
Book Review

Celia Donert (2017) *The Rights of the Roma: The Struggle for Citizenship in Postwar Czechoslovakia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Celia Donert's impressive study of the changing situation of Roma in Czechoslovakia since the Second World War is to be welcomed for its thorough treatment of this important subject matter. For those interested in this topic, her book is essential reading as it reveals a 'largely forgotten history'. The careful and informed scholarship is evident throughout – often drawing on previously restricted official sources – and arguments are supported by a comprehensive bibliography and detailed footnotes. While the principal focus of the book is on developments in Czechoslovakia, there are frequent comparisons with neighbouring socialist states. The commentary is enlivened by the experience of key Roma individuals, while references do not detract from the lucid explanations of policy shifts and their causes.

A major aspect of Donert's account is that it challenges conventional Cold War narratives which locate 'the apparent emergence of Roma rights in the context of the Eastern European "democratic transition" after 1989.' Instead, she argues convincingly, 'socialist regimes in the Soviet bloc played a crucial role in the future development of discourses and practices of Roma rights by providing the Roma with equal rights and economic opportunities as citizens after 1945.' (p. 273) As a consequence, the 'redistributive, egalitarian logic of the socialist economy had reduced the relative deprivation of Roma populations.' As Donert points out: 'by 1960, Czechoslovakia had the lowest income inequality of any country in the world.'

A 1967 study of social stratification in Czechoslovakia showed the average monthly income of employed Roma men to be higher than that of Slovaks. This remarkable transformation from their impoverished situation in the interwar period had come about following the post-Second World War migration of many Roma from rural Slovakia to Czech cities and industrial areas in search of better-paid labouring jobs.

Given the numerous criticisms made by human rights organisations about the treatment of Roma during the Communist era, Donert's positive view of this period may seem surprising. However, she presents Roma as political actors helping to shape their future identity rather than as passive victims of state policy, emphasising the important role played by Roma activists, many of whom were Party members such as the sociologist Miroslav Holomek, lawyer Tomáš Holomek and author Elena Lacková. This is in marked contrast to the Canadian historian Gordon Skilling's dismissal of Czechoslovak Roma as 'culturally backward and unorganised.'

Her nuanced account also reveals the conflicting views of Roma held by key officials within the state apparatus, some of whom offered forthright support for Roma rights. As early as 1949, the Communist-dominated Central Council of Trade Unions had opposed the establishment of special labour camps to re-educate Roma migrant

workers, arguing that Gypsies had shown 'better adaptability to the new conditions... than many other classes.' Party newspapers also complained about the 'overcrowded, flea-infested wooden shacks' provided by the country's largest steelworks to house its Roma workers. Later, Vladimír Srb, the leading demographer at the State Statistical Office, protested officially against the government decision that Roma were not to be classified as a nationality.

At the same time Donert does not flinch from discussing the significant shortcomings of Communist policy towards Roma. These were highlighted in a fiercely critical 1978 report by the dissident organisation Charter 77 which accused the government of a series of human rights abuses.

More than 20 years earlier, alarmed by mounting non-Roma concern at the emergence of virtual Roma ghettos in Czech towns and cities, the government had decided that 'a final solution to the gypsy question' was required. Roma were accused of 'sitting on piles of gold and cash ... destroying our economy while the toiling masses are building socialism in our homeland'. The chosen solution was a 1958 law against nomadism, partially influenced by a similar 1956 Soviet decree outlawing Gypsy vagrancy. Donert argues that these laws were part of an attempt to legitimise socialist regimes after the arbitrary rule of Stalin.

Although nominally aimed at the few genuinely nomadic Roma of the Vlach minority, the real target of the Czechoslovak law was the settled Roma majority. At this time, most Roma still lived in Slovakia, concentrated in isolated, segregated settlements lacking basic infrastructure, which were the reservoir from where migrant workers were drawn. For those registered as 'nomads', moving elsewhere without local authority permission was punishable by up to three years imprisonment. Implementation of the law largely failed, as Donert recognises, because 'local and national state agencies pursued contradictory approaches to Roma migration; local authorities supported migration to get rid of their Gypsies, while central bodies attempted to limit or stop migration.'

Poor results led, in 1965, to the adoption of a 'dispersal and transfer' programme aimed at the elimination of Roma concentrations. The intention was to assimilate Roma into the wider population, partly to eradicate their 'cultural backwardness' but also to avoid demands for national minority status. This new initiative collapsed after three years, again largely due to resistance by local authorities. After three further years – and in the aftermath of the tumultuous Prague Spring – the now permitted Slovak Roma Union pointed out that the 1965 measures violated the constitutional right to freedom of movement of Roma citizens.

One of the strongest charges in the Charter 77 report was that Czechoslovak doctors were carrying out what amounted to genocide. Not only were Roma women offered cash incentives for sterilisation but this procedure was often performed without their consent or even knowledge. This was confirmed by a 2003 report which disturbingly 'revealed [that sterilisation without consent] was continuing into the post-socialist era.' Such practices occurred within the context of official concern about the rapid growth of the Roma population and amid allegations that Roma had many children in order to maximise their income from child benefit payments.

After the failure of the dispersal plan, several all-Gypsy housing estates were built in the 1970s and after in a reversal of the previous policy. Donert explains that

these were presented as model housing improvements, but that Charter 77 criticised them as segregated ghettos. The first example was Chanov in the North Bohemian city of Most, where the previous Roma district was demolished to make way for an open-cast mine for brown coal. This was followed by similar schemes in Slovakia, such as the Luník IX estate on the outskirts of the East Slovak regional capital of Košice. The local Slovak population had resented the large Roma concentration in the town centre and welcomed the demolition of this quarter. The scheme to resettle Roma was supported by the mayor, Rudolf Schuster, later to become Slovak president.

At the same time that physical segregation of Roma was increasing, there was growing educational separation of Roma children. These were often unjustifiably consigned to special schools for those with learning disabilities, a practice denounced by Charter 77. By the mid-1980s, almost half of school-age Roma attended a special school, which limited their employment possibilities to unskilled jobs.

With the emphasis on rights as its theme, an important topic in Donert's book is the role of Czechoslovak Roma activists in the developing international Romani movement. While Roma attempts to mobilise in Czechoslovakia before 1968 had been rejected as counter-productive nationalism, the failure of the dispersal policy – coinciding with the arrival of the Prague Spring – prompted a fresh approach and Roma activists were allowed to form their own cultural associations and related economic organisations. Donert explains that although representatives from the Czech Roma Union were permitted to attend the First World Romani Congress, held near London in 1971, they were closely supervised by embassy staff. These officials reportedly praised the delegation's positive account of the situation of Roma in Czechoslovakia in comparison with those living in the capitalist West.

Nevertheless, 'the Roma Unions survived for just four years, before being forced into "voluntary" liquidation' following 'an internal [Party] report that "the Gypsy intelligentsia, supported by outsiders, is starting to ... [make] demands for Gypsies-Roma to be recognised as a nationality".' Meanwhile, the economic organisations were accused of corruption because, instead of using their state funding 'supposed to support "traditional gypsy crafts (coppersmiths, blacksmiths, pottery)"', they were using them to "conduct entrepreneurial activities for socialist economic organisations", frequently by "selling labour force" – in other words, hiring out Roma construction workers on an informal basis for short-term work in state companies.'

The bulk of this book focuses on Czechoslovakia and only the final chapter deals with post-Communism and the failure of neo-liberal, post-socialist governments to secure effective rights for their Roma citizens. In the first post-Communist parliamentary elections, Czechoslovakia returned 11 Roma MPs – more than any other Eastern European country – but after 1992 only a single one remained. The Velvet Divorce of 1993 – hailed as the peaceful separation of the Czech Republic and Slovakia – was manipulated by the Czech government in an attempt to deny citizenship to an estimated 150,000 Roma residents. Meanwhile, Roma – working in low-skilled, labour-intensive occupations before 1989 – 'experienced the transformation as a *loss* of rights in all fields of life: employment, education, housing, and health.' Meanwhile, racist attacks on Roma drove many to seek asylum in Western Europe.

Significantly, virulent anti-Roma prejudice is not only a populist phenomenon. Unfortunately, there was not space in the book to document the racist utterances and attitudes of leading Czech and Slovak politicians, which helps explain the lack of progress in improving Roma rights in key areas. However, reluctance in acknowledging complicity of Czechoslovaks in the labour camp at Lety, where Roma were held before being transferred to the Nazi death camps, and the reluctance to commemorate these victims, as well as the continuing large proportion of Roma children in special schools, tell their own story.

In Donert's view, 'human rights for Roma ... emerged not as a solution to the problems caused by Communism but as a response to the vacuum created by the collapse of citizenship rights in the socialist bloc after 1989.' (p. 276) A Slovakian research report on returned Roma emigrants conveyed a similar message: 'Every single Roma whom we have spoken with claimed that for Roma it was easier to live in this country before 1990. As one of them put it: "It is necessary to return the Roma where he was ten years ago".'

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References

- Donert, C. (2017) *The Rights of the Roma: The Struggle for Citizenship in Postwar Czechoslovakia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
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