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THE EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE

A Multi-Perspective History
of Modern Europe, 1500-2000



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2.2.1 Interethnic Relations in Early Modern History (ca. 1500–1800)

Benjamin Conrad, Tobias P. Graf, and Arndt Wille

Introduction

Contrary to nationalist narratives which generally postulated ethnic homogeneity within the boundaries of given nation-states, early modern Europe was ethnically diverse. This is most obvious in the case of territorially extensive polities such as the Habsburg and Ottoman realms, which are commonly referred to as ‘multi-ethnic empires’. However, significant ethnic diversity existed even in much smaller spaces. This makes twentieth- and twenty-first century conceptualisations of nationality as inadequate for understanding early modern ethnic relations as the concept of borders (see Chapter 1.2). When people in this period spoke about Germans, for instance, they meant not just the inhabitants of what we might think of today as the ‘German-speaking lands’ (Germany, Austria, and parts of Switzerland), but also populations living in Poland-Lithuania, Silesia, Bohemia, Croatia, Transylvania, and the Baltic. These demographics were not necessarily the result of recent migrations, but had existed for a significant period of time. While a combination of language and descent were important for contemporary understandings of ethnic belonging, other elements such as religion played an equally important role.

In a first step, this chapter discusses early modern conceptions of ethnic difference before investigating ethnic coexistence and conflict in Europe through the example of Poland-Lithuania. It then turns to a discussion of the status and treatment of Jews and the Romani people (often referred to as ‘gypsies’) at the hands of majority populations. The final section explores the place of European indigenous peoples such as the Sámi of Scandinavia.

Ethnicity in Early Modern History

From today's point of view, ethnicity appears to be a ubiquitous category in early modern texts of all genres. Contemporaries clearly distinguished between Germans, Italians, French, Poles, Turks, and so on, and there was considerable fascination with the different languages, customs (including dietary habits), 'national character' (reputations for ingenuity, servility, or violence, for example), and styles of dress associated with different 'peoples'. These interests are amply attested to by ethnographic descriptions included in geographical texts, travel accounts, and missionary reports, as well as numerous manuscripts and printed costume books. Characteristically, such works mixed first-hand observations to varying degrees with information extracted from authoritative ancient and biblical texts. Nevertheless, for most of the early modern period, there was no general theory or widely accepted concept of ethnicity in the modern sense, even as contemporaries freely used ethnonyms and grouped individuals into peoples and nations. These concepts frequently remained ambiguous, combining and conflating ethnic, geographic, linguistic, and religious identifications, while also sometimes providing shorthands for describing juridical subjecthood to a given ruler, such as the King of Spain. Ostensibly ethnic terms such as 'Turk' at once designated a Muslim and a subject of the Ottoman Sultan. The phrase 'to turn Turk' found in numerous European languages denoted religious conversion to Islam. Perhaps unsurprisingly, ethnonyms frequently served the purpose of constructing the otherness of different communities, especially to exclude perceived aliens such as Jews and Roma (see below).

The term *nation*, although used relatively frequently in early modern sources, did not imply the same degree of ethnic, linguistic, and political homogeneity associated with it from the late eighteenth century onwards (see Chapter 1.2). In administrative terms, a nation was usually a loose grouping of people of similar geographic, linguistic, and religious background. Although the Ottoman Empire, for instance, recognised a French 'merchant nation' under the commercial privileges (Ottoman Turkish: *'ahdname-i hümayun*) granted to the French king, these rules also governed English merchants until 1580 and thus did not necessarily coincide with political affiliations. As practical arrangements, such privileges regulated the assessment and collection of customs duties and taxes, as well as the resolution of conflict among merchants.

The shift towards a more systematic distinction of ethnic groups occurred only in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with the formulation of theories of race. Such attempts to establish a 'scientific' categorisation of human beings, which built on Carl Linnaeus's (1707–1778) system of taxonomy, were stimulated by European interactions with the inhabitants of other parts of the

world (see Chapter 1.4.1). In the process, the term *race*—which had previously, and rather vaguely, signified descent from a noble family, or could be used more generally as a synonym for *people* (especially in English)—acquired its modern meaning of membership in a biologically defined ethnic group, which nevertheless remained culturally and socially constructed. In spite of the scientific ideals of objective classification, proponents of race theory like Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) enshrined ideas of alterity, which could be used to provide justification for colonial rule and slavery. Such theories also encompassed minorities in Europe like the Scandinavian Sámi, whom Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon (1707–1788) judged to have “few virtues, and all the vices of ignorance”. Although very influential, such theories provide no insight into the practical organisation of interethnic relations in Europe.

The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as an Example of an Early Modern Multiethnic Polity

While there is much that is unique about the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the cohabitation of multiple ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups observed here, as well as the institutions and policies adopted in relation to ethnic diversity, in many respects resemble those found in other early modern empires like Russia, Habsburg-ruled Southeast Europe, and the Ottoman Empire. After the Union of Poland and Lithuania in 1569, the Commonwealth was one of the six largest European polities. Although formally an elective monarchy, contemporaries already referred to Poland-Lithuania as the ‘Republic of Poland’ (*Rzeczpospolita*) because of the great political influence of the wealthiest part of the nobility, the Magnates. The Union brought together a staggering variety of beliefs and languages. Roman and Greek Catholics formed the dominant religious groups but there were also large numbers of Jews, Greek Catholics, and Protestants in the country. Polish and Ruthenian (a relative of today’s Ukrainian and Belarusian languages) were the most important Slavonic languages spoken in the Commonwealth besides Lithuanian. In addition, the population included a considerable number of German and Yiddish speakers.

At the beginning of the early modern period, the population of Poland was estimated to consist of around seventy percent Poles, fifteen percent Ruthenians, and at least ten percent Germans, with the rest comprised of Armenians, Jews, Karaites, Romani, Tatars, Vlachs and others. After the Union with Lithuania, Poles still formed about fifty percent of the overall population, whereas forty percent were Lithuanians and Ruthenians, with the remaining ten percent made up of Germans, Jews, non-Lithuanian Balts, and other ethnicities.

It is worth noting that these groups were differentiated not only by their languages and religions, but also by their professions and their geographic distribution. The diversity of the Polish-Lithuanian population was further increased by the immigration of groups of Dutch, Italians, and Scots, some of which enjoyed limited forms of communal autonomy. In fact, the only group never granted such a status were the Roma, whom the Poles regarded as economically, socially, and politically unimportant. The greatest measure of autonomy was accorded to the Jewish community, which had the right to administer its members across Poland-Lithuania independent of their specific places of residence. Similar arrangements, allowing even for a measure of state-enforceable jurisdiction in internal matters, existed for Christian and Jewish communities in the Ottoman Empire, as well as for expatriates such as merchants officially recognised by the Ottoman sultans. This model was at times applied to settler communities within Europe, such as the Huguenot immigrants to various German states (see Chapter 1.3.1).

Such multi-cultural, multi-lingual, and multi-religious societies were not free from conflict. Throughout the early modern period, Poland-Lithuania witnessed several riots over ethnic and communal differences and, occasionally, minorities were expelled. This happened, for example, to the Protestant Socinian Society, also called the Polish Brethren, during the Polish-Swedish War (1655–1660). The Socinians afterwards took refuge in the Netherlands, the non-Polish part of Prussia, and Transylvania, which provided a safe haven for a number of radical Protestant groups from all over Europe (see Chapter 1.3.1).

The relative political weakness of Poland-Lithuania's royal government and the limited power of its king in this period is comparable perhaps only to the situation in the Holy Roman Empire. This potentially gave individual groups greater bargaining power here than elsewhere in Europe, but the overall pattern of organisation and cohabitation was by no means unique.

Outsiders Within: Jews and Roma

'Stateless' and scattered across numerous countries, Jews and Roma were often referred to as strangers within, troublemakers, or enemies by the dominant societies of early modern Europe. However, a clear ethnic, social, or religious classification was considered difficult: Jews, who formed the largest minority in early modern Europe, were understood as both an ethnic *and* a religious community. Their position was fraught with a great deal of ambivalence. While Christian majority societies sometimes regarded them as witnesses of faith who were worthy of protection, Jews were also aggressively stigmatised as blasphemers and diabolical evildoers, or even held responsible for the death of Christ. And although customs, rites, laws, and languages (including

Yiddish, Judaeo-Italian, Judaeo-Spanish, and Hebrew) ensured a distinct Jewish identity, strict segregation was a concern for Christians (and to some extent, for Jews themselves).

Segregationist measures came to an unprecedented climax with the expulsion of the Sephardic Jews from Spain in 1492: after the conquest of Granada (then the last remaining Islamic kingdom in the Iberian Peninsula), the Spanish monarchs sought to homogenise their ethnically and religiously highly diverse subject populations. Sephardic Jews faced the choice of either baptism or execution if they refused to leave Spain. A similar measure in 1609 targeted Spanish Muslims (called Moriscos) and their descendants, feared to be an Ottoman ‘fifth column’ (see Chapter 1.3.1). Both policies triggered massive migratory movements. While most Moriscos went to North Africa, the Jews scattered more widely, moving to Portugal (where they were in turn evicted in 1496/1497), the Ottoman Empire, North Africa, Italy, and some cities in northern Europe. Even those Iberian Jews who opted for conversion so that they were allowed to stay (the so-called *conversos*) were suspected of ‘crypto-Judaism’ by the Spanish Inquisition. Furthermore, the proto-racist concept of *limpieza de sangre* (‘purity of blood’) functioned to preserve clear socio-symbolic boundaries between Old and New Christians.

While the expulsion of 1492 was unprecedented in its scale, European Jews had been subjected to regular expulsions across the continent since the Middle Ages. Such measures were later frequently replaced by resettlement policies, enacted by European rulers seeking economic and fiscal benefits from the skills, commerce, and financial networks of Jewish people.

Where the presence of Jews was tolerated, ecclesiastical and secular authorities made frequent attempts from the Middle Ages onwards to visually distinguish Jews from Christians, through distinctive clothing and markings such as the yellow badge. Separate streets and city quarters—notably the Venetian Ghetto established in 1516 and the segregation measures implemented in the Papal States by Pope Paul IV (1476–1559) in 1555—created largely separate spheres of life. Legislation aimed at Jews was passed to regulate everyday interactions with Christians, for example by prohibiting unregulated interreligious disputations and sexual contact. Jews were excluded from membership in the guilds and numerous other fields of employment such as agriculture. Nevertheless, these laws and ordinances also protected Jewish life, in combination with the existing grants of safety of body and property as well as limited rights of communal self-administration. As peddlers, pawnbrokers, cattle dealers, merchants, luxury traders, glaziers, goldsmiths, lenders, and doctors—or as court Jews, Hebrew teachers, and also as friends and lovers—Jews were an essential part of Christian societies in spite of their segregation. The true emancipation of Jews, however, did not occur until the end of the

early modern period, during the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, or, in some areas, even later.

Like the Jews, the Roma, who had come to Western Europe at the beginning of the fifteenth century, soon faced considerable mistrust. As pilgrims equipped with papal, imperial, and local safe-conducts, groups of Roma were initially welcomed in most parts of Europe. Yet by the turn of the sixteenth century elites began questioning the narrative of the penitential pilgrims. The Roma were described as ‘strange’ in terms of skin colour, language, and their high mobility (although the latter was often the result of necessity rather than choice). Contradictory ethnic labels such as ‘Egyptians’, ‘Gypsies’ and ‘Tatars’ — the Romani word Roma does not appear in early modern sources — as well as frequent (but incorrect) abuse of the Roma as ‘heathens’ all point to the difficulties contemporaries found in placing the ‘new’ minority into any clear category. Over the course of the early modern period, some commentators came to doubt that they were a people in their own right, claiming, among other things, that Romani identity had simply been assumed by vagabonds, thieves, and robbers.

By the sixteenth century, Roma communities increasingly fell victim to marginalisation and discrimination. Stigmatising accusations of laziness, dishonesty, theft, robbery, fraud, espionage, magical practices, and bargaining with the devil made their situation much more difficult. In addition, numerous European territories tried to expel the Roma under the regulations of ‘poor laws’, which were aimed especially at itinerant groups. Despite these hardships, Roma worked as blacksmiths, basket makers, horse traders, construction and farm workers, traders, healers, entertainers, miners, soldiers, and even in law enforcement. They were often highly specialised workers and thus played a complex role in most early modern European societies, meaning that their history cannot be reduced to persecution.

The status and fate of the Roma as a group—or, more precisely, as a wide range of communities—also varied over time and space. While those living in Hungary were at times more firmly integrated into feudal structures and faced less marginalisation, Roma communities were enslaved for several centuries in the principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia. After a period of extensive persecution during the eighteenth century, a few countries launched new disciplinary policies to aggressively integrate and assimilate the Roma. In addition to older Spanish settlement initiatives, the ‘enlightened’ rulers of the Habsburg Empire, Maria Theresa (1717–1780) and Joseph II (1741–1790), enforced a rigid settlement policy (particularly in Burgenland in present-day eastern Austria) which also aimed at undermining Romani collective identity.

Unlike in the case of the Jews, the situation of the Roma witnessed few substantial improvements even as the early modern period came to a close.

Europe's Indigenous Peoples

Ambivalence also characterised the dealings of majority populations with ethnic groups today recognised as indigenous peoples within Europe, such as the Tatars in Poland-Lithuania, the Sorbs in Poland and Germany, or the Sámi in northern Scandinavia. Among these groups, the Sámi deserve particular attention because they formed one of the last remaining European groups of pre-Christian faith. The largely (but not exclusively) nomadic, reindeer-herding Sámi inhabited territories divided between Russia, Denmark-Norway, and Sweden. Especially as suppliers of expensive furs, many Sámi groups were closely integrated into commercial networks in all three polities. Although Christian missions to the Sámi had already been undertaken in the Middle Ages, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw a renewal of state-backed Christianisation efforts by Swedish and Norwegian Protestants as well as Russian Orthodox monks. Intended to stamp out pagan beliefs, missionaries undertook considerable efforts to seek out and destroy traditional religious sites while establishing new churches in Sámi settlements.

Even in the eighteenth century, the Sámi (who were called Laplanders at the time) had a reputation for witchcraft and magic which seems to have been connected to traditional shamanic practices interpreted by the Christian clergy and rulers as devil worship. Although King Christian IV of Denmark and Norway (1577–1648) issued a decree calling for the vigorous persecution of Sámi witchcraft in 1609, the number of Sámi accused of this crime was relatively low, suggesting that, despite their reputation, the Sámi were not particularly vulnerable to allegations of witchcraft.

Both witchcraft persecutions and renewed missionary efforts need to be seen in the context of attempts by Swedish and Danish-Norwegian monarchs to increase control over the Sámi through taxation and trade. Especially in the eighteenth century, the Scandinavian crowns promoted the influx of Finnish and Swedish settlers, with the aim of developing their northern territories agriculturally, while an increasing number of Sámi abandoned their nomadic lifestyle to take up farming and animal husbandry. The same period, however, also witnessed an expansion of Sámi reindeer herding, which continued to require a nomadic lifestyle.

Politically, the Sámi nomads played a key role in the attempts of Denmark-Norway and Sweden to delineate their common borders, since claims to territorial control were linked to usage of the land by the subjects of the respective

monarchs. The so-called Lapp Codicil, an addendum to the Strömstad Treaty (concluded in 1751), protected the nomadic lifestyle of Sámi reindeer herders by recognising their right to cross this border in order to access pastures and other key resources, even in times of war. At the same time, however, the requirement that herders fixed their juridical subjecthood, along with the subsequent hardening of the borders between Norway, Sweden, and Russia, increased the pressure on them to assimilate to the majority populations and submit to the authority of the respective states.

Conclusion

People living in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries were aware of the ethnic diversity of Europe, even if what we today refer to as ethnic categories were more fluid at that time. Ethnicity, ‘peoplehood’, and ‘nation’ did not have the same political significance ascribed to them by nineteenth- and twentieth-century nationalism, and different ethnic groups (defined by geographic origins, language, cultural practices, and religion) coexisted in all European polities. Of course, such coexistence was not necessarily always peaceful, and there were significant power asymmetries between different groups. Especially marginalised minorities such as Jews and the Romani people were generally disadvantaged and abused. On the other hand, their identities as distinct groups—imposed from the outside by European majority populations as much as they were constructed from the inside by members of such communities—did at times afford them a degree of protection and autonomy, especially when early modern authorities considered it expedient. This model of relative communal autonomy with direct relations to the ruler was characteristic not only of Poland-Lithuania but also most other multi-ethnic polities. To some extent, this principle also extended to Europe’s indigenous peoples such as the Sámi. However, the right of self-administration also existed in tension with rulers’ attempts to increase their control over their subjects, mobilise their resources, and homogenise their beliefs. In this sense, therefore, interethnic relations in early modern Europe were precarious, unstable, and subject to change over time. They remained volatile after 1800 when nationalist and racist ideologies took early modern scientific theories of race to the extreme, in order to justify exploitation, colonisation, violence, and even extermination in Europe and overseas. Long before that, Europe’s deepening entanglements with lands and peoples beyond its shores had already given rise to a growing presence of people from distant countries—the result of conquest, enslavement, and religious missions. In the sixteenth century, for instance, Sevilla was home to a sizeable community of people of

African descent. Thus Europe's ethnic diversity further increased in the early modern period.

Discussion questions

1. How does the early modern concept of nation differ from our present-day understanding of the term?
2. How did early modern governments deal with ethnic diversity in Europe in the early modern period?
3. How did the status and experiences of different 'ethnic groups' in Europe vary in the early modern period?
4. How can we account for the hostility shown towards minority populations?

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