



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

Research Report

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I. Topic of Research

Making “Gypsies” Soviet:

Nationality Policy, Social Practice, & the Roma of the Soviet Union, 1917-1939

In the first two decades of the Soviet empire, nationality policies were designed in accordance with the belief that even the most “backward” -- indeed, even the most historically reviled -- minority peoples could be “uplifted” and transformed into enlightened bearers of Soviet socialism. Roma were not exceptions to this rule. My dissertation investigates Soviet nationality policies as they applied to Roma in the USSR between the years 1917 and 1939, and examines the various ways in which Roma’s subjectivities were transformed by living within the Soviet empire. I explore the many ways Roma engaged Sovietism on an everyday basis, shaped or reshaped aspects of Soviet culture, and attempted (consciously or not) to work the system to fit their own needs. My exploration of Roma’s everyday maneuverings in the multiethnic Soviet empire sheds light on how the politics of nationality in the early Soviet Union worked “on the ground,” and on how nationality policies affected both Roma’s self-understandings and social practices.

II. Relevance & Contribution to the Field

My dissertation will contribute to the field of Soviet history, the more general and comparative study of empires, and also to the growing field of Romani studies

A. Contemporary scholars such as Francine Hirsch, Terry Martin, Yuri Slezkine, and Ronald Suny have in recent years traced the general trajectories of early Soviet nationality policies and have also posed provocative questions as to the meaning these policies have carried into the present day. The formation of minority subjectivities in the early Soviet period, however, has not been fully explored. While building from previous scholars' work, my investigation of Roma as Soviet subjects-in-the-making will extend beyond a study of Soviet nationality policies, their ideological bases and the methods and arguable outcomes of the execution of such policies. My project will explore how the politics of nationality in the Soviet Union was central to the transformation of Roma's subjectivities and will thereby expand present understandings of the Soviet Union as empire and "civilization" (Kotkin: 1995).

B. Over the past two decades, many historians of the Soviet Union have devoted considerable attention to studying the Soviet Union as a multiethnic empire. Inspired both by the disintegration of the USSR itself and a broader disciplinary trend of studying (often comparatively) empire-state formations, colonial projects, and imperial policies and practices, these historians have contributed greatly to present understandings of the Soviet Union and inspired a number of important – and lively – debates. Much of this new historiography, however, has focused primarily on imperial Soviet policies and their ideological bases, on the practices of Soviet officials engaged in the overall task of consolidating the empire, or on the possible correlations between Soviet nationality policies and the demise of the USSR itself. Within these broader frames, questions of gender and religion have also been explored in various parts of the empire.

While building from this historiography, my project will focus not only on Soviet nationality policies, but on the subjects of those policies – specifically, on one "official nationality": Roma. I will concentrate both on the opportunities made available and unavailable to this minority people within the imperial Soviet framework, and on how Roma's various engagements with Sovietism may have transformed their self-understandings as Soviet citizens, and as "Gypsies." Moving beyond questions of ideology, the intricacies of discrete policies, and issues of nationalism (assumed or otherwise), my project will highlight social practices and subjectivities in order to explore how "living like a gypsy" may have been transformed by living within the Soviet empire.

C. The goal of informing the expanding field of Romani Studies is not tangential, but central to my project. Much of the work produced by scholars of Romani cultures and histories has focused on the persecution and victimization of Roma and not on Roma themselves. The standard research questions posed by many practitioners of Romani Studies are consistently directed at probing the how and why of discrimination, racism, and genocide, and/or aimed at understanding how "Gypsies" have successfully managed to refuse assimilation into majority cultures.

A related problem that persists within the field of Romani Studies is the tendency of scholars to treat Roma as belonging to a homogenous group sharing a singular "Romani culture" that necessarily separates them from majority populations. Such homogenizing conceptualizations help to perpetuate the myth of "Gypsies" occupying a world apart, marginalized in the extreme from the societies operating ostensibly around

them. The myth of the impenetrable “Gypsy world” has prevented many scholars from analyzing Roma as social actors in their own right.

Recently, however, a handful of scholars – anthropologists in particular – have begun to pay attention to Roma as social agents who have lived (and acted) in various ways in various times and places. In the field of Russian and Soviet Studies, anthropologist Alaina Lemon’s pioneering study of Roma in post-Soviet Russia has marked an important scholarly shift from treating Roma as victims, to Roma as social agents. Lemon’s work has also served to highlight the differences – linguistic and otherwise – that many Roma perceive between themselves and other Romani groups living within the boundaries of the Russian Federation. This revisionist trend has helped to redirect the field onto a path that may yet release Romani Studies from disciplinary isolation and provide students, researchers, and activists alike with a better understanding of Roma and their histories – including those they share and have shaped with others.

III. Research Methodology & Research Sites

In St. Petersburg, I divided my time between the following three research institutions: the archive of the Russian Ethnographic Museum (REM), the St. Petersburg filial of the archive of the Russian Academy of Sciences (PFA RAN), and the Russian National Library (RNB). Additionally, I worked at the following provincial archives: the State Archive of Smolensk Oblast’ (GASO); the State Archive of Krasnodar Krai (GAKK) and Kuban State University (Krasnodar); the State Archive of Volgograd Oblast’ (GAVO), the State Archive of Tver’ Oblast’ (GATO); and the Oryel State Literary Museum of I.S. Turgenev (OGLMT).

The types of materials I worked with varied in accordance with their place of origin and authorship. In St. Petersburg, at the REM and at the PFA RAN, I examined materials created by ethnographers working in the service of the Soviet state and focused on how these ethnographers wrote about, described, and “catalogued” the empire’s Romani populations. At the REM, I also examined documents surrounding the Museum’s short-lived “Ethnographic Theater,” and the Theater’s Romani performances and performers in particular. At the RNB, I worked with published primary source materials that had not been available to me previously in Moscow. These included the published writings of Romani activists (fiction and non-fiction) as well as original copies of the short-lived Romani-language periodicals, *Nevo Drom* and *Romany Zoria*.

In the provincial state archives, I primarily worked with materials that documented daily life on Romani collective farms in the late 1920s and 1930s. I also closely examined the relationships between central state organs in Moscow and local and regional administrative centers and studied these relationships’ effects on the carrying out of nationality policies “on the periphery.”

AT OGLMT, I worked with the personal *fond* of a prominent Romani activist, leader, *intelligent*, and author. In addition to working with his unpublished reflections on Soviet nationality policy and measures to “enlighten ‘Gypsies’” in the 1920s and 1930s, I also focused on the series of autobiographic notes that he composed and revised at various stages of his life.

IV. Summary of Research Findings & Preliminary Conclusions

A. In my research proposal, I expected to find that Roma were “put on display” at the Russian Ethnographic Museum (REM) at some point in the 1920s and 1930s. Working in the REM archive, I discovered that Roma were not made an object of study in the Museum’s stationary exhibits at any time between 1917 and 1939. At the Museum’s “ethnographic evenings” (discussed in the work of Francine Hirsch), Soviet ethnographers did not lecture or discuss the history of Roma in Russia or the Soviet Union. In a discussion with a present-day staff member of the REM, I was informed that Roma have never occupied a place in the Museum’s permanent exhibits, nor have Roma ever been treated to any significant extent in temporary exhibits. The ethnographer A.P. Barranikov, however, was commissioned by the REM and the Academy of Sciences to travel to Ukraine to study Roma in selected areas in the late 1920s.

As I had expected, Roma did enter the history of the REM in a different way: they performed as members of the short-lived “Ethnographic Theater” (an arm of the Museum in the early 1930s). As I had asserted in my proposal, Soviet officials viewed Roma as a people “naturally” suited to display the “ethnographic present,” and perhaps more importantly, “the ethnographic past” on stage as they performed “genuinely national” dances and songs. The REM archive does document the Romani theatrical troupe that performed “Gypsiness” at the Museum in the 1930s and that would later splinter off into an independent “ethnographic ensemble.”

This finding, in particular, provides important insight into Soviet officialdom’s general assumption that “Gypsies” could best “civilize” other “Gypsies” through the medium of theater. Whereas the *Teatr Romen* (established in Moscow in 1931) enjoyed popular and official support – despite various recognized failures and shortcomings – throughout the 1930s, the Romani ensemble that performed in the REM’s Ethnographic Theater was widely criticized and, worse, charged with advancing each and every “bourgeois sin” of the so-called *tsyganshchina*. Comparing the performances and the fates of the Romani performers of the REM and those of *Teatr Romen* in my dissertation will provide a platform on which not only the politics of nationality, but also the politics of performance can be discussed and analyzed.

B. One of the most important research goals I established for this trip was to thoroughly investigate the Romani collective farms that were established in the late 1920s and which operated (for better or for worse) throughout the 1930s. In a previous research trip during which I had conducted research at the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) and the State Archive of the Economy (RGAE), I worked with a number of documents that discussed Romani collective farms located on the outskirts of Smolensk, Volgograd, Krasnodar, and in other locales. These central state archives, however, for the most part only offered me a surface view of what was going on in the fields of these Romani collective farms. Research conducted at the provincial archives, as I had surmised, was essential for discussions of various Romani experiences outside the empire’s urban centers.

Documentation of life on Romani collective farms found in these provincial archives has helped to fill the many gaps that had afflicted my previous research. In these archives, I found minutes of meetings held by members of Romani collective farms, transcripts of speeches that Romani kolkhozniks made at local minority peoples’ conferences, and evidence that abandonment was a far greater problem than had been

reported in the central state archives (in the sense that Romani kolkhozniks often chose to abandon the collective farms and to resume previous nomadic modes of living). These documents also reveal tensions between Romani members of the farms with non-Romani members, as well as tensions between committed Romani kolkhozniks and so-called “saboteurs.” As I had previously asserted in my research proposal, I believe that this research will help provide others with a fuller picture of how nationality policies affected minority people’s lives and subjectivities on the “periphery” of the Soviet empire.

C. Work conducted at OGLMT will also prove crucial for my dissertation. The autobiographic statements produced by my subject – in that they were not written with any expectation of publication – will, I believe, prove far more valuable for my investigation of transformations in Roma’s subjectivities than, for example, other published memoirs that I will also be using as primary sources.

D. My study of Romani-language periodicals (which I examined in their original form and, in certain instances, in Russian-language translation) as well as the work of the ethnographer A.P. Barranikov have helped to complete the picture and my analysis of the Moscow-based Romani intelligentsia and their “public enlightenment” activism in the 1920s and 1930s.

V. Suggestions for Future Research Agenda

“Soviet nationality policy” and “the Soviet Union as Empire” -- as broad topics of research, investigation, and analysis -- will continue to invite scholars into the archives in future years, and I believe there are many important questions that remain to be asked.

For my own project, I focused on one “official nationality:” Roma. While conducting my research, however, I many times took note of the fact that Romani citizens were also brought into contact with other minority peoples as a result of measures to “enlighten” this “small, backward” group. In clubs, “red corners,” national-language schools, theaters, etc, Roma were brought into relationships with Koreans, Assyrians, Romanians, Greeks, and other minority peoples who shared the Roma’s ascribed status as a “small and/or backward” people within the empire. According to theory, each of these nationalities separately deserved the attention and resources of Soviet officials and “enlighteners.” Often, the resources and attention that the Soviet ideal required were not, in actuality, directed toward smaller nationalities. Thus, many “nationality” projects and measures existed only on paper. At other times, however, Serbian and Romani students, for example, would be lumped together into one “Romani-language school.” Certain “Gypsy cooperatives” in Moscow were, in fact, primarily staffed by Russian workers, while other “Gypsy collective farms” were populated by a wide array of nationalities.

Many “national” institutions that were created in the 1920s and 1930s were often “national” (in the sense of serving and/or “enlightening” one nationality) in name only. Many of them were, in fact, multicultural and international spaces in which representatives of various nationalities worked with one other, lived with one another, intermarried, competed against, and fought amongst one another. In looking specifically at these types of intercultural social spaces, it would be interesting to ask: to what extent did the short-term promises of nationality policy (advancement, opportunities, cultural institutions for the formerly “oppressed” and “backward”) undermine and/or advance the

long-term ideal of nationality policy (the erasure of “nationality” and the triumph of unitary socialism)?

VI. Recommendations for U.S. Policy Community

Abuse and mistreatment of minorities living and working in today’s Russian Federation deserves more attention; this applies as equally to Roma as it does to many others. Human rights abuses are not uncommon in today’s Russia, and such abuses in some instances continue to take institutionalized forms. Stereotypes of Roma that persisted in my period of study (1917-1939) continue to thrive today (“Gypsies” as innate swindlers and criminals), while new stereotypes have emerged in the post-Soviet era (“Gypsies” as the lords of the narcotics trade in Russia). Speaking most broadly, the U.S. policy community should not turn a blind eye to the continued growth of violent nationalist and fascist movements or recent spates of hate crimes perpetrated in today’s Russia. Likewise, the U.S. policy community should not underestimate or ignore the stranglehold placed on the NGO sector in Russia.

U.S. policymakers may also wish to pay attention to the Open Society Institute’s initiative, “Decade of Roma Inclusion” [2005-2015], [<http://www.romadecade.org/>], as well as to the work of the European Roma Rights Council [<http://www.errc.org/>]. Both seek, among other priorities, to combat discrimination and human rights abuses committed against Roma in Europe.