

FROM PROVERBIAL PEST TO “ALIEN RACE”:
THE TREATMENT OF “GYPSIES” IN CZECHOSLOVAK
CRIMINAL SCIENCE (1918-1939)

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A lot of time has passed since the 1990s, when a heated and controversial debate about concentration camps in Lety near Písek and in Hodonín near Kunštát began in the Czech Republic, and quite a few historical studies devoted to this topic have appeared meanwhile. The present article seeks to take the ongoing debate a step further by analyzing the descriptions of persons characterized as “Gypsies” in Czechoslovak police and gendarmerie journals, textbooks and handbooks. The use of the “Gypsy” label is examined by the author with regard to the development of police forces (state police and gendarmerie) and of criminal science in Czechoslovakia during the First and Second Republic. On this basis, he comes to the conclusion that a radicalization (racial allocation becoming increasingly important) of the “Gypsy” notion occurred in the 1920s and 1930s. In this context, the 1927 law on “vagrant Gypsies” was especially important, as it legitimized the use of fingerprints (dactyloscopy) for the registration of those who were labeled as Gypsies.