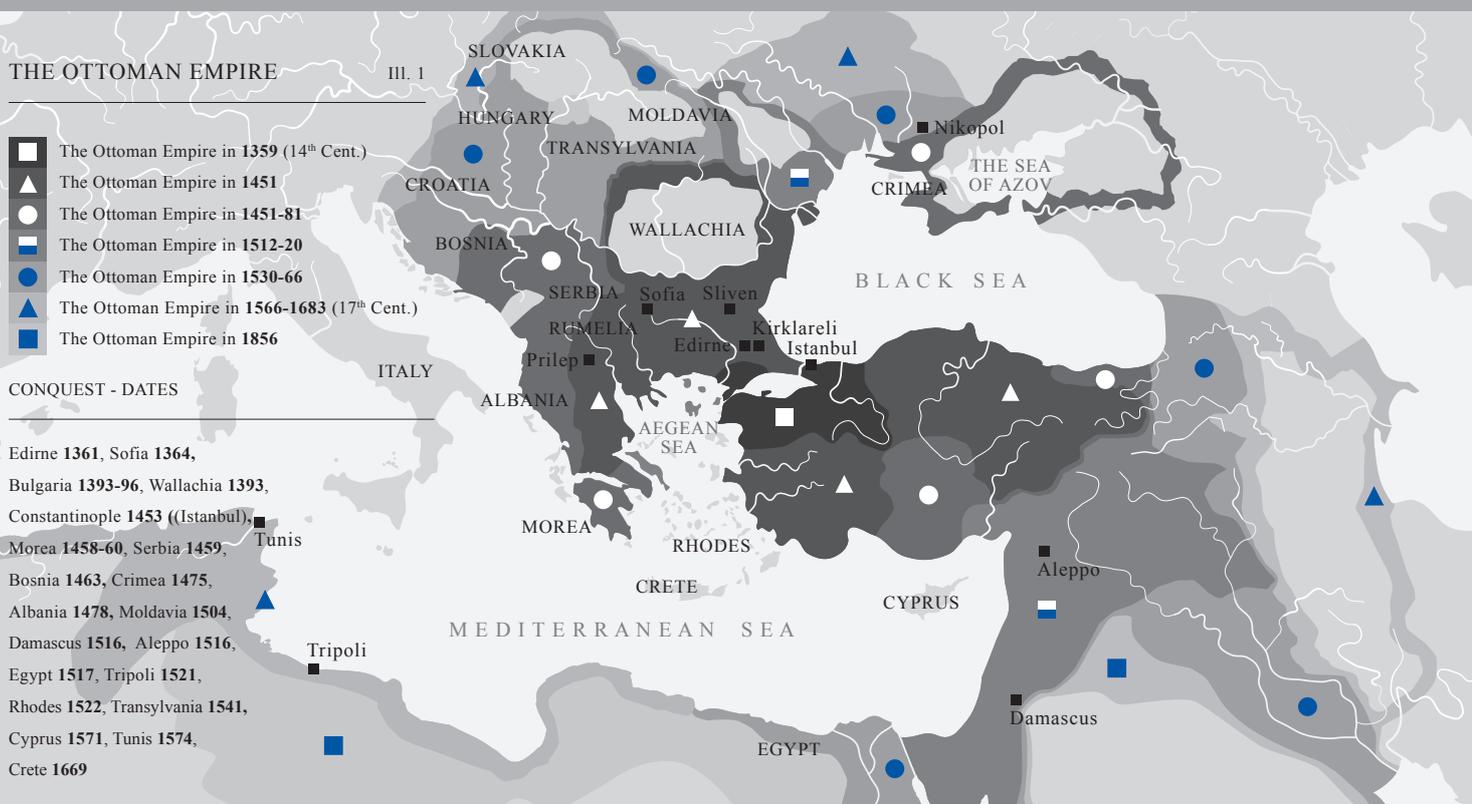


Ottoman Empire

Elena Marushiakova / Veselin Popov

Historical Sources about the “Gypsies” in the Empire | The “Gypsies” in the Tax Registers | Law Concerning the “Gypsies” in the Province of Rumelia | The “Gypsy Sanjak” – Roma in the Ottoman Army | The “Gypsy Sanjak” – Roma in Army Auxiliary Services | The Tax Register of Sultan Suleiman I the Magnificent | Measures against Nomadism. Settling the “Gypsies” | How the Roma Earned their Living | The Decline of the Ottoman Empire | Civic Status of the “Gypsies”. Official Legislation and Everyday Reality | The Beginning of Roma Emancipation

➤ *The Roma in the Balkans did not live isolated from their cultural and historical surroundings; on the contrary, they were an integral part of it and consequently were greatly influenced by the various Balkan peoples. Significant numbers of Roma have remained in the Balkans for centuries, others migrated from there throughout the world in past and modern times, taking with them inherited Balkan cultural models and traditions. The Ottoman Empire dominated the Balkans for over five centuries and made a distinct impression on the culture and history of the region. Thus the role of the Ottoman Empire is a key factor in the process of the formation and development of the Roma people.*



INTRODUCTION

The Ottoman Empire (1299-1922) had a great influence on the overall course of world history as well as the specific historical fate of a number of peoples who were part of it for

longer or shorter periods of time. Experts on Roma often say that the Balkans are “the second home of the Roma”, thus emphasising the important role the Balkans played in shaping the history, culture and language of the Roma. The majority

of the Roma population of the Ottoman Empire was concentrated in the Balkans, and thus the Balkans have a particular meaning for their historical fate, and for understanding the contemporary situation of the community.

Historical Sources about the “Gypsies” in the Empire

The “Gypsies” in the Tax Registers

Law Concerning the “Gypsies” in the Province of Rumelia

The “Gypsy Sanjak” – Roma in the Ottoman Army

Some of the most important paragraphs of the “Law concerning the Gypsies in the Province of Rumelia”, issued by Sultan Suleiman I the Magnificent read as follows:

- 1. The Muslim Gypsies from Stambul, Edirne and elsewhere in Rumelia pay 22 akche for each household and each unmarried person. The infidels (Christian) Gypsies pay 25 akche, and, as for widows, they pay one akche tax.*
- 2. They pay marriage fees as well as the fines for crimes and wrongdoings as do the rest of the subject people. [...]*
- 3. The Gypsies who show obstinacy and stray from their judicial district, hiding in another district as well as in backyards, are to be found, admonished, strictly punished and brought back to their district. [...]*
- 4. The fines, the usual taxes and penalties for severe criminal offences imposed on Gypsies by the Gypsy sanjak, belong to the chief of the Gypsy sanjak. No one from the local administration or the military should interfere. Exceptions to this are the Gypsies who are recorded as villains in the prebends, fiefdoms, fiefs and the sultan's lands.*
- 5. The taxes on the Gypsies from the above-mentioned feudal lands are collected from the Gypsies' leader. The chief of the Gypsy sanjak, the chiefs of the regions in each province, the police and others have no right to interfere with them.*
- 6. If Muslim Gypsies begin to nomadise with non-Muslim Gypsies, live with them and mix with them, they should be admonished; after being punished, the infidel Gypsies pay their taxes as usual.*
- 7. Those Gypsies who are in possession of an authorisation from the sultan are to pay only the sultan's tax and do not pay land tax ... and the other usual taxes.”*

III. 2 (abbreviated from Marushiakova / Popov 2001, p.32)

HISTORICAL SOURCES ABOUT THE “GYPSIES” IN THE EMPIRE

The first migration of Roma into Asia Minor and the Balkans, in the lands of the Byzantine Empire, dates back well before the 14th century. Large numbers of Roma arrived in the Balkans later at the time of the Ottoman invasions in the 14th-15th century. They were either directly taking part in the invasions (mainly as auxiliary soldiers or as

craftsmen serving in the army), or were among the population which accompanied the invasions. Some of these Roma went along with the army further into Europe, but a considerable number remained in the Balkans.

They figure in various official documents of the Ottoman government and local administration, mainly in detailed tax registers, as well as in numerous court orders relating to a variety of matters (civic, economic, religious and family). The Ottoman social, political and economic system was an extre-

mely complex and interlocking military-based administrative, economic and religious structure. This complicated system encompassed the entire population and strictly controlled their daily life. The inhabitants were also classed hierarchically into various categories, the main two being the “true believers” (the Muslims) and the “infidels” (the subjected Christian population). These categories were treated differently, the members of each having a different status and varying obligations towards the central state.

THE “GYPSIES” IN THE TAX REGISTERS

All subjects of the Ottoman Empire were obliged to pay different taxes and were described in numerous tax registers. The existing Ottoman documents reflect in great detail the desire of the administration to incorporate the “Gypsy” population into its registers and to make them pay the necessary taxes. The “Gypsies” were fully described by age, occupation and family status and, according to these and other factors, were grouped into tax units (“jemaats”), each with its respective leader; the communities in turn were divided into smaller units, based on the Roma

quarter in each village or town. Each of these units had its own leader, meaning that, here, the principle of limited group responsibility was applied.

The very first mention of “Gypsies” in the tax documentation of the Ottoman Empire dates from 1430 and is found in the Register of Timars (a kind of land property) for the Nikopol “sanjak” (territorial unit), in which 431 “Gypsy” households are registered, 3.5% of the total listed. From this first register and from later historical documents it becomes clear that the majority of “Gypsies” there were settled and were differentiated by their ethnicity, and not by their way of life.

In many cases the “Gypsies” were included in common tax registers of the

respective territorial units, for instance in the collection of laws and regulations relating to the population of the Province of Rumelia (including almost the entire Balkan peninsula) from 1475 during the time of Mehmet II Fatih (The Conqueror). There are also special registers preserved, concerning only “Gypsies”, such as the tax register for the Christian “Gypsies”, paying “jizie” (a poll tax for non-Muslims) from 1487-1489. It records 3,237 “Gypsy” households plus a further 211 widows' households. The register in question has a special regulation dating from 1491 attached to it which reflected the poll tax dues, and also further specified taxation, e. g. the “ispenche” (a land tax for Christians, i.e. the settled “Gypsies”). The



III. 3
Decree of Sultan Selim II in 1574 (from Marushiakova / Popov 2001, p. 33) (Detail)

Sultan Selim II's decree reads:

“The Gypsy communities who are found in Bosnia are entirely freed from the personal tax (m’af), from the other occasional taxes (takalif-i yorfiye), and from any additional taxes (avariz). For the above mentioned Gypsies, one of their own should be elected and appointed for each group of 50 to be the leader (jemaat bashi). No one should interfere in his affairs, or limit him in any way. If anyone should break the law, they should be detained and, provided that guarantees are given by the community, and by its leader, there should be an oral hearing.”

III. 4
(abbreviated from Marushiakova / Popov 2001, p. 34)

data on large numbers of settled Christian “Gypsies” indicate that they have settled in these lands before the Ottoman

conquest, when the predominant religion was Christianity. Judging from the regions mentioned, the Christian “Gypsies”

apparently predominated in the region of Thrace (which roughly corresponds with the European part of modern Turkey).

LAW CONCERNING THE “GYPSIES” IN THE PROVINCE OF RUMELIA

Sultan Suleiman I the Magnificent who ruled the empire during its glory (1520-1566) issued a special “Law concerning the Gypsies in the Province of Rumelia” in 1530. This law helps us to a better understanding of the information gleaned from the tax registers. [III. 2]

The rules included in the law demonstrate once more the special place of the Roma in relation to the two main categories in the Ottoman Empire – the “true believers” and “the infidels”. All of the “Gypsies”, irrespective of whether they were Christians or Mus-

lims, paid a poll tax, which was collected only from the non-Muslims. The Christian “Gypsies” had to pay slightly higher taxes than the Muslim ones, but the discrepancies in the taxes between the different categories of “Gypsies” were not clearly and coherently outlined. An exception was made for those “Gypsies” who were included in the so-called “Gypsy sanjak”, including those involved in providing services to the army – for example the “Gypsies” who lived in fortresses and maintained them, the blacksmiths making or repairing different kinds of arms, the military musicians and other auxiliary troops. [III. 5]

In addition, this law reveals the ambition of the Ottoman administration

to ensure that taxes were collected in full from everyone, including the itinerant “Gypsies”. In this respect, the clear tendency to encourage members of the “Gypsy” communities to be responsible for the collection of taxes as guarantors of their payment on time deserves special attention. At the same time, the responsibility for any possible non-payment of obligations to the authorities was in the hands of these members of the “Gypsy” community. This is confirmed by further evidence, for example a decree by Sultan Selim II in 1574, which obliged “Gypsy” mine workers from Banya Luka, who enjoyed a special status, to form groups of fifty, each group choosing its leader who was responsible to the authorities. [Ills. 3, 4]

THE “GYPSY SANJAK” – ROMA IN THE OTTOMAN ARMY

The “Law concerning the Gypsies in the Province of Rumelia” confirms the special administrative legal status and

the extended rights to taxation self-government for those living in the “Gypsy sanjak”. Dating from 1541, there was also a special law concerning the leader of the “Gypsy sanjak”. This institution originated in Anatolia but was modified to suit the “Gypsies” in the Balkans. In this case “sanjak” is not used in the

usual sense of a territorial unit but in the sense of a special category of the “Gypsy” population which was involved in a number of auxiliary activities in the service of the army.

Roma were, however, recruited into the actual army as well. There is evidence, dating from 1566, that some



III. 5

Ottoman army with (probably Roma) army musicians before the gate of Buda and Pest.

(from Marushiakova / Popov 2001, p. 21)



III. 6

Impression and cast of a blood red Carnelian Seal, the kind of which was used by Ottoman authorities to declare that taxes had been paid properly.

(from Marushiakova / Popov 2001, p. 40)

members of the taxable population who were called up for military duties were Muslim Roma. Estimations made on the

basis of the data preserved shows that during the 16th and the 17th centuries between 15,000 and 20,000 “Gypsies”

must have been involved in the Ottoman army undertaking various services, mostly auxiliary military duties.

THE “GYPSY SANJAK” – ROMA IN ARMY AUXILIARY SERVICES

The “Gypsies” included in the “Gypsy sanjak” were grouped into “my-

usellem” (platoons) and their auxiliary units. At the head of each “myusyulem” was the “mir-liva” (major), a non-“Gypsy”, who was in charge of four captains and eleven corporals. For their service the “myusellem” (altogether 543) received land proper-

ties, 449 in total, situated in 17 regions of Rumelia. The members of the “myusellem” undertook auxiliary military duties. The head of the “Gypsy sanjak” was based in the town of Kirk Klise (modern Kırklareli) in Eastern Thrace.

THE TAX REGISTER OF SULTAN SULEIMAN I THE MAGNIFICENT

1522-1523, during the reign of Sultan Suleiman I the Magnificent, another tax register was prepared, entitled “Comprehensive roll of the income and taxation of the Gypsies of the Province of Rumelia”. This vast register consisted of 347 pages and specifically dealt with the “Gypsies”. It recorded the number of “Gypsy” households classified according to tax commu-

nities, situated in nine judicial districts encompassing big parts of what is now the Balkan peninsula. This is a unique document with a huge quantity of data about the “Gypsy” population in the Balkans in the beginning of the 16th century.

The register recorded 10,294 Christian and 4,203 Muslim “Gypsy” households (in the total a further 471 widows’ households were included). Apart from these, there were a further 2,694 Muslim households in the “Gypsy sanjak”. According to the same calculations, counting each household having an average

of 5 people, this made a total of 66,000 “Gypsies” in the Balkans, of which about 47,000 were Christian.

Further calculations made on the basis of this register are also of great interest. According to these, a total of 17,191 “Gypsy” households – in what became the territory of the present-day Balkan states – were distributed as follows: Turkey – 3,185, Greece – 2,512, Albania – 374, former Yugoslavia – 4,382 and Bulgaria 5,701, while the exact locality of 1,037 households is uncertain. The Ottoman tax registers are



In the 1522-1523 tax register, among the recorded occupations of the "Gypsies", are musicians, tinsmiths, farriers, goldsmiths, sword-makers, stove-makers, shoemakers, slipper-makers, makers of clout-nails, leather workers, tailors, carpet-makers, dyers, ironmongers, cheesemakers, butchers, kebab-makers, gardeners, muleteers, guards, prison guards, manservants, couriers, monkey-breeders, well-diggers and others, occasionally including army officers, janissaries, policemen, doctors, surgeons and monks.

III. 10

(from Marushiakova / Popov 2001, p. 44)

III. 9

Closely related to the art of the "Gypsy" musicians was the development of some specialised forms of musical theatrical performances, for example, the puppet shows.

(from Marushiakova / Popov 2001, p. 66)

degree of wealth among the "Gypsies". Such kind of information is, for example, contained in the judicial proceedings of the Sofia region from the beginning of the 17th century. Listed among the taxes

paid by the "Gypsies" is a one-off tax on sale of a residence, levied on 20 houses, as well as a tax on sheep. Moreover, there is further evidence of comparatively rich "Gypsies": in 1611 the "Gypsy Ste-

fan" sold his house in Sofia as well as his shop and some fruit trees for 2,400 akche (quite an impressive amount, given the usual sum of annual taxes per "Gypsy" household, some 25 akche).

HOW THE ROMA EARNED THEIR LIVING

Roma in the Ottoman Empire worked in a range of occupations. In the tax register of 1522-1523 the "Gypsies" were most often recorded as musicians (military or "free lanced"), which is also confirmed by other sources. The musical instruments most commonly mentioned are the "zurnas" (a kind of oboe) and drums, but other instruments were also used (most often the tambourine and in more recent

times different string instruments). Along with this, there is much evidence about "Gypsy" ensembles with dancers (mainly Roma and sometimes Jewish women).

In many places around the world the Roma are known as smiths. This occupation has a long tradition, and has been well preserved in the Balkans until the present day. Although during certain periods of time – as in the early 16th century – Roma blacksmiths and ironmongers were relatively uncommon in the Ottoman Empire, evidence concerning blacksmiths becomes very ex-

tensive from the 17th century onwards. [Ils. 9, 10]

In some cases the Roma abandoned their former occupations and became involved in agriculture, which they practiced within the framework of the existing feudal possessions of military officers. For example, in an inventory of fiefdoms in the Sofia region, dating to 1445-1446, there is detailed information on one belonging of Ali, which included the village of Dabijiv; it consisted of 15 complete and 3 widows' households; the inventory categorically states that "they are Gypsies".

THE DECLINE OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

After its era of power and glory in the 16th - 17th century, the Ottoman Empire entered a period of stagnation and from the end of the 17th and the beginning

of 18th century onwards the long period of gradual (but deepening) decline started. This period (18th and 19th centuries) was characterised by permanent crisis that affected social and economic conditions as well as the complex administrative system, and was accompanied by a long sequence of unsuccessful

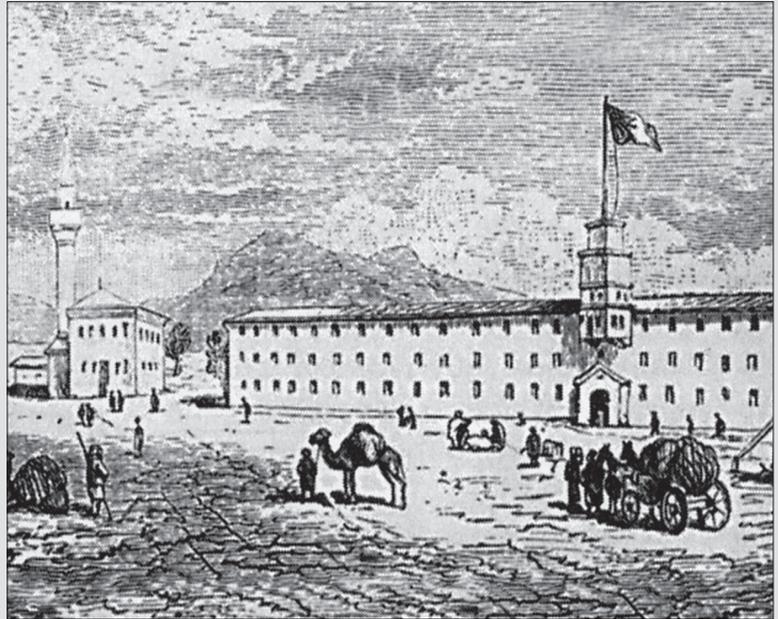
ful wars and loss of territory. Due to almost permanent political and economic crisis the various state registers (tax, judicial, and others) gradually lost their importance. The historical sources about the Roma in the empire, therefore, became more fragmentary and uncertain.

WORKING-CLASS ROMA

In 1836, the Bulgarian Dobry Jeliaskov, known as “The Factory Man”, opened the first modern textile mill in the Ottoman Empire in the town of Sliven, to make cloth for the state - primarily for the Ottoman army. The main work force were Roma from the town of Sliven, since at the time the Bulgarians were craftsmen, traders, or involved in agriculture, and the only uncommitted labourers were the Roma (men, women and even children). Gradually, a working class was established consisting of Roma families engaged in the textile industry which increased considerably after the liberation of Bulgaria (1878) when a number of new factories opened in Sliven and it became an important centre of the textile industry.

III. 11

(from Marushiakova / Popov 2001, p. 69)



III. 12

The factory of Dobry Jeliaskov in Sliven, around 1870.

(from Marushiakova / Popov 2001, p. 69)

During this period of time a significant change in religious affiliation of the Roma became visible. During the 15th and the 16th centuries Christian Roma predominated, while during the 19th century the balance had been radically altered and the Muslims were in the majority. The ratio of Christian to Muslim has been calculated as 1:3 or 1:4 in various estimations, but it is difficult to obtain precise figures. We can conclude that there was a continuing trend over the centuries to convert to the Islam.

The Ottoman authorities continued to use administrative measures to make the nomadic “Gypsies” settle down permanently, but, as with earlier attempts, in most cases these efforts turned out to be ineffective. From the end of the 18th century onwards, however, sources reveal an increase in the permanent settlement of the “Gypsies” in villages and their reliance on farm work, a tendency which had first appeared centuries earlier in the Ottoman Empire. New villages in the neighbourhood of newly

established “chifliks” (big farms) also appeared, entirely populated by “Gypsies”, from where they were recruited as hired agricultural workers.

Some Roma established themselves in completely new crafts. This is the case with the “Gypsy proletariat” in the town of Sliven (Bulgaria). In 1836 the first modern textile mill in the Ottoman Empire was opened, which made cloth to meet the needs of the Ottoman army. Most of the workers hired for this factory were Roma. [Ills. 11, 12]

CIVIC STATUS OF THE “GYPSIES”. OFFICIAL LEGISLATION AND EVERYDAY REALITY

The “Gypsies” occupied a special place in the overall social and administrative structure of the empire. In the first place they had been “Citizens” of the empire since its establishment. Notwithstanding the division of the empire’s population into two main categories (the “true believers” and the “infidels”), they had their specific statute and were differentiated on the basis of their ethnicity. There was not a strong differentiation

between Muslim and Christian “Gypsies”, between nomadic and settled. On the whole, they were close to the local populations, with some small privileges for the Muslim “Gypsies”, and considerable larger benefits for those in the service of the army.

This ethnic differentiation of the “Gypsies” is not connected to the so-called “Milliet System”, as is often wrongly thought. The “Milliet System” in the sense of differentiation of separate peoples (in ethnic, not in religious terms) was introduced as a consequence of the efforts for reforms in the Ottoman Empire from the 19th century onwards. The separation

of the “Gypsies”, however, was rooted in the general feeling towards them: Many sources reveal the evident contempt felt towards them by the rest of the population – Ottoman and local population alike – who considered them to be inferior people who did not merit any attention, a long-standing social stereotype, which has survived in the Balkans to this day.

In spite of these persistent social attitudes, and perhaps because of them, the Roma managed to preserve – or develop – many ethnic cultural characteristics under Ottoman rule, for example a (semi-)nomadic way of life as well as certain traditional crafts, and ultimately remained a relatively

ROMA AS FIGHTERS FOR FREEDOM

The Roma also took part in the national liberation struggles of the Balkan peoples. The Rom Aliya Plavich and his brother Muyo (who died in 1807) took part in the Serbian uprisings against the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the 19th century. One of the most famous “haiduts” (freedom fighters) in the 19th century is the Rom Mustapha Shibil (born in the Gradets village, near

Sliven, killed in 1856). Roma from Sliven (the brothers Yordan and Georgy Hajikostovi, Yordan Ruschev) took part in the Russian-Turkish war (1877-1878) in the ranks of the Russian army as Bulgarian volunteers.

III. 13

(from Marushiakova / Popov 2001, p. 70)

closed ethnic community. On the whole, however, the civil status of the Roma in

the Ottoman Empire was more favourable than it was for their cousins in Western

Europe, where, during the same historical period, the Roma were persecuted.

THE BEGINNING OF ROMA EMANCIPATION

In 1866 Petko Rachev Slaveikov, a famous Bulgarian author, published an article signed by “an Egyptian” (“a Gypsy”) in the Istanbul-based newspaper Gaida. In this letter, the author, Ilia Naumchev from the city of Prilep, defends the glorious past of the “Gypsies’ right” to be treated equally, to “have

their own society and take care of their education”, to have “Gypsy priests” and so on.

As a whole the letter illustrates the beginning of a new stage in the development of self-awareness among at least some members of the Roma community in the Balkans during the 19th century. Typical of this new stage is the process of leaving the “internal” traditional community framework in order to seek an equal place in the new “ex-

ternal” social and cultural reality. The general atmosphere in the Balkans at that time predetermined the shape of this new social activity. Like the rest of the Balkan peoples (for whom the 19th century is the century of modern nationalism) the Roma, too, were actively seeking a glorious past as well as the creation of a national historical mythology. This was necessary in order to support them in their struggle for civil emancipation.

CONCLUSION

After the breakdown of the Ottoman Empire Roma remained permanently within the new boundaries of the one-nation Balkan states. From then on, their historical destiny and their

evolution as communities have been interwoven with those of the majority populations of these countries. However, the heritage of the Ottoman Empire remains present in various ways – either in the form of established ethnic cultures such as that of Islam

and the related customs and traditions inherited by large numbers of Roma in the Balkans, or in the form of the influence that Ottoman cultural and historical traditions still have on life in the single Balkan states.

Bibliography

Crowe, David M. (1995) *A History of the Gypsies of Eastern Europe and Russia*. London / New York: I. B. Tauris Publishers | **Fraser, Angus (1992)** *The Gypsies*. Oxford / Cambridge: Blackwell | **Gilsenbach, Reimar (1994)** *Weltchronik der Zigeuner. Teil I: Von den Anfängen bis 1599*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang | **Gronemeyer, Reimer / Rakelmann, Georgia A. (1988)** *Die Zigeuner. Reisende in Europa*. Köln: DuMont Buchverlag | **Inalçik, Halil (1997)** *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, Volume I*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press | **Marushiakova, Elena / Popov, Veselin (2001)** *Gypsies in the Ottoman Empire. A contribution to the history of the Balkans*. Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press | **Todorov, Nikolaj (1972)** *Balkanskiat grad XV – XIX vek. Socialno-ikonomicheskoto i demografsko razvitiie. [The Balkan town: social, historical and demographic development]*. Sofia: Bulgarian Academy of Sciences