Overlooked Citizens:
Roma (Gypsy) Minorities Living in post-Socialist Ukraine

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ABSTRACT: The position of Roma within Soviet Ukraine was dictated by their treatment as a culture prior to the onset of communism. Under the Ukrainian S.S.R., the treatment of the Roma by the State both promoted their rights as minorities while attempting to integrate them into the general Soviet Ukrainian and Russian culture. Due to the State's ambiguous approach, the status of Roma within Ukraine was constantly changing. In turn, this has dictated the cultural status and treatment of Roma within contemporary Ukraine. This paper will look at the cultural history of the Roma in Soviet Ukraine and their current status as minorities in a newly independent Ukraine.
Keywords: Roma, gypsies, Soviet, Ukraine

0 Introduction

The socio-political status of Roma[i] minorities living in present-day Ukraine has been influenced by the misdirected ethnic policies established during communism directed at integrating the Romani[ii] into the general Soviet lifestyle, while simultaneously confusing their culture's social status. Although Soviet policies did not specifically aim to discriminate against the Roma, they did not help maintain their specific culture either. Due to the ambiguity of the Soviet state's approach, many of the Roma living in western Russia and Ukraine were left with options of either culturally assimilating into a 'new', proletarian Soviet lifestyle and gaining some sense of 'nationhood'; or, they could continue to attempt to maintain their highly criticized lifestyle of nomadism and traditional labor. Assimilation provoked a backlash from non-Roma Soviet citizens who wanted to maintain their segregation from the Roma, as well as from fellow Roma who viewed assimilation as an abandonment of Romani identity. While assimilation did provide some legitimacy for the Roma in the eyes of the State during this time, this benefit was short-lived.

In the past twenty years, the Roma throughout Ukraine have been faced with problems of unemployment, social exclusion, racial violence and increasing stigmatization. Moreover, the dissolving of the Soviet Union has left both assimilated and unassimilated Roma unsure of their place in new and continually changing social and political spaces. As social and cultural relations evolve over time, the Roma must create their unique place within them. In this paper, I will

look at the Roma's place within Soviet Ukraine and their contemporary status within modern-day Ukraine.

In order to understand the contemporary status of Roma within Ukraine, we must look at their history under Communism. By understanding the Soviet-policies that shaped their relationship with Ukrainian culture, we will be able to understand where the prejudices and discrimination against them stem from. Although the roots of discrimination experienced by the Roma date farther back than the Soviet era, it can be argued that the Soviet system only further perpetuated this by placing the Roma within compromising, socio-economic positions.

1 First appearances in pre-Soviet Ukraine

Soviet historians suggested that groups of Roma had begun to appear in the Crimea by the early-to-mid eighteenth century (Cherenkov 50), with recorded appearances in Ukraine dating at 1757. In the early twentieth century, Russian records indicated a total of 61,299 Roma, stating that more than half had settled in Ukraine. The Roma's first appearance in Europe dates back to the early fifteenth century, with their roots branching back to India (Hancock 20-23). During these times, it was believed that the Roma had come from Hungary, Moldova and Romania, not from India. With their early appearance, the Roma in Ukraine were regarded as "a group that was inferior to the common people" (Crowe 154), and were briefly forced to pay into various factions, such as the Military Treaty of Little Russia tax ('Voiskovoi Malorossiiskii Skare') and other factions that they were forbidden from participating in (Barranikov 9).

2 Life under Communism

With the assumption of state power by the Bolsheviks, the Roma were recognized as a national minority within the Soviet Union and its indigenization policy by 1925 (Kalinin 242). This gave them the right to be educated in the Romani language and participate in lower levels of government factions. Great efforts were made by Roma intelligentsia to create a Romani language that was "consistent with Russian orthography" (Kalinin 51). This early – and very brief - period in Soviet history could be seen as a 'Romani Renaissance,' in which Roma individuals were encouraged to act on their culture's civil rights. This translated to a tremendous growth in Ukrainian and Russian Romani cultural, educational and political activity.

Under Vladimir Lenin's indigenization policy, the Roma had begun to find their cultural place within Ukrainian and Russian society. However, these social developments were brought to a stop under Joseph Stalin, as they did not correspond with the new minorities' policies[iii] of the USSR and Ukrainian SSR (Roucek 19). By 1926, the Roma were encouraged to adopt a sedentary lifestyle

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and settle on farming land that had been set-aside for them (Crowe 175). The Roma were encouraged and coerced by the Communist Party to take the bold steps of pushing for further education and qualifications and enrolling their children in state schools. However, integration into Soviet culture and a newly earned sense of 'nationhood' was usually at the price of abandoning their traditional Romani identity, which caused some groups of Roma to turn on those who had desired to culturally assimilate. In the end, one had to choose whether they would rather be marginalized by the state or their own people. This brings up the question of how could a social-policy towards Roma who do not necessarily desire to be educated, employed or 'accommodated' by the Soviet state have been revised? If many Roma individuals did not desire to be integrated within the Ukrainian SSR's social structure, then would it have been possible to create a social policy that was able to accommodate the Roman, the state and its people's wishes?

A second problem stems from the State's lack of attention towards gradually removing the long-standing prejudices against the Roma. By encouraging a group of socially marginalized people to participate in the formation of the new Soviet State, without acknowledging problems of racism only maintained prejudices among non-Romani citizens.

The statistical data (such as population figures) gathered on the Roma by the Soviet authorities resulted in varied treatment policies throughout the decades. The Soviet state inherited from Imperial Russia a Romani population of slightly over 60,000, which rose to 480,000 by the 1980s (Crowe 191). Many scholars argue that these figures are inaccurate, with some estimates ranging up to 200,000 Roma already living in Ukraine by the late nineteenth century (Crowe 195). With population figures drastically fluctuating throughout the years, the question of how 'minor' these Roma minorities actually were, was constantly at hand. The Roma's cultural lifestyles and traditions were seen by the Soviet state as problematic, as they did not coincide with the state's aims at modernization and industrialization. The problems lay with their nomadic lifestyle and traditional work (such as farming assistance, repair of household items and tools and fortune telling) that was integral to the culture of many Russian and Ukrainian Roma (O'Keefe 283-312).

With the population growing, the Soviet state encouraged educated, urban Roma to participate in politics and allowed for the emergence of Soviet Roma within international Romani affairs (Crowe 193-194). However, many of the Roma had integrated with the new modern urban culture, which was at this point still predominantly Russian speaking, losing much of their traditional cultural identity with time. Up until the Second World War, many Roma in the Soviet Ukraine attempted to continue living their nomadic lifestyles, usually to be reprimanded by the state. The political aim of the Soviet state was to make them equal citizens, yet extinguish all qualities that identified them as a distinct

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community, such as the nomadic lifestyle of many Roma kumpanias[iv]**.** The Soviet state encouraged them to "change their way of life and their main occupations in accordance with the new Soviet system" (Marushiakova and Popov 11). Roma who lived in the countryside were 'encouraged' (and often forced) to work on collective farms or to find work in newly industrialized cities. Many Roma resisted the move to state mandated land, which brought a new decree titled "O nadelenii zemlei tsygan, perekhodyachshikh k trodovomy osedlomy obrazu zhizni [On the Allotment of Land to the Gypsies for the Transition to a Working and Settled Way of Life]" (Crowe 175).

During this time, Ukraine possessed large portions of agricultural land that the peasants of Ukraine had refused to cultivate as a state collective. So, the Ukrainian SSR decided that they needed 'other rural people with nothing to lose from co-operative farms,' and they turned to the Roma. The land was taken from the peasants who refused to work on it under the new state-mandated collective laws and given to those Roma who had not moved to industrialized cities for settlement and cultivation (Guy 12). This undoubtedly awakened a feeling of hatred towards the Roma among the peasants, when it should have been directed at the government.

After the Second World War, nomadism was banned, with an aim to "recruit all Roma into full-time employment in standard occupations" (Kalinin 224). Many Roma succeeded in finding work within industrialized cities over the following decades, offering their skills in trading goods that were in short supply. However, this brought the Roma people into the position of scapegoats, as non-Romani citizens blamed the Roma for profiting illegally at "the expense of members of the majority populations" who had fallen on hard times (Kalinin 245). With this, social tensions in the workplace developed, with the Roma being chastised for doing what the State had initially encouraged them to do – which was to find work with the members of the majority populations.

The records kept by the Soviet Union informed (or in this case, misinformed) the policies which were used to treat the Roma. With this being the case in persecutory states, many Roma would have chosen to renounce their identification with their ethnic group and traditional cultural lifestyle in order to avoid being marginalized, and ultimately disadvantaged by the state or its people. Therefore, if many individuals who were Roma did not claim this as passport nationality and kept their true cultural identity a secret, Soviet records, in turn, would reflect only a fraction of the Roma population, making them appear to be even more marginal due to low population figures. Drawing any prejudicial or discriminatory attention to their marginal population is what some Roma tried to avoid in the first place. As a result, the Roma population within the Soviet Union would have been underrepresented, and in turn, the labor and ethnic policies constructed would have been based on inaccurate statistics, such as ones denoting a small population of Roma individuals.

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3 Forming an Identity within Ukraine

Compared to the Romani's state in present day Ukraine, it can be said that the Roma fared better during the Communist period. During the Soviet era, command economies needed unskilled Roma workers, yet the newly emerging post-Socialist market economies did not (cf. Guy 13). During the post-Communist economic restructuring, the closure of outdated "smokestack industries" and the return of privatized collective farms lead to the unemployment of many Roma individuals. They were the first to be made redundant and the last to be hired to fill vacancies (Guy 13).

Many Roma were now left without work, unable (that is, if they wanted) to return to their traditional way of life – one that had now become foreign to Roma born into assimilated families. As collective farms were broken down at this time, and the land was reprivatized, the Roma were faced with having to return to find their means elsewhere. Once again, they were uprooted and forced to find their place within a society that was already in a state of turmoil. During this period, crime rates among the Roma appeared to rise and many Romani individuals relied on state support and benefits to subsist. Once again, the Roma were cast in their familiar role of scapegoats and as a "drain on limited state resources at a time of acute uncertainty" (Fonseca 45). The flawed Ukrainian and Russian Soviet social policies towards the Roma are the underlying reasons for many of the contemporary issues that they face. These include policies of 'encouraging' the exchange of their traditional lifestyle for one that served a newly industrialized nation, as well as suppressing anti-Romani sentiments rather than actually dealing with them.

In the end, the policies affected both Roma and non-Roma in constructing unjust and unrealistic expectations of the Roma. It is, of course, impossible to rewrite former policies, as it is impossible to expect generations who have lived and live in Soviet and post-Soviet times to be able to easily redefine their deep-rooted social prejudices. Many of the Roma's hardships lie in forming an identity within a nation that has tried to construct its own. With the end of communism and the onset of Ukraine's independence, the Roma too faced hardships in finding their place within a society that sought to develop a national identity, as well as economic and political stability. Taras, Filippova and Pobeda sum this up by stating:

> Whereas Russia's historical development was based on their nationality shaped by the state, or imperium, Ukraine's was of the nation realizing its national interests within the framework of the Russian, then Soviet, empires. Circumstances dictated the adoption in Ukraine of a form of transnational rationality. (839)

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However, although Ukraine does promote transnationalism, traditional prejudices towards the Roma have survived within post-Soviet Ukrainian society. One of the worst areas in the post-Communist regions for the breaching of Romani human rights is the Ukraine (Kalinin 248). Reports of incidents of violence against the Roma are widespread, many identifying the police as the perpetrators. Due to this hostility, many Roma have fled from Ukraine to Belarus, a quasi-Soviet state controlling public expression. Measures to self-protect have been set up by Ukrainian Roma communities, such as a system of legal self-regulation, in which an individual is appointed to represent their Romani community and co-ordinate resistance whenever attacks occur (Kalinin 250). However, this in itself has not decreased the hate-crimes being carried out against the Roma.

Based on the 2001 census carried out by the State Statistic Committee of Ukraine, the population of Romani living in Ukraine is at 47,600 (State Statistic Committee of Ukraine 2001), although the World Romani Union and the Council of Europe estimate this figure to be over 400,000 (Gypsy Council, 2006). This large gap in population figures denotes that there are many Roma individuals within Ukraine that continue to publically and legally deny their cultural identity, to once again, avoid being discriminated against and persecuted by both state and people.

4 Concluding Remarks

Although the Soviet system recognized the minority status of the Roma, it believed that the best way to 'solve' their problems was to 'encourage' them to culturally assimilate with the rest of the Soviet population. In doing so, they stripped the Roma of their cultural traditions and lifestyle, and set them up for a future of socio-economic crisis and as scapegoats for the population's problems. Presently, the Romani continue to experience discrimination based on their socio-economic status, their ethnicity and cultural practices (Rose 4). This discrimination results in violence, harassment and the general mistreatment of the Roma. As a result, many have sought refuge within EU nations and overseas (Castle-Kanerova 117-134). Unfortunately, many Roma are once again faced with the same discriminatory treatment within the countries in which they seek a better life. Anti-Romani sentiments are widespread and persistent throughout the world, despite efforts taken by various nations to be multicultural and ethnically inclusive. More often than not, Roma seeking refuge within other countries are sent back to the countries that they have originally fled (Hancock 23).

Within Ukraine, the Roma continue to experience stigmatization, despite efforts taken by many to assimilate into the general Ukrainian culture. Those that continue to maintain their cultural tradition of nomadism are treated with

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contempt from both the general public and state. As such, the place of the Roma within Ukrainian society and culture is an enduring question. Future research could further explore the perception of Roma within Eastern Europe, while looking at how the Roma perceive themselves and how they maintain their traditional culture within societies that do not support their cultural histories and rights.

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i
A subgroup of the Romani who live in Central and Eastern Europe. The term 'Romani' references the ethnic group commonly known as 'Gypsies', while 'Roma' references this specific subgroup. 'Rom' is used to reference an individual Roma person, both male and female. The subgroup of Roma living in Ukraine is known as Servitka (Серви) Roma. (Hancock 270).

ii
The term for the ethnic minority group living in Europe, commonly known as Gypsies (Hancock 342).

iii
Initially, Soviet leaders had hoped that they would secure more political loyalty by "granting more cultural freedom to all minorities; especially the policy of promoting national cultures and the grand of the right of national languages was hailed as a great forward-step by the non-Russian intelligentsia" (Roucek 19). However, the general Soviet theoretical standpoint has always been that in the long run, national cultures were seen as a "bourgeoisie phenomenon" and that all minority cultures must and even "certainly will" undergo the process of assimilation (Joseph Stalin, Marxism and the National Question, 2nd Ed. (London, 1936) 196-97).

iv
A group of traveling Roma, linked together by extended families (Hancock 336).

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