

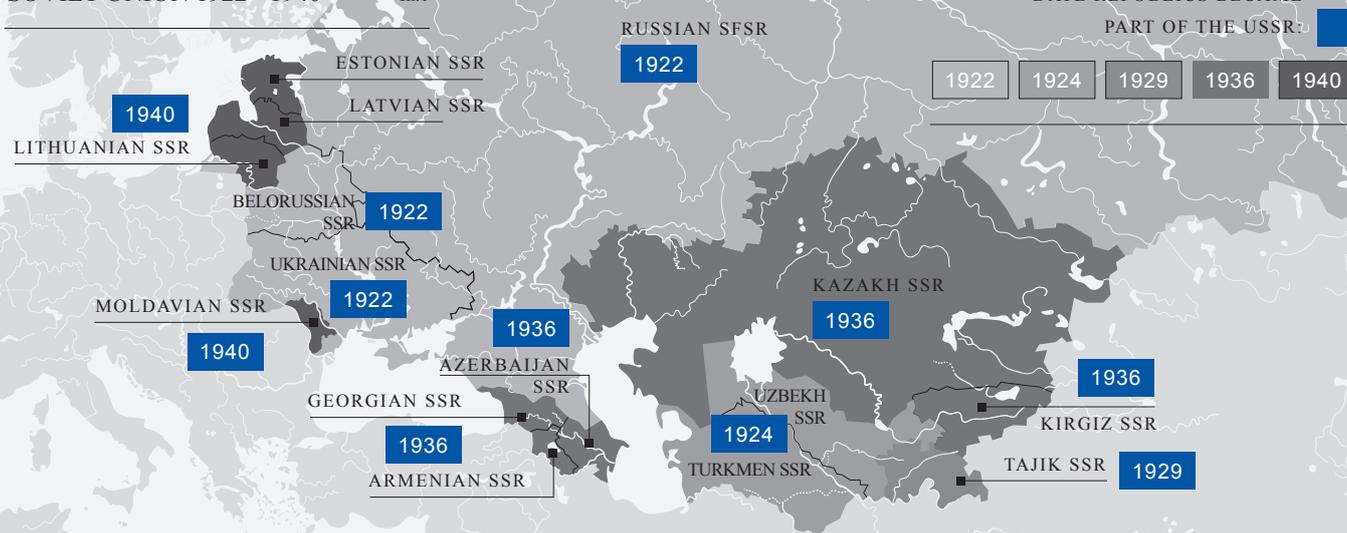
Soviet Union Before World War II

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State and Political Norms | The “All-Russian Union of Gypsies” | “Gypsy Kolkhozes” (Co-Operatives) | “Gypsy Co-Operative Artisan’s Workshops” | Roma Language and Literature | Education | The “Romen Theatre” | The Repressions of the 1930s | A Turn in the National Policy

➤ *The creation of the Soviet Union has frequently been called “a great historical experiment” which determined the fate of a considerable part of the world and many peoples. The policies towards Roma in the Soviet Union fall into two clearly separate periods, based on two radically different principles: From the creation of the Soviet Union up to 1938 the leading principle was the treatment of Roma as a separate people, who should develop as a constituent element of Soviet society; after 1938 the model changed, the “special” approach giving way to a “mainstream approach” and Roma were considered above all, an integral part of Soviet society.*

SOVIET UNION 1922 - 1940



INTRODUCTION

The Great October Socialist Revolution of 1917 and the subsequent civil war resulted in radical socio-political changes. A new, radically different type of state, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was established in place of the Russian Empire, with new economic relations, social structures, political and cultural stan-

dards. Under these conditions Roma became subject to a state policy and gradually attempted to find their place under the new conditions and adapt to new realities.

The Civil War, foreign intervention, chaos in social life, the general collapse of the economy and the rapid impoverishment of the population resulted in a deterioration of the Roma’s situation. Many of them continued

their traditional (semi-)nomadic way of life, another part, which already had settled in towns, went back to itinerant professions. A small part of the Roma “musical elite” succeeded in emigrating together with the “white” Russians. The total number of Roma according to the census of 1926 was 61,299. Comparatively few of them, 20.9%, living in towns, more than 2/3 continued their travelling way of life.

AROUSING A “SLEEPING BEAUTY” – THE “ALL-RUSSIAN UNION OF GYPSIES”

The “All-Russian Union of Gypsies” formulated its goals in line with the spirit of the dominating ideology – to unite the Roma, to draw them towards “socially useful labour”, to assist with the creation of co-operatives and communes, to organise itinerant Roma in their transition towards a settled way of life, to create evening classes and Sunday schools, clubs and libraries, to publish newspapers, books, textbooks and brochures in Romani, to combat drunkenness, begging, and fortune-telling.

The “All-Russian Union of Gypsies” sent Alexander Grakhovskii as its representative to Belarus in 1926. On September 29, 1926, in Minsk a meeting was held by a group of Roma activists, in which one of those present, G. Toura stated, that “the Gypsy nation, as a sleeping beauty, has been aroused from her deep sleep by the sorceress the revolution”. A decision was taken on the statutes of the future “Union of Gypsies” in the Belorussian Socialist Soviet Republic, endorsed by the Belorussian Commissariat of the Interior of the Belorussian Socialist Soviet Republic, and preparatory work began on the establishment of the new union. However, after the dissolution of the “All-Russian Union” the issue was no longer topical.

The “All-Russian Union of Gypsies” existed for a relatively short time and was dissolved by the decree of the NKVD of February 15, 1928. Various reasons were given for that decision – “the absence of a proletarian stratum at management level” (out of 23 members in the management, 9 in the past had been horse traders), weak organisational activities (the union had failed to open sections in the country), insufficient results on work on making travelling Roma settle, internal conflicts, poor financial management (15,000 roubles were missing from the balance sheet) etc.

III. 2

“NEW HAPPINESS” ON THE “RED ROAD” – “GYPSY KOLKHOZES”

“Gypsy kolkhozes” were created in various ways. Many of the Roma representatives directly approached the All-Russian Central Executive Committee with a request for assistance with their sedentarisation, however, quite frequently they would either take the funding for granted and would disappear, or they would go to the places where they were sent to settle, receive credit, farming machinery, cattle, etc, but then would quickly sell everything and go to other regions.

STATE AND POLITICAL NORMS

Soviet power was already in control of the entire territory of the USSR in the early 1920s, and a gradual economic and social stabilisation began to set in. The authorities increasingly began to deal with national and ethnic issues in this enormous country, where lots of different peoples lived (between 150 and 200 peoples according to different criteria). At the

same time a considerable number of peoples was not granted the right to establish their state and administrative institutions, but only socio-political and cultural structures. Roma were among them, and for them the absence of such an institution was perhaps most justified owing to their comparatively small numbers, their largely nomadic way of life, the spread of territories occupied, and above all the absence of an elite which would have sought state and administrative institutions.

Throughout the entire existence of the USSR and in its legislation Roma were in no way separated from the dozens of peoples in a similar situation (without their own territorial and administrative formations). Moreover, up to 1932 there were no personal passports or any similar identification documents where national identity would have been noted; passports were only issued for travel abroad, and nationality was not included in them.

THE “ALL-RUSSIAN UNION OF GYPSIES”

Representatives of the former Roma musical and artistic elite, who in the past had been closely associated with high society in the former Russian Empire, were the first to gather under the banners of the new “proletarian” ideology. The first Roma Comsomol group (“Comsomol” is an abbreviation of the Russian term for “Communist Youth Union”) was created in Moscow

in 1923, with Ivan Rom-Lebedev at its head. Subsequently this group became a voluntary society, which started propaganda among Roma.

The creation of Roma organisations and associations was under constant party and administrative control of the Soviet State. With the assistance of the Soviet State in 1925 the voluntary society became the “All-Russian Union of Gypsies”. Andrei Taranov, member of the All-union Communist Party (Bolsheviks), was elected Chairman. The Secretary was Rom-Lebedev, who

represented the Roma in the Department for Nationalities at the All-union Central Executive Committee. [III. 2]

The dissolution of the “All-Russian Union of Gypsies” in 1928 did not exert any substantial impact on the state policy conducted in accordance to the goals outlined in its statutes, moreover, it became much more active and effective. Most members of the former union, about 640 in all, including most of the leadership, were drawn under different forms in the realisation of this policy.

“Gypsy kolkhozes” were created in various regions of the Russian Socialist Federative Socialist Republics, the Ukrainian and Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republics and in Soviet Central Asia. Most of them were quite poor, did not have sufficient livestock nor agricultural machinery, their organisation was bad, yields were low, separate families were constantly leaving the co-operative etc, but there were also some exceptions. “Gypsy kolkhozes” were comparatively successful in the Smolensk region (where the tendency towards the sedentarisation of Roma had existed prior to the October Revolution), in the steppe region of Northern Caucasus (where there was a lot of unoccupied land), and to a certain extent in the Belgorod region and the Volga region.

Among the leading “Gypsy kolkhozes” mentioned in the Soviet press of the period are the “Tsiganskii trud” (“Gypsy” labour) co-operative in the Northern Caucasus, “Svoboda” (freedom) at the village of Kardimovo, near Smolensk, “Novaya Zhisn” (new life) in the Gorkii region (Nizhnii Novgorod), “Novoe Shchastie” (new happiness) in the Sarapul region in the Sverdlovsk (Ekaterinburg) region, “Krasnyi put” (red road) in the Sumy region in Ukraine, and “Lozovaya” in the Kharkov region of in Ukraine.

It is difficult to draw up an exact list of “Gypsy kolkhozes”, as parts of them would quickly break up, others would be transformed, and new ones established. Frequently the so-called “mixed kolkhozes” were established through the amalgamation (administrative) of people from two small communities within a region. Examples were the two “Gypsy-Jewish kolkhozes” (in the Vitebsk region, Belarus and the Kirovgrad region, Ukraine), or the “Gypsy-German kolkhoz” (in the vicinity of Eupatoria, the Crimea), which existed for a short time during the 1930s.

The “Gypsy kolkhoz” in the Krikunovo “khutor” (the type of settlement of farmers) is frequently mentioned in literature. In fact this is the first “Gypsy kolkhoz”, established prior to the adoption of the respective normative documents issued by the state. 50 Roma families, led by A.P.Krikunov, arrived in the steppe of the Northern Caucasus near the Dvoynaya station, settled in the free lands and founded their co-operative in the spring of 1925. Three years after its establishment there were 300 people (70 families) and the co-operative had 4,700 acres of land, 40 horses (obviously insufficient for working the land), 1 bull, 20 cows, 6 oxen and 3 camels.

III. 3

“GYPSY KOLHOZES” (CO-OPERATIVES)

In 1926 the Presidium of the All-Russian Executive Committee and the Council of the People’s Commissars of the USSR adopted a decree proposing to the authorities of the union republics to undertake steps for priority measures for land allocation to “Gypsies” willing to settle, and the granting of additional preferential terms. A new decree followed in 1928, when the respective bodies were obliged to ensure that there was land for “Gypsies” willing to settle as a matter of priority, and each “Gypsy” family was to be given from 500 to 1,000 roubles. A commission was created for allocation of land to itinerant “Gypsies”, also including representatives of the “All-Russian Union of Gypsies”.

Measures were taken in order to create “Gypsy kolkhozes” (co-operative farms). By the end of 1927 a total of about 500 Roma families in Ukraine were

given land by the state and created 9 co-operative farms. In 1931-32, the period of mass collectivisation, special attention was given to the movement of Roma, willing to settle in the free lands in the steppes of Southern Russia. The central management of the co-operatives created a “Department of work with Roma” for 222 families, awaiting to be moved to the newly established “Gypsy” co-operatives. An instruction was issued “On enhancing work of Gypsy kolkhozes”, requiring the opening of crèches, medical centres and schools under the co-operatives, at the same time “clearing the ‘Gypsy kolkhozes’ of ‘kulak’ elements” (wealthy landowners; there were no “kulaks” among the Roma). [III. 3]

Soviet propaganda (including the Roma press) presented the process of settlement and creation of “Gypsy kolkhozes” as a voluntary process, arising naturally among the itinerant Roma. In spite of the pompous and clearly false tone of propaganda, this was to a certain extent

the truth. However, regardless of all the efforts of the Soviet State, the outcome was more than modest. In 1932, 25 “Gypsy kolkhozes” were created, including 490 families, and in 1938 the number reached 52, including between 2-3% of the total Roma population in the USSR. If the Soviet authorities had seriously considered the sedentarisation of itinerant Roma a major goal, the results would hardly have been so modest.

The last state act, dealing with “Gypsy kolkhozes” was the decree of April 4, 1936 on “Measures for employment of itinerant (Gypsies) and improvement of the economic and cultural and living standards of working Gypsies”. According to this decree, measures were to be taken for the subsequent inclusion of itinerant “Gypsies” in “Co-operative Artisan’s Workshops, “kolkhozes”, “sovkhoses” (state farms), industry, as well as for the improvement of living conditions in their transition towards a settled way of life.

“GYPSY CO-OPERATIVE ARTISAN’S WORKSHOPS”

Another line of realisation of the state policy towards Roma was the creation of “Gypsy Co-operative Artisan’s

Workshops” (“artels”) in towns. Their establishment at its inception, however, aimed not only at including Roma

A “NEW LIFESTYLE” – “GYPSY ARTELS”

After NEP was stopped “Gypsy Artisan Workshops” continued to develop, and also new forms of production emerged. Three new big “Gypsy artels” were created in Moscow in 1927 – “Tsigchimprom” (“Gypsy” chemical industry), “Tsigchimlabor” (“Gypsy” chemical laboratory) and “Tsigpishcheprom” (“Gypsy” food industry”). The grand names should not be misleading – in fact these were small co-operatives, producing various types of paint, chemical detergents and packaging for food products. In Moscow alone in 1931 there were 28 “Gypsy artels” uniting 1,351 members (and with their families 3,755 people) – “The Army Transport” (a state enterprise for the production of ball bearings), “Romanian Foreigner”, “First-Serbian Romanian”, “The Red Transbaikalian”, “Greek-Romanian”, “Serbo-Romanian”, “Stalin”, “New Lifestyle”, “The Black Sea Emigrant”, “II Serbo-Romanian”, “International”, “The Tin-smith

from Tifliski”, etc. The frequent names Romanian, Serbian, Greek indicate that these Roma (mainly Kalderaš) had come from these countries in the past and often had retained their foreign passports.

The largest “Gypsy artel” was “Natsmenbit” (the way of life of national minorities) in Leningrad created in 1934 where about 200 people were working, turning out copper boilers, iron barrels and other metal wares. However most “artels” were smaller and they were created in connection with the sedentarisation of itinerant Roma. Thus in December 1936, 12 families of Kalderaš wanted to stay in the town of Yoshkar-Ola, the capital of the Mari Autonomous SSR and created their own “artel” for the production of metal household utensils. The “Flame of the revolution”-artel in Stalingrad was similarly created in 1936; the local executive committee endorsed 464 roubles free assistance and loans for the organisation of production and the improvement of living conditions.

III. 4

ROMANI PUBLICATIONS FROM 1927 TO 1938

A journal “Romani Zorya” (Roma daybreak) began to come out in 1927. From 1930 up to 1932 it was replaced by “Nevo Drom” (new way). The “Butyartiko Roma” (working Roma) journal was issued once in 1932. The journals, mainly in Romani, brought out various material, including Roma folklore and literary works. The quantity of published literature in Romani is impressive. Published literature fell in several main categories: social and political, Marxist-Leninist; on “kolkhoz” issues; technical and

related to production; popular science; fiction (of Roma authors and translations into Romani). Between 1931 and 1938, 292 various titles were published in Romani. Many of these publications bore the character of Soviet propaganda of the period, judging from their titles which are sufficiently eloquent, for example: “Lenin is our banner”, “The new Gypsies are coming”, “Women workers, don’t believe in god”, “What did Soviet power give to Gypsy women” etc.

living in towns, but also at drawing part of the itinerant Roma towards a settled life. The first Roma “artels” were established several years before the state had begun a policy for their support. A “Tsiganskaya artel” – “Gypsy Co-operative Artisan’s Workshop” – already existed in 1923 in Mos-

cow, largely with the membership of Kalderaš Roma; “Gypsy artels” for copper work were registered in Khar'kov and Leningrad as well. The last state legislation, dealing with “Gypsy artels” was a decree of 1936, according to which “Vsesojuspromsovet” (the All-Union Industrial Council) was

to undertake special measures for the support and expansion of “Gypsy artels” and their production base; to organise the preparation and training of their members; to improve living conditions, to enhance cultural and educational activities among Roma working in “artels”. [Ill. 4]

ROMA LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

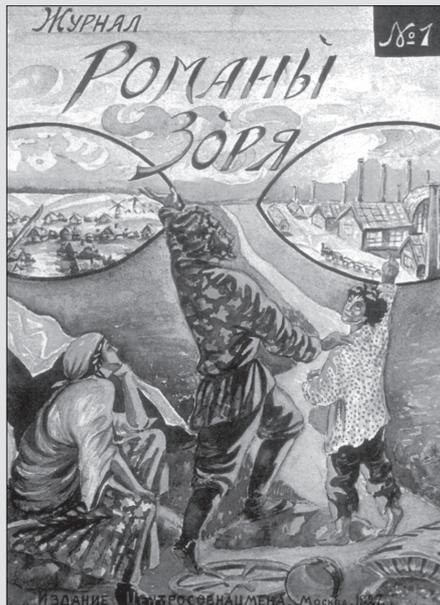
The second main line of an active realisation of the state policy towards Roma was the development of Romani, the language of the Roma, and Romani literature.

Serious efforts began after the publication of an article in the “Izvestia” newspaper “On samples of Gypsy letters”, that is on the version of the Romani alphabet and its literary language, based on the dialect of the Ruska Roma, created by the well-known Roma activists Nikolai Pankov

and Nina Dudarova. The Decree “On the Creation of a Roma alphabet” was issued on May 10, 1927, by Anatolii Lunacharskii, Head of the “Narkompros” (the People’s Commissariat of Education) and a meeting was held with representatives of the Chief Department of Science, the Council for National Minorities and the All Russian Union of Gypsies. A decision was taken to create a Romani alphabet (based on the Russian alphabet) and a commission was elected to prepare a draft for a standard Roma language, including Professor Mikhail Sergeevskii, of the Moscow State University, Nikolai Pankov, and Nina Dudarova.

Sergeevskii’s study “On the Language of Russian Gypsies” was published in 1929 and his Romani grammar came out in 1931, the Romani-Russian dictionary, compiled by Mikhail Sergeevskii and Alexei Barannikov, edited by Nikolai Pankov, in 1938.

The considerable amount of literature published in Romani until 1938 no doubt exerted its influence on the development of the “Gypsy” community. Nevertheless this influence fell in a comparatively limited circle, mainly in Moscow and several towns in the USSR. [Ills. 5-7]



III. 5
First issue of the journal “Romani Zorya” (Roma daybreak), Moscow, 1927
(from Djurić, Rajko et al. (1996) *Ohne Heim - ohne Grab. Die Geschichte der Sinti und Roma*. Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, p. 184b)

III. 6
Page from the Romani journal “Nevo Drom” (New road), 1931, nos. 4-5). The journal ran some stories specifically for Roma, but many pages were taken up by translations of general propaganda from Russian into Xaladytka Romani. This page tells of “ancient customs” that oppress women: the title above reads, “Women in the East”, and the one below exhorts “Romani daughter-worker, write about your new life.” Courtesy of the Lenin Library.

(from Lemon 2000, p. 135)



Many books were published, aiming to acquaint Roma with agriculture and co-operatives, factory organisation and various crafts. A large number of publications were devoted to practical problems of family life, such as “First aid in emergency situations”, “What to do when your child has diarrhoea”, “Hygiene for women”, etc. Other publications are of a general knowledge nature, and some probably would hardly have interested Roma as future readers, for instance, “On mammoths”, “On monkeys”, “Digging minerals and

ores”. Fiction translations contain quite a number of translations of classical works into Romani, for instance works by Alexander Pushkin (novels, stories, the poem “Gypsies”), Lev Tolstoy, Maxim Gorki (including the story “Makar Chudra”), Michail Sholokhov. Forty seven works by Roma authors (verses and prose), Maxim Besljudsko, Alexander German, Ivan Rom-Lebedev, Nikolai Pankov etc. were published, too.

III. 7

EDUCATION

To a great extent this intensive publishing activity was connected with the state’s policy in the area of education. The “Izvestia” newspaper dated June 8, 1925, published an article, citing “Gypsies” among the peoples, entitled to an education of their own. “A Primer for Gypsy Schools”, published in 1929 by Nina Dudarova, as well as “A Primer for Semi-illiterate People”, compiled by Nikolai Pankov, were among the first editions for Roma of this kind in the world. By 1938 a total of 13 textbooks in Romani were published, the last one being “Lylvari Piro Romany Chhib” (a textbook in Romani) by A. V. Germano, as well as other textbooks and teaching materials.

Active work to increase literacy and raise the educational le-

vel of the adult Roma through the so-called “likbez” (abolition of illiteracy) courses, evening classes etc. began during the second half of the 1920s. Roma schools and kindergartens, which were not officially separate educational establishments, started to exist as parts of other institutions.

The number of existing Roma schools varied at times, as new ones were constantly being opened (for instance at “Gypsy kolkhozes”), while at the same time others were dissolved or closed (owing to bad conditions, the absence of trained teachers, or no interest by Roma children). Generally, during the 1926-1938 period, 86 Roma schools existed for various lengths of time or classes with such a status. In 1938, there was one basic school (up to the 7th grade) and 25 primary schools (up to the 4th grade), as well as one Roma boarding school (at Serebryanka, at Smolensk

and at two boarding schools and four kindergartens Roma groups were opened.

Text books and teaching materials written in the dialect of Ruska Roma were used in Roma schools. In some cases however, Roma from the other groups found this dialect difficult, therefore there were attempts to adapt the teaching of Romani, by selecting another dialect.

On December 21, 1931, the Central Committee of the All-Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) opened a special “Gypsy Party” school, whose first graduates included 18 men and 2 women. The duration of the school was 10 months, those who graduated were sent to work as organisers and to take on the responsibilities of functionaries in propaganda activities in “Gypsy kolkhozes”, schools, and even at Roma nomadic camps. [III. 8]

TRAINING ROMA TEACHERS

The overall education at Roma schools and classes was planned to be in Romani, which raised the acute problem of trained teachers. Roma educational courses were created in 1927 where Nina Dudarova and Nikolai Pankov taught and trained the first Roma teachers. Roma pedagogical courses were begun in Moscow in 1931, the first course enrolling 30 students out of 80 after a competition. These courses worked parallel to the intensive summer courses at Toropets (Kalinin region), Nevel (Pskov region), Serebryanka (near Smolensk), at Kharkov, Ivanovo, Saratov, Sverdlovsk, Leningrad, Orel and elsewhere. Roma pedagogical courses in Moscow were reorganised into pedagogical colleges with a Roma section in 1932, where until 1938, between 120-140 Roma students graduated. The graduates left for the country, where they were to work in Roma schools. Nevertheless, the very teachers frequently preferred to be appointed to "normal" - mixed - schools, instead of establishing new Roma schools.

III. 8



III. 9

Meeting of the "Russka intelligentsia" with Anatolii Lunacharskii in 1930 to establish the "Moscow Romani Theatre". After meeting Anatolii Lunacharskii on October 4, 1930, at a meeting of the activists of national arts of the "Narkompros" a decision was taken for the establishment of a Studio for "Indo-Romen Theatre", and on January 24, 1931, the theatre was opened.

(from Lemon 2000, p. 131)

THE "ROMEN THEATRE": PROMOTING THE VALUES OF "NEW LIFE"

The idea for a Roma theatre was put forth by a group of activists of the dissolved "All Russian Union of Gypsies", united in the "Loly Cheren" (Red star) "Gypsy" club. The first performance was in May 1931 – a performance in two parts, a propaganda sketch "Atasya i dadyves" ("Yesterday and Today") and an "ethnographic sketch".

However the first real premiere was on December 16 of the same year, when Alexander Germano's "Life on Wheels" was performed, giving the name to the theatre "Romen". In the 30s the "Romen Theatre" quickly found its place in the musical and cultural life of the USSR and became very popular both with Roma and Soviet society in

THE "ROMEN THEATRE"

The creation of the "Romen Gypsy Theatre" throughout the 1920s and the 1930s was an exceptionally important event in the state policy towards "Gypsies", which with time acquired a symbolical significance. The theatre was the conclusion of the process of the incorporation of the Roma musical elite (largely

concentrated in Moscow and Leningrad) in the new Soviet reality. At first it was difficult for this elite to find its place in new Soviet society. Hence Roma joined the new Soviet structures providing the funding for musical organisations. Thus the "Gypsy Choir" of Nikolai Kruchinin, was registered in 1920 in the "Narkompros" Musical Department by the name "Studio for Old Gypsy Art".

The "Theatre Romen" was not the only possibility for realisation of

the Roma musical elite (which in fact was changing in that period, beginning to include representatives of groups other than Ruska Roma). In many large cities in the USSR various musical ensembles were created with a state subsidy, under different Soviet cultural institutions or under local cultural centres. In 1932 in Moscow, for instance, there were also a "Gypsy State Theatre Studio" and a "Touring Gypsy Theatre". [Ills. 9, 10]

THE REPRESSIONS OF THE 1930S

The Stalinist policy of mass repressions began in the 1930s. Many Roma fell

victim to these repressions. They were, however, not based on a racial or national ground, but were in line with the general official Soviet ideology of the period. In this case Roma were treated on a par with all Soviet citizens.

The first wave of repressions was in 1932-1933, after the introduction of identity cards and obligatory registration according to the place of residence (combined with the provision of ration books) on December

ROMA VICTIMS OF MASS SHOOTINGS

Roma were deported without any sentence. In Siberia they were generally not placed in camps, but rather exiled in separate settlements and they were under relatively free administration. At the same time about 3 to 5 million peasants (the estimates vary), declared “kulaks”, were deported in the course of enforced collectivisation, together with their families. Unlike the peasants, the Roma did not remain in their new settlements. In the course of several years, overcoming great difficulties and

suffering they succeeded in leaving the places where they had been deported to and renewed their earlier way of life, largely in the European part of the USSR. The authorities obviously did not take them seriously and in many cases turned a blind eye when Roma left the places they had been sent to. The fact that Roma turned to a itinerant way of life or frequently left their residence was not viewed as a particular problem by the authorities, as long as the Roma did not get close to large cities and stayed in the periphery of rural regions.

III. 11

MASS DEPORTATIONS OF ROMA

Originally, Roma in the 1930s were sentenced to imprisonment in camps, but in 1937 mass “clearance” of camps from “anti-Soviet elements” began, with quotas of the number of camp inmates which were to be shot, according to additional charges. Roma were also among the victims of these mass shootings in the camps. Thus in the Solovki camp, in Karelia a total of 13 Kalderaš from two large families (Stanesco and Mihai) were shot in 1937. These mass executions were carried out in the Sandomorkh locality, where in total over 9,000 people were killed throughout the 1937-1938 period. Besides the 13 Kalderaš other Roma were shot at

Sandomorkh, 27 of them from the Ruska Roma, who had earlier worked on the construction of the Belomor-Baltic channel (done by forced labour in concentration camps).

The total number of Roma, who died throughout the 1937-1938 campaign, according to research from the Memorial Association, was 52 shot at Sandomorkh, Smolensk, Kursk, Marii-El, and elsewhere. Of course the data is incomplete, and very probably the total figure is much higher. Mass purges almost did not affect the new Soviet “elite” of the Roma, unlike other peoples in the USSR, where almost the entire intelligentsia and party activists were killed in the period of mass repressions.

III. 12

general. Its repertoire inevitably included plays with a propaganda character, promoting the values of “new life” among Roma (most of them written by Roma activist authors). When the “Ethnographic Theatre” in Leningrad staged two plays in 1932, “Romano Drom” (Roma way) and “Gilya i Khelibena Roman” (“Gypsy” songs and

dances) produced by its director V.N. Vsevolodskii-Gerngross, there was serious criticism in the Roma press, that they had not succeeded in showing the transition from a travelling way of life to the life in “Gypsy kolkhozes”.

III. 10

27, 1932. Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev, Odessa, Minsk, Kharkov, and others fell into the categories of “closed cities”, where registration was more difficult, and the possibilities of earning a living much greater. Many people would come to these cities, including travelling Roma; the authorities reacted with raids to catch “de-classed elements”, who were exiled (chiefly to Siberia) without any court hearing or sentence. Evidence of mass deportations of Roma comes largely from Moscow and other big cities in the USSR. [III. 11]

The second wave of repressions, which also involved Roma, was in 1936-1937, when it was no longer a matter of deportations, but of “court sentences”. In fact, this is hardly the most suitable name for the decisions of the so-called “troika” (NKVD tribunals). Roma were also victims of these repressions, the charges against them were generally along several lines. Most often the grounds for the sentence was “speculation with currency”. Horse theft went from being a criminal offence to being declared a political crime, and to be “sabotage” against

the socialist state. Another frequent charge against Roma was the charge of espionage in favour of a foreign country, the justification usually being the presence of foreign passports among many Roma, who had recently settled in towns (most often Kalderaš), some of whom were unfortunate to register their “artels” with foreign names. Declaring Roma foreign spies was absurd, of course, but it was not unusual in the Soviet Union at the time, on the background of the discovery of “foreign spies”, even among the highest echelons of party nomenclature. [III. 12]

A TURN IN THE NATIONAL POLICY

A radical change in state policy towards the Roma was set out in 1938. A “note” of the Central Committee of the All

Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) gave instructions to close down 18 national classes in the educational system as

well as existing schools of 16 separate nationalities. The list included people without state-administrative formations (or living beyond them) – for instance Armenians (living beyond the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic), Poles, Germans etc. finishing with Kurds, Assyrians and Roma.

The changes did not affect the area of education alone. Mass publication of books in Romani ceased, the performances of the “Romen Theatre” started to be in Russian (with separate parts and songs in Romani). Gradually “Gypsy artels” and “kolkhozes” began to break up. The process was a slow one, and part of the Roma assumed a nomadic way of life again.

In the second half of the 1930s the so-called “Leninist” national po-

licy gave way to the “Stalinist” national policy. The change began with the new constitution of the USSR, adopted at the 8th Congress of the Soviets in November 1936. Claims have been made that this constitution deprived Roma of their status as a “national minority”, however, the claim has no substance. Nowhere in the new constitution or in other state documents is a list of the peoples with (or without) a “status of a national minority”, nor is there any mention of Roma in particular. Roma were a minor issue in the context of the overall state national policy, and it was not by chance, that in the list of peoples whose national schools should be closed down, Roma schools were at the end of the list.

The measures of the new national Soviet policy followed various lines and aimed at doing away with ethnic differences in the USSR. The overall aim was to achieve a new stage of national development – the concept of the “Soviet people”. This was a key term in the national policy in the USSR and was in fact a development of the old imperial idea of “Russia and ‘Rossiane’” (i.e. peoples belonging to Russia, and not “Russkie” – the ethnic Russians). Concrete state policies were subordinated to this principle paradigm, for instance, state and administrative formations, which for practical purposes “created” a number of new peoples based on earlier clans and tribal formations. State policy concerning Roma followed this paradigm.

CONCLUSION

There are considerable turns and even (at least apparently) some contradictions in the policy of the Soviet state concerning Roma. Up to 1938 the policy towards Roma was based on their treatment as a separate people, who should develop above all as an ethnic community, which is part of Soviet society, by creating separate “Gypsy kolkhozes”, “Gypsy artels”, “Gypsy” schools etc.

After 1938, the paradigm changed, the “special” element in the policy gave way to the “mainstream, general approach” and Roma were seen above all as an integral part of Soviet society, without any special separation in the main social areas (economy, education, etc.); as a community their development was supported in the framework of an ethno-cultural plan (above all in the field of music and dancing).

The outcome of the first approach includes a very limited circle of a new, Soviet Roma elite. Through the second approach, although we cannot speak of a complete and successive policy of the state for the development of the Roma community, a number of possibilities were created, which guaranteed an equal participation of Roma in public life and the improvement of their educational background and their civic consciousness.

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