Chapter 5

From “Unsettled Fortune-Tellers” to Socialist Workers: Education Policies and Roma in Early Soviet Union

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Abstract This chapter embeds Roma identity formation in the politics of early Soviet Union, by examining the role schools played in delineating boundaries of belonging and the sense of nationhood. I analyze education policies and politics towards minorities in the 1920s and ‘1930s through textbooks in Romani language from the time. I show that textbooks, often through educating basic grammar to children, sought to alter their identities from “unsettled fortune-tellers” to working Roma. Roma way of life was equated with oppression of the old, pre-revolutionary times, while new, Socialist life that Roma were to become part of was characterized by equality and work. What was seen as the traditional Roma way of life was incompatible with the goals of the state, and schools were to “transform” Roma children into productive Socialist workers. Socialism, therefore, was seen as the emancipation and empowerment Roma needed in order to leave their “backwards” habits in the past.

Keywords Roma · Soviet Union · Nation-building · Nativization · Education

Introduction: Making a Nation and Building a State

State- and nation-building are inseparable developments that were linked together by mass education (e.g., Boli et al. 1985, 1989; Meyer et al. 1979; Darden and Grzymala-Busse 2006), and public schools were a key institution and the primary homogenizing tool of the state (Gellner 1983; Foucault 1997; Mitchell 1988). In other words,

(...) the state contributes to the unification of the cultural market by unifying all codes (...) and by effecting a homogenization of all forms of communication [...]. Through classification systems (...) inscribed in law through bureaucratic procedures, educational structures, and social rituals (...) the state molds *mental structures* and (...) contributes to the construction of (...) national identity. (Bourdieu 1999, p. 61)

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With centralized and state-approved core curriculum, school can be considered “monopolistic, centrally controlled communication network” of the state (Azrael 1972, p. 318) and “the most important socializing institution” (Nogee 1972, p. 315). Internalization of attitudes towards the authority as well as teaching loyalty and discipline has been the perennial goals of the state. Universal schooling has been historically the mechanism “generating citizens” and managing identities through political and cultural socialization (Boli 1989) and “the road leading towards the eradication of non-conformity” (Crowe 1994, p. 76).

In the Soviet Union, schools also played a central role in creating a manageable, cohesive society, which can be more effectively directed by the “all knowing government agencies” (Stewart 2001, p. 78), and possess the necessary class-consciousness. The compulsory nature of education was important to “overcome considerable resistance” especially in more remote areas of Russia (Slezkine 1994, p. 224).¹ “Education involves considerably more than the developing of skills. . . it involves ‘molding the new Soviet man’. . . [and] pedagogic techniques are designed to foster discipline and respect for authority,” writes Nogee (1972, p. 315). There was “no education for the sake of education,” as Slezkine aptly put it, instead the “emphasis was on practical skills and ideological correctness” (1994, p. 222). The educational system “helped socialize a predominantly tradition-oriented population into the cultural patterns of an industrial society” (Azrael 1972, p. 327). Schools were mobilized as a tool for the state, where the students were taught “how to detect backwardness in economic, social, domestic, and spiritual life; (. . .) and then go back home and pull their kinsmen out of the proverbial swamp” (1994, p. 222).

Schooling, then, becomes an interesting area for research: How are citizens made through the educational system? How is nation-building reinforced in the process of education, and how are minority groups treated? For the examination of these questions I focus on the early USSR’s Nativization policies in the 1920s until the mid-‘1930s, which is arguably a unique education policy, promoting minority identities while instilling Socialist ideology and loyalty towards the state. Roma² at the time represented a challenge on many levels, as their lifestyle made a centralized decision-making more difficult they posed a continuous challenge to Communist thinking (Stewart 2001, p. 71).

In this chapter, I explore the role of schools and educational policy to shaping Roma identity in the early Soviet Union. I focus on the Nativization policies, which laid the foundation of institutionalizing Roma culture as part of the Soviet society. I look at policies focused on “civilizing” and “normalizing” Roma, as it was seen at

¹Education became compulsory in early Socialism, with the Soviet successful (state-run) *likbez* campaign (liquidation of illiteracy) in the 1920s and ‘1930s.

²The author wishes to acknowledge that although the term *Gypsy* better reflects historical and ethnographic realities of the time—policies were formulated about Soviet Gypsies and the language of the time referred to Gypsies as the name of the group, rather than Roma, nevertheless this chapter mainly uses the term Roma, reflecting the contemporary academically and politically correct way of calling the group.

the time, through the school system. I show that the Roma way of life was to be corrected and adjusted to the values of Communism.

To that end, I interrogate issues of nationhood, state power, belonging, and identity politics attempting to elucidate Roma identity formation in the early Soviet Union. I argue that nation and state building efforts informed policies towards Roma, and consequently how they were defined and managed by the state, primarily through schools. This chapter primarily builds on top-down analysis of state documents, state-issued textbooks, and various archival materials from Russia.³

Nationality Policies in the Early USSR

As the aftermath of World War I and the October Revolution, Lenin embarked on a grand project building a new society: a state that was meant to become borderless and encompass the entire world and a nation that was united by ideology, rather than language, culture, race or history. Lenin firmly believed that every nation has the right to self-determination (Lenin 1967-1981, vol. 19, p. 212). Consequently, immediately after the formation of the Soviet Union, the question about social cohesion and nationality policy emerged. Lenin launched a brief but very important Nativization (*Korenizatsiya*) program, according to which the state was to promote minority cultures and promote native cadres into leadership positions.

Some scholars argue that the nationality policy at the time had indeed a nation-building character (Von Hagen 1996, p. 297). Slezkine suggests a rather instrumental employment of national elites to assure loyalty to the state: “the virtues of the periphery and non-Russian nationalism were being loudly proclaimed by increasingly self-assertive ethnic elites [by the early 20th century],” and instead of repressing this national revival, the “revolutionary regime called on the former exiles to perform the task [of representing their nations]” (Slezkine 1994, p. 129).

Nativization was founded on the following principles: cultivating national identities and cleansing cultures of non-progressive, nationalist elements of Tsarist times; undoing past exploitation of non-Russian nationalities (Slezkine 1994, p. 136); and promoting the ideas of Marxism-Leninism in order to incorporate all ethnic groups into the fabric of a new Soviet society. Cultivation of national identity was necessary because the previous Russian exploitation of minorities could only be “undone” by

³The chapter is partially based on two previous research projects: (1) research that I conducted for my unpublished dissertation manuscript (Dunajeva 2014), which was supported in part by a fellowship from the International Research & Exchanges Board, with funds provided by the United States Department of State through the Title VIII Program, and by a Sasakawa Young Leaders Fellowship Fund graduate fellowship for international research. Neither of these organizations are responsible for the views expressed herein; and (2) research conducted together with Dr. Dmitriy Dunaev, entitled “The Question of National Self-Determination after World War I: Nation- and State Building Efforts in the Soviet Union” and presented at the Annual Conference of National Movements and Intermediary Structures in Europe (NISE) in May 2019 in Warsaw, Poland.

establishment of national governments, which through cultivation of their own lifestyles would “direct at the dark masses a ray of enlightenment” (Slezkine 1994, p. 136).

Institutionalization of national cultures in reality entailed a high degree of standardization of national languages, education in local languages, setting up of cultural and arts institutions to celebrate national cultures and traditions—all was done to conform to and contribute to the common idea of a Soviet socialist nation. In the case of Roma, top down management of group identities during this period also involved a form homogenization and standardization: one Romani dialect (Xaladitko) was pronounced as standard language and consequently taught in Roma schools:

the Northern Russian dialect was given the status of standard language in Romany schools of Russia and Ukraine. It was compulsory in the spirit of the Soviet state at the time: no alternatives, no comments, unless you wanted to be sent to Siberia. The 1925 decree had to be carried out. . .[and] adults Roma and Sinte and their children from all these groups [Vlach Roma, Balkan Roma, Ukrainian Roma, and German-influenced dialect speakers, Scandinavian Roma and others] strove hard to learn this standard Northern Russian Romani (Kalinin 2000, p. 145).

Standardization based on such criteria was far reaching, and even “Gypsy-like nomads” like the Liuli in Central Asia had to learn this selected dialect (Kalinin 2000).

There were also attempts to involve Roma as a national minority in building Communism. In 1925 the Soviet government recognized Roma as a national minority and besides granting them the right to be educated in Romani language, the Pan-Romani Union and Romani Congress were organized, and Romani collective farms were established in 1926–1927 (Kalinin and Kalinina 2001, p. 244).

Incompatibility of the Socialist vision to create a uniform working class and promotion of distinct cultural (or ethnic) identities as part of the Nativization program unmistakably created a paradoxical situation. For instance, the unique Romen Theater was built in 1931, and until today it is considered as the cultural center of the Russian Roma. However, Alaina Lemon shows that the Romen Theater while helped to preserve Romani culture was also created to help assimilation, sedentarization, education, and “transform[ation of] Gypsies from wild parasites into productive workers” (2000, pp. 130–131). The directors in the theater changed plays “to fit within both Euro-Russian theatrical expectations and the bounds of socialist realism” (Lemon 1998, p. 150). The establishment of the Romen Theater, in other words, embodies the tension between building a Socialist identity and the seemingly minority-friendly nationalist policies.

Even though non-Russian nationality continued to be equated with backwardness and Soviet policies aimed at “eliminating the backwardness. . .that the nationalities inherited from the past” (Slezkine 1994, p. 144), Lenin’s USSR was arguably known by the Russian Roma community as “the beginning of civil rights for Roma in USSR” (Crowe 1994, p. 174). Valdemar Kalinin wrote that “feeling thankfulness to the Russians is still vivid among Roma in North-Eastern Europe, especially the Russian Roma” (2000, p. 140). Russian Roma also remain the “symbol and model

for all Roma in the Romani commitment and dedication in the Romani customary code” (ibid.).

Schools and Nation-Building in Early USSR

For the revitalization and institutionalization of the Romani language and culture while instilling values of Marxism-Leninism, schools were deemed as the most important state institution. “Marxist schools would have the same curriculum irrespective of their linguistic medium”—was the attitude at the time (Slezkine 1994, p. 142). To achieve Communism, everyone needed “special guidance” from a “special communist party,” which had to reach all groups in their native language (Slezkine 1994, p. 142). Thus, while national cultures were promoted, the goal remained to modernize nations and standardize cultures, as only modern, class-conscious groups can develop further into Communist and Soviet men and women, and, in turn, evolve into loyal Soviet citizens. Schools were used to manage group identities, but the goal was to change the content of “Roma,” rather than eliminate the category. Roma had to be modernized and civilized to join the Socialist working class.

There has been only sporadic inquiry about Romani-language textbooks of the time, but to the best of my knowledge, an in-depth analysis of textbook content has not yet been done. For instance, Crowe described that Romani literacy books “include[d] articles explaining the new land tenure system, the five year plan. . . how to become atheists, live in houses and go to school (Crowe 1994, p. 177). Below I present my own textbook analysis conducted at the archives of the Russian State Library, and consider examples from textbooks at the time, translated from Romani language to English.⁴ I show excerpts and the way those, through educating basic grammar to children, sought to alter their identities from “unsettled fortune-tellers” to working Roma.

Through textbooks, building on stereotypes about Roma the Soviet state strove to re-create Roma as part of the Socialist working class. I suggest that in textbooks there was an obvious attempt to juxtapose stereotypical Roma culture with desirable qualities of a Soviet citizen and teach values of Socialism. Textbooks taught discipline, work ethic, Marxist-Leninist ideology, and socialist values, while contrasting those with undesirable social elements, backwards traditions and lacking work ethic.

Image 5.1 is the cover of a textbook for first grade Roma students. It depicts a Roma home at the top, and a classroom at the bottom of the page. The former is a chaotic, filthy, undisciplined environment. The latter, however, is an orderly and disciplined atmosphere, with obedient children, clear hierarchy and defined social roles. The schools, thus, became not only institutions that teach these values, but the

⁴Translation was done with the help of Kirill Kozhanov, hereby I thank him for his kind assistance.

Image 5.1 Inside cover of N.A.Pankov and N.A. Dudarova, “Dzhidi buty” («Джиды буты»). Moscow: Centrizdat, 1930. Book accessed from the Russian State Library (Khimki, Russia)

very analogy to the Soviet society: a well-disciplined, homogenous society of workers.

Textbooks were also filled with political messages, educating Roma in Romani language about Lenin, Stalin, values of Socialism, and the Bolshevik Party. For instance, Image 5.2 translates from Romani as following⁵:

⁵N.A. Dudarova, “ABC book: your primary school” («Букварье: ваш начальна школа»). Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe uchebno-pedagogicheskoe izdatelstvo, 1934, p. 64–65. Book accessed from the Russian State Library (Khimki, Russia)

Image 5.2 N.A. Dudarova, “ABC book: your primary school” («Букварь: ваш начальная школа»). Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe uchebno-pedagogicheskoe izdatelstvo, 1934, p. 64–65. Book accessed from the Russian State Library (Khimki, Russia)

Lenin

For us, he was a leader, teacher, friend.
We are on the path that Lenin paved for us.
So say workers in all countries.
So say Communists in all countries.
We are on the path that Lenin paved for us.

Stalin

Lenin died, but the Leninist party, the
Communist party, the Bolshevik Party – it lives and grows.
Stalin - the best student of Lenin.
Beloved leader of our party.
Under his leadership, we are building a new life.
Stalin - the best student of Lenin.

Similarly, “enemies of the people,” also referred to as the “enemies of the proletariat,” meaning political opponents of the Soviet regime, could be found among Roma, so educating the young Romani pupils to identify such traitors among themselves was imperative. Kulaks—affluent peasants—were seen as

remnants of the inequalities of Tsarist Russia and class enemies. Kulaks also posed an obstacle to collectivization efforts, which a crucial goal of the state's industrialization effort (Slezkine 1994, p. 188).

Collectivization was particularly important in the case of Roma because nomadism was seen as incompatible with collectivization. In addition, collectivization was also considered a way to manage the “backwards” peoples: it cultivated qualities such as of strength and determination and taught economic rationality and modern technology (Slezkine 1994, p. 205). Consider the following translation from a Romani language textbook⁶:

Kulaks

Gypsies have kulaks
Kulaks should not be admitted to collective farms
They are enemies of collective farming
Together with the priests,
We must drive them off,
They are the enemy of collective farming
And they are called kulaks

On the collective farm

Kulaks said that we will not have bread in the collective farms, that we will not have vegetables

Kulaks are our enemies. Kulaks told the poor peasants not to join collective farms.
Collective farms follow a plan. Each worker completes their tasks. . . .
Kulaks lied to us.

Working class identity assumed a certain attitude to labor as well. Textbooks instructed Roma about their participation in the labor market with clear message about women's contribution as well. Based on the images below (Images 5.3 and 5.4) it is clear that while women in the traditional Roma household are portrayed as subordinate to men and victims of patriarchal social order, their submissive status changes through work in a Socialist society. Joining the working class implied more autonomy for women. Roma women were shown fulfilling occupations previously thought as only for men (e.g., tractor drivers, factory workers).

“Civilizing” the Roma was also an explicit goal. Schools were seen as the most appropriate tool to achieve this goal. Consider the following abstracts from a Romani textbook⁷:

Masha works in a factory. Her husband works in a factory. Their children go to Roma kindergarten.

Masha doesn't have a father. The school gives food to Masha. Masha is given shoes and clothes. Masha goes to school.

My mother was a fortune-teller. My father was a trader. Now my mother is no longer a fortune-teller. My father does not trade. I go to school. My mother works in a factory. My father works in a factory. Find your happiness in work.

⁶N.A. Dudarova, “Amari buty” («Амари буты»). Moscow: Uchpedgiz, 1932, p. 32-33. Book accessed from the Russian State Library (Khimki, Russia)

⁷N.A. Dudarova, “ABC book with illustrations: Reader for adults” («Аваса лылваренса: Букваре ваш барэ манушэнгэ»). Moscow: Uchpedgiz, 1933, p. 28–29. Book accessed from the Russian State Library (Khimki, Russia)

Image 5.3 N.A. Dudarova, “ABC book with illustrations: Reader for adults” («Авасалыларенса: Букваре ваш барэ манушэнгэ»). Moscow: Uchpedgiz, 1933, p. 25. Book accessed from the Russian State Library (Khimki, Russia)

Image 5.4 N.A. Dudarova, “ABC book with illustrations: Reader for adults” («Авасалыларенса: Букваре ваш барэ манушэнгэ»). Moscow: Uchpedgiz, 1933, p. 14. Book accessed from the Russian State Library (Khimki, Russia)

Another aspect of the “civilizing mission” was undoing injustices of the past, characteristic of the Tsarist Russia and many “backwards” traditional cultures. Consider the following excerpt⁸:

(...) under the Tsar, Roma were not considered people, they did not work, were not taught...now they live like any other worker. (...) Under the Tsar women’s lives were bad. The women were oppressed. Now the woman can depart from her old life.

It was the school, in other words, that allowed Roma to transition into the new, desired lifestyle. The following excerpts from textbooks are telling of that⁹:

Lifestyle changes fast. Roma understand well that a house is better than the field.
Those who work, eat. We won’t sit hungry, we are working Roma.

Through education and work Roma were to be liberated of their backwards habits and ultimately join the Socialist masses. Socialism, therefore, was portrayed emancipation and empowerment for Roma.

In the end, all ethnic or national differentiation was expected to disappear, according to the popular rhetoric of the time. “Oppressed nation nationalism” was not supposed to pose a challenge to the Soviet state as it was expected to “eventually lead to...the end of nationalist paranoia and therefore to the end of national differences” (Slezkine 1994, p. 142). This was necessary to the withering away of the state, the last stage of Communism. Lenin believed that the lack of national tension and national distrust would draw people together until the state fades away (ibid., p. 143).

Conclusion: The End of Nativization and its Legacies

Nativization policy was short-lived: The national minority status of Roma in the USSR (along with national schools, newspaper and alike) was withdrawn in 1936, and the “Theater was simply a rather small hangover of the Bolshevik legacy” (Stewart 2001, p. 74). By 1938, a secret resolution discontinued (minority) national education and national classes for the Roma (Demeter et al. 2000, p. 207). The Pan-Romani Union lasted until 1928.

Nevertheless, the project promoting “socialist content” in “national form” had lasting consequences. For instance, in 1926, 64.2% of Roma chose Romani as their native tongue, compared to 1959, after the discontinuation and reversal of the Nativization policies, when only 59.3% chose Romani (Crowe 1994, p. 189). Also, some suggest that Russian Roma were able to preserve their culture in Russia and today “are a symbol and model for all Roma in their Romani commitment and dedication to the Romani customary code” (Kalinin 2000, p. 140). They

⁸N.A. Dudarova, “Amari buty” («Амари буты»). Moscow: Uchpedgiz, 1932, p. 24–25. Book accessed from the Russian State Library (Khimki, Russia)

⁹N.A. Dudarova, “ABC book with illustrations: Reader for adults” («Аваса лылваренса: Букваре ваш барэ манушэнгэ»). Moscow: Uchpedgiz, 1933, p. 13. Book accessed from the Russian State Library (Khimki, Russia)

arguably feel rooted in Russia more so than in European countries (Lemon 1998, 2000; Dunajeva 2014).

In sum, this chapter discussed the unique Nativization policy in the early USSR. At the beginning of the chapter, two questions were posed: How are citizens made through the educational system? How is nation-building reinforced in the process of education, and how are minority groups treated? Based on the example of Roma in the early Soviet Union, I showed how schools were the primary nation-building institution of the state. Since the early Soviet nation was tied by the ideology of Socialism, this ideology had to be taught to all nations who belonged to the USSR, in order to form a coherent society of Socialist workers. Consequently, nationality policy had to take on a nation-building character.

The paradoxical nature of Nativization program is well illustrated through the educational realm: although Roma language and culture was supported by the state, nevertheless textbooks unambiguously served a “normalizing,” “civilizing function, written in a standardized Romani language. Through textbooks and school discipline, Roma children learned how elements of their culture were incompatible with values of Marxism-Leninism and needed to be corrected.

Furthermore, the top-down educational policies were vital for creating a manageable and coherent population, all in the name of equality. Everyone could become “an equal member of the family of Soviet peoples” (Slezkine 1994, p. 303), with the right ideological training in Marxist-Leninist ideology and socialist values, as well as appropriate work ethic. Roma, similarly to all other citizens of the Soviet Union, were expected to contribute to the labor force and join the collective effort of building Socialism. In theory, once Roma, or other “backwards groups” for that matter, reach the desired mentality and become “revolutionaized,” they will blend in to the Soviet working class.

The analysis of the early Soviet nation-building efforts with its experimental nationality policy teaches are valuable lessons, with much relevance today. What defined Roma in the early Soviet Union, and what continues to delineate Roma identity today, is a combination of political ideology and state policies. What was truly remarkable about the early Soviet nationality policy is the generated debate about national self-determination – a debate that is at the heart of contemporary (political) Romani movement – and its application to the Roma peoples living within the USSR. Another noteworthy feature of early Soviet society is its inclusiveness – perhaps a utopian myth, generated to hold the heterogeneous construction of the Soviet Union, but perhaps not more utopian than contemporary myths of national belonging. The totalizing identity of “the Soviet people” assumed that cultural development would lead to the eradication of cultural differences, and all people would evolve into the Soviet totality.

The presented research is a testament that ethnicities are constructed over time and categories of belonging are dynamic, fluid and flexible. This period in Soviet history showed how specific policies are used to construct citizens; Roma were “citizens in-the-making” and for the “New Soviet Gypsies” it meant being “socially useful laborers and striving towards full integration into Soviet life” (O’Keeffe 2013, p. 5). By extension, one can argue that today they remain “citizens in-the-making” of

their respective countries as well. Just like Roma threatened the ideal vision of a New Soviet citizens, they seem to pose a challenge to the relatively homogenous nation-states of Europe today.

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