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(review)**

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Reviews

New Soviet Gypsies: Nationality, performance, and selfhood in the early Soviet Union. Brigid O’Keeffe. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 2013. ISBN 978-1-4426-4650-6. 328 pp.

Reviewed by Yaron Matras

The concept of a Romani ‘nation’ still triggers controversy among scholars and policy-makers alike. Several decades before the emergence of the Romani political movement as we know it today, the idea of Romani nationhood was debated, perhaps for the very first time, in the early Soviet Union. In theory, the Soviet state allowed all non-Russians to practise their own nationhood. This included the promotion of their language, schools, theatres, and other institutions. But the Roma had been considered since imperial times to be exotic and backward, properties that were not the typical features that would define a national minority. The Roma therefore constituted an interesting test case for the policy – both in regard to what defines ‘nationality’ and in regard to the opportunities for ‘advancement’ that the Soviet state purported to offer to minority groups (p. 6). Brigid O’Keeffe tells the fascinating story of the makings of Romani nationhood in the early years of the Soviet empire. Her thesis is that Soviet nationalities policy offered Roma an opportunity to perform their belonging to the state by displaying particularity. Within the broader context of early Soviet nationalities policy, a display of selfhood was advantageous. The public discussion of minority nationhood gave Roma a chance to define both what is Roma and what is Soviet.

The text is based on research of primary archive sources covering government documents, personal correspondence, newspapers and other published materials, which the author accessed at the Russian state archives in Krasnodar, Moscow, Smolensk and Volgograd, as well as in the archives of museums and other cultural institutions in St Petersburg and Moscow. The book is organised in thematic chapters. The first describes the emergence of the Romani lobbyist and activist scene, the second deals with the promotion of Romani-language literacy and education, the third and fourth chapters outline attempts to transform Roma into workers in industrial and agricultural collectives and to institutionalise their political as well as economic participation, while the fifth chapter deals with Romani artistic performances during the Soviet era. The Epilogue is devoted largely to the personal story of Soviet Romani activist

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and writer A.V. Germano, who in his essays tried to express the ambiguities of his identity as a Gypsy, a Russian, and a Soviet citizen. The book is not a conventional historiographical narrative in which events are rendered in chronological order. There are quite a few repetitions both within individual chapters as well as among them, and the story unfolds gradually. Yet it is a gripping account of the role of a small number of individuals in attempts to shape state policy and ideology toward the Roma. O'Keeffe offers insights into the internal discussions of the Romani leadership, the performance devices that they employed, collaboration with the authorities, the obstacles that they encountered within their own community and pressures from outside, as well as their enthusiasm for the momentum of change and their ideological vision. The book thus offers not only a description of events that affected Roma in a particular country during a particular period in time, but also an analysis of what was arguably the very first attempt at any Romani nationalist mobilisation, and so it is a must read for anyone with an interest in the theory and practice of Romani nationhood. The theoretical framework centres on the performative aspects of identity discourses, and here the author follows closely in the footsteps of Lemon's (2000) seminal work on Romani identity performance in Russia.

The circle of Romani activists whose story is featured in the book includes I. I. Rom-Lebedev, E. A. Poliakov, I. G. Lebedev, N. A. Pankov, A. S. Taranov, M. T. Berliudskii, and A.V. Germano. Many of them descended from the families of Romani choirs that proliferated in Russia during the nineteenth century and immediately before the Soviet revolution. These were dissolved immediately after the revolution and many performers turned to nomadic lifestyles and itinerant occupations. Lenin's New Economic Policy allowed Roma to resume their art as part of a consolidation of minority nationhood, and this provided the spark for Romani cultural and political activism (pp. 33–6). In 1923 I. I. Rom-Lebedev and a circle of friends established a Communist Party cell exclusively for Roma in Moscow. This was followed first by the founding of an Action Committee of the Gypsy Proletarian Society which promoted the idea of Romani industrial cooperatives, agricultural communes and educational institutions, and then by the state-approved 'All-Russian Gypsy Union' that was established in 1925 to pursue the implementation of these goals (pp. 37–40).

Gypsies had been romanticised in some of the most important Russian literary works including those by Pushkin, Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy. In order to lobby state institutions, the activists partly embraced the old and established images, but they tried to use them to their advantage by showing that they were immersed in the political discourse of Soviet nationalities policy. They adopted a narrative that described the Roma as a backward nation that

required support in order to be elevated to a degree of productive participation. They demanded state funding in order to promote the transition of the Gypsy masses from a nomadic way of life to productive Soviet citizens. Within a relatively short period, their lobbying activities yielded a series of recommendations from official state organs precisely in this spirit. These were accompanied by articles published by the newly formed circle of Romani intelligentsia in key Soviet newspapers such as *Izvestiia*, where in a similar fashion stereotypes were employed as a way of asking for recognition. The Gypsy Union's information work was also directed at the Roma themselves, who were invited to join the lobbying effort and were promised plots of land free of charge if they lined up for resettlement in state-run collectives. In effect, it seems like the activists were pursuing a kind of bottom-up nationalism. This is an enlightening realisation for any reader who has hitherto assumed that Soviet policy toward the Roma followed directly from the overall centralised configuration of the Soviet state organs.

The movement succeeded in introducing an impressive range of practical measures. The activists initiated Romani-language schools, the first of which opened in Moscow in 1926. Although most teachers were Russian and most of the teaching was carried out in Russian, for the first time in history the Romani language was codified by linguists for the purpose of promoting wide-scale literacy, and between 1930 and 1933 hundreds of translations, political pamphlets and primers as well as magazines were published in Romani. A Romani boarding school was established in Smolensk in 1928 and at its height it admitted some 150 students, some of whom went on to medical courses (p. 174–5). In 1932 the first teacher-training courses for Roma were opened (p. 89). Motivated by the wish to 'advance' the Romani masses, these efforts led to what was in effect the birth of the very first Romani intelligentsia, in any country. It is also noteworthy that the choice of the regional dialect of Romani (Northrussian Romani) and of a writing system based on the majority state language was to set the model for country-based codification efforts for Romani that were to follow throughout central and eastern Europe from the 1960s onwards (cf. Matras 1999).

The adjustment of Romani stage performers to the expectations of Soviet artistic norms is a testimony to the dynamism of Romani culture and its adaptation strategies: Romani choirs had been abolished under Soviet rule since the traditional 'tsyganshchina' – the Gypsy style – was considered decadent. But Romani theatre re-emerged with performances such as 'Gypsies on a new path' in 1927, which depicted the misery of pre-revolution Roma. In 1931 the Romani theatre 'Romen' in Moscow became the very first Romani national theatre, led by directors M. I Goldblat of the State Yiddish Theatre, and S. M. Bugachevskii of the Bolshoi. It specialised in stereotypical depic-

tions of Romani culture, including a production of *Carmen*, thus offering its Russian audiences 'Gypsiness' as an exotic commodity (pp. 197–237). In the economic arena, many Roma sought employment in the industrial sector because the New Economic Policy placed severe restrictions on their itinerant service-economy. Inspired by the initiatives of the Gypsy Union, a number of Romani industrial collectives were established between 1927 and 1932, among them Tsgykhimprom (Gypsy Chemical Manufacturing) and Tsygpishcheprom (Gypsy Food Production) (p. 117). More than fifty Romani kolkhozes or collective farms were established in the Ukraine, North Caucasus, and other regions such as Smolensk Province. Although many were abandoned, some were celebrated for achieving and even exceeding their production targets. By the eve of World War II, some 800 Romani families were known to have settled on thirty Romani kolkhozes (pp. 176–88).

These initial successes were followed by setbacks. The Gypsy Union's membership remained limited to just a few hundred, most of them from the Moscow area, and it eventually lost its state subsidies (p. 54). In 1938 Romani schools were shut down as part of a general policy to abandon educational institutions for smaller minorities. The disagreements within the Party as to whether separate schools are more likely to promote segregation rather than integration or assimilation are reminiscent of many of today's discussions about Romani-language education. Only 150 children were enrolled in Moscow's Romani schools in 1931, and when Romani schools were closed in 1938, the official estimate of the number of pupils taught in Romani across the whole country was a mere 277 (p. 96). A total of some 120 Roma were trained as teachers, but most of them never found work in Romani schools (p. 98). Only 150 of the 400 workers of Tsygpishcheprom (the Gypsy Food Production collective) were actually Roma (p. 140). Of the twenty-five Romani Kolkhozes founded in the Ukraine, most had collapsed by 1932, often due to the fact that the authorities entrusted with supporting them were ill-equipped and not motivated (p. 158). A highly praised Romani collective farm in the North Caucasus had 112 members at the time of its establishment in 1928, but by the end of 1932 only eleven had remained (p. 161). The Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union put an end to the remaining Romani kolkhozes, many residents of which were exterminated.

Although the activists rallied around an overall ideology of Romani nationalism, which they tried to promote as compatible with Soviet ideals and policy, their work highlighted tensions and demarcations between Romani sub-groups, most notably between the Russka Roma and the Vlax Roma who had been recent immigrants from Romania and transition countries. The former had led the Romani choirs that were the cradle of the Romani intelligentsia, while the latter were seen as inherently foreign in their ways and non-adaptable and hence as a threat to the activists' ambitions of self-determination through inte-

gration. The activists therefore distanced themselves from the immigrants and denounced their behaviour to the authorities, and these often responded by evicting and criminalising the 'foreign' Gypsies (pp. 120–34). One is reminded of contemporary attitudes in some Romani communities, notably among the political establishment of Sinte in Germany, toward immigrant Roma from southeastern Europe. The Soviet Union officially outlawed nomadism in 1956 (p. 190). Elsewhere traces of the activists' legacy are still identifiable: many Roma served in the Red Army during World War II. An attempt was made after the war to revive a *kolkhoz* in the Smolensk Province. The *Romen Theatre* lives on, as does Romani presence in the Russian intelligentsia. Some old editions of the Romani dictionaries and grammars composed to support Romani literacy are still obtainable in libraries, though the majority of materials printed in Romani in the 1930s have become rare archival documents. But the lesson to be derived is not that Romani nationhood is doomed; Soviet policy was full of contradictions and the Soviet state never wholeheartedly embraced the concept of a Romani minority, nor that of genuine cultural autonomy for minorities. Rather, it is the performative aspect of Romani identity, and by inference of any national identity, that is the centre of the analysis. Indeed, some might argue that points for comparison might be drawn to today's efforts to forge Romani nationhood in a united Europe: if Soviet-era Romani politics were characterised by a dichotomy of the images of 'backwardness' and the need to gain recognition as 'productive citizens', then today's political discourse might be viewed as an attempt to attain social inclusion and overcome both poverty and discrimination by gaining legitimacy as a nation, whereby symbols of nationhood such as commemoration, political representation, and acknowledgement of a language and territorial origins in India serve to promote such legitimacy.

This brings me to a concluding point that is of no major significance to the book's main narrative, and indeed is largely a footnote, quite in the literal sense, in the book itself, but which nonetheless deserves attention in the context of a review in this particular journal. It concerns a remark that O'Keeffe makes about the debates on early Romani origins. In passing, while briefly reviewing early scholarly work, O'Keeffe cites Hancock's (2010) statement that the connections postulated by scholars between early Roma and castes of commercial nomads amount to nothing but a projection of stereotypes (p. 19). In a series of footnotes (pp. 260–1) she then refers to the works of Willems (1997) and Mayall (2004) for a critique of early European studies of Roma, and even comments that scholars have questioned "the currency of tracing Romani origins in India" (p. 261). There is an odd contradiction here. On the one hand O'Keeffe signals that she is inclined not to dismiss the so-called de-constructionist view that is sceptical toward the postulation of Indian origins and regards it merely as an

attempt to exoticise a population that is supposedly of unknown, uncertain or indeed of diverse origins, a view that is represented vigorously by Willems and to some extent by Mayall. At the same time she seems content to give at least the benefit of doubt to the discourse of Romani activists who rally around Hancock and who not only celebrate Indian origins but also put forward the claim that Roma migration to Europe was not voluntary but a result of external oppression and enslavement, and that Romani service economy is not inherited but imposed by outsiders. O’Keeffe does not devote more than a few sentences to the issue, but the mere mention of the argument over origins reflects a growing trend in Romani studies: the two strands represented by Willems–Mayall and Hancock can be reconciled only by a wholesale suspicion toward mainstream, established scholarship and the tradition of comparative linguistic–philological and ethnographic interpretation on which it is based. This suspicion in turn seems to reflect a quest for a politically correct alternative narrative, irrespective of any specific, identifiable flaws in the existing argumentation of established theories. In other words, it is less important whether Romani origins in India can be proven or not, or whether there is, conversely, any factual basis for Hancock’s fantastic claims that the ancestors of the Roma were noble warriors assembled to resist Muslim invasions. A growing number of authors seem simply to feel a need to express doubt in mainstream scholarship, whichever direction the critique comes from and wherever it may lead, and in this way to assert their own scholarly work as politically correct. This too, I suppose, is a kind of identity performance that would merit closer analysis.

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