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.
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 extremely 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 subject Christian population). These categories were treated differently, the members of each having a different status and varying obligations towards the central state.

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”).

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Some of the most important paragraphs of the “Law concerning the Gypsies in the Province of Rumelia”, issued by Sultan Saleiman 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.”

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

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 Muslims, 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.

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 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).

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 yor-fiyet), 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.”

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

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

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
The “Gypsy Sanjak” – Roma in Army Auxiliary Services

Tax Register of Sultan Suleiman I the Magnificent

Measures against Nomadism. Settling the “Gypsies”

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 “myusellem” (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 properties, 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 Kirklareli) 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 communities, 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
Part of the Roma in the Ottoman Empire lead a nomadic way of life, which created problems for the state administration. That is why laws and regulations provide penalties for Muslim “gypsies” who “wandered” (i.e. followed a nomadic way of life) alongside non-Muslim “gypsies”. The reasoning behind this policy becomes clear from the previously quoted “law concerning the gypsies in the Province of Rumelia” issued by Sultan I the Magnificent, which explains that the problem was not so much the association of the Muslim “gypsies” with non-Muslims, but the fact that, when travelling, they did not pay their taxes regularly. However, it is quite significant, that there is no clear outline who usually the main taxation community (“jemaat”) in the Ottoman Empire was linked to a specific territorial unit, even when this encompassed nomadic “gypsies”, as there were no differences in the tax obligations of the “gypsies” according to their way of life (settled or nomadic). The register of 1522-1523 records only eleven nomadic groups registered for tax purposes in certain villages. This hardly reflects the real situation. It is likely that itinerant people were often registered as a settled population, but in reality continued their (mostly seasonal) nomadic way of life.

Ottoman documents reflect the desire of the administration to force the nomadic “Gypsies” to settle down or at least to restrict the area of their nomadism. This can be seen from a regulation of Sultan Suleiman I the Magnificent from 1551, repeated almost literally by Sultan Murad III in 1574. However, it is evident that these, and possibly other such administrative measures, were unsuccessful. In practice, it seems that for the authorities nomadism was not a serious problem.

In Balkan towns and villages settled Roma lived in isolated “Gypsy quarters” (“mahallas”) – a basic principle of settlement for all minority communities in the Ottoman Empire. The number of settled Roma was high. A similar impression was recorded in Anatolia at the beginning of the 17th century by the well known Ottoman traveller Evliya Çelebi (1611-1679). He remarked that the majority of the “Gypsies” living there were settled. [Iills. 7-8]

The tax registers reflect permanent settlement as well as of a certain...
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 extensive from the 17th century onwards.

The decline of 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 wars and loss of territory. Due to almost permanent political and economical 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 Jeliazkov, 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)

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.

Ill. 13
(from Marushiakova / Popov 2001, p. 70)

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 “external” 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.

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