023.
<https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/slovak-national-uprising-1944>
- United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Czechoslovakia.”
<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/czechoslovakia>
- United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Genocide of European Roma (Gypsies), 1939–1945,” last updated July 24, 2023.
<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/genocide-of-european-roma-gypsies-1939-1945>

Contact

For inquiries, please contact:
EPF Media - info@epfmedia.com

Copyright. The Study Guide is owned by EPF Media Group, LLC. You may use the Study Guide solely for personal or educational, non-commercial use, and you may download or print any portion of the Study Guide solely for personal or educational, non-commercial use, provided you do not remove the copyright or other notice from such Content. No other use is permitted without prior written permission of EPF Media Group, LLC.