“Comrades, If You Have a Heart…”
The History of the Gypsy Issue, 1945–1961

The construction and spread of the state socialist system

Like in many East-Central European countries, the brief period of parliamentary republicanism following World War II ended with the seizing of power by a communist party (the Hungarian Workers’ Party) with the support of the Soviet Union. The single-party system began to form in 1948 and aimed to reorganize society according to Marxist-Leninist principles within a framework of political internationalism. While those in power between the two World Wars established their rule on the restriction of rights (e.g., Jewish laws), the communist powers in theory declared the execution of an egalitarian society, where equality became a policy for which the working class, the co-operative peasantry and their allies in the intelligentsia would form a foundation. However, what ended up happening was that the anti-egalitarian nationalism that had gained strength between the World Wars persisted in the new political framework. State policy in Hungary based on differentiation received new content and form, and thereby a definitive role was played not by the restriction of the rights of Jews, but by prejudices and social/political passions toward the Gypsies, who were the biggest minority in the eyes of the “majority.”

The fate of Gypsies in the decades after 1945 was similar in all the countries of East-Central Europe. The new constitutions of state socialist systems, based on the Soviet model, appeared to guarantee equality to all citizens. The various Gypsy communities in these countries generally lived under poorer conditions than the average standard of living of the “majority” society, and this had a strong effect on how society judged them, even under state socialism. Consequently, from the 1950s these countries had to begin dealing with them. At the local level, the social boundaries that existed between non-Gypsies and Gypsies in the decades before
1945 began to become visible at the national level, largely as a result of discourse on Gypsies. These discourses on the one hand demarcated the borders of the “majority” that was loyal to the state, along with the advantages and higher social positions that came with membership in the “majority” vis-à-vis others, while on the other hand they practically excluded Gypsy communities from the “socialist society.”

**Policy and Gypsies**

“How many were lost, we still don’t know. I couldn’t find any Hungarian newspapers that figured it would be worth mentioning the decimation of the people that live among us—meaning that from centuries of hatred in the Danube Valley we haven’t reached the minimum of human solidarity”—these are the words of poet György Faludy, who was the only person to challenge Hungarian society to face up to its crimes against Gypsies.4

Generally the number of victims in the European Roma Holocaust is estimated at between 200,000 and 500,000 persons;5 since the 1990s the latter number has become the more accepted, although international Roma organizations speak of 1.5 million victims.6 Researchers on Roma began to work on the history of the Roma Holocaust in the 1970s,7 and as mentioned above, they strove to write an expressly Roma Holocaust history in contrast to works that had excluded them before.8 A similar group of historians, later, after the regime change (1989–90), began to elucidate the history of genocide9 committed against Hungarian Roma.10 One of the goals of such research was to resurrect the “forgotten” history of an “invisible” minority group in discourse on the country’s past. This would on the one hand strengthen the identity of minority communities, and on the other hand it would transform the societal perception of its own collective responsibility. In the 1950s ethnographer Kamill Erdős estimated the number of Hungarian Gypsy victims at 50,000. In the 1970s the Committee on the Victims of Nazism judged that a number of 28,000 was likely.11

In his 1992 book historian László Karsai used archival sources to estimate a total of 5,000 persons who were removed and/or executed.12 Very often no documents were prepared during the deportation of Roma because in many cases these were considered “disciplinary” acts of local authorities, and were the results of surprise and violent maneuvers. Therefore, a number of tens of thousands is more likely. Oral history research after the regime change naturally cannot produce an exact number of Roma victims. The number, compared to the tragic nature of the event, the documentation of the genocide and the need to inform non-Roma and Roma public opinion, is of secondary importance.
In the years after the Second World War and after the horrors of the Nazi death camps, Hungarian Gypsies received no reparations and no apologies for the genocide. The actual achievements after 1945 hardly affected the Gypsies. Furthermore, they were largely excluded from land redistribution programs. Democratic parties did not deal with their situation, nor did they compete for their votes. One of the reasons for this is undoubtedly that the Hungarian state had very little knowledge of Gypsies. Censuses, which collected data on the number of people speaking Gypsy as a mother tongue, did not indicate that the Gypsy people—pushed to the periphery of society—were very significant in number.

The new political elite was completely oblivious to them, and the danger of postwar epidemics served to increase prejudice. The party’s social science periodical, Társadalomtudományi Szemle (Social Science Review), published a piece by András Kálmán calling for Gypsy rights in 1946. The author, who was a communist émigré returning from the West, referred to the Soviet Union’s minority policy and argued that the question of “unassimilated” Gypsies was a national issue. In the 1930 census little more than 8,000 respondents declared themselves as native speakers of Gypsy. Conversely, András Kálmán estimated the country’s Gypsy population at 80–100,000. He felt that Gypsies, along with Slovaks, formed Hungary’s largest national minority group. He recommended a new policy: he envisioned putting Gypsies to work and integrating them into heavy industry. He thought this was the only way to fold (or essentially assimilate) them into Hungarian society.
Gypsies were hardly mentioned in public forums in the period of transition. The state socialist system for a long time did not have a Gypsy policy. As such, these issues only turned up on the desks of state administrators, county and district councils and party committees as occasional administrative issues. The Party announced the unity of a “socialist society” and used all means at its disposal to obstruct self-organization, refusing to support the foundation of minority organizations. In 1957 the Party showed nothing to indicate it would recognize Gypsies as a national minority. Reports and recommendations on the situation of Gypsies collected dust in unread piles of documents, waiting for department heads in ministries, local council presidents and party secretaries. When functionaries grew tired of the towering pile of documents, or when they were satisfied with “domestic” or “social welfare” programs, they would place these piles in archives or put them in the “finished” drawer. From the smoke-filled world of local authorities, public issues were slow to advance. As to what life was like and what really happened within the walls of administration, we have very little information.

The leading bodies of the state party, the Hungarian Workers’ Party, which had powerful decision makers, finally put the Gypsy issue on the agenda in 1956, after receiving a submission from the Ministry of People’s Education and from the National Police Headquarters. The Party’s given departments wrote a proclamation plan based on the received recommendations, which can be interpreted as an official position. Like most previous documents, this one also mentioned “Gypsy crime,” Gypsy stereotypes, the idea of dispersing Gypsies, as well as ideas for “elevating” the Gypsies. Typically, this document described the general situation of Gypsies as such: “Most of the Gypsies live on the periphery of society, or are often parasitic.” The Party’s highest directive body, the Politburo, did not accept this directive. More important issues had come to the fore. The submission was forgotten for good in the time of the restoration after the 1956 Revolution.

In 1957, staff at the Ministry of Labor conducted a study on the situation of Gypsies, which referred to several forms of exclusion. The Planning and Balance Department’s staff measured “the numbers and employment situation of Gypsies in Hungary”; they based their work on estimates provided by local councils as well as the opinions of other officials working in state administration. Through the Foreign Ministry they asked for information on how the Gypsy situation was progressing in other state socialist countries. The finished report contained recommendations on improving the living environment of the Gypsy population, all while claiming that Gypsies did not constitute a national minority.

György Pogány and Géza Bán considered Gypsies an “ethnic group.” They claimed: “[W]e do not need to artificially develop them toward nationhood or national minority status,” and “...we must not place obstacles to their assimila-
tion." The authors of the study were bureaucrats conducting a state commission, who were executing a task and a given goal for their writing. From today's perspective their words must be seen otherwise, unlike analyzing them in their own context and times. Characteristically, the ethnographer Kamill Erdős, who had great sympathy toward the Gypsies in his writings, had a similar view of their future. In 1960 he wrote: "The essence of the Gypsy question: there is no Gypsy question." Gypsy national (or national minority) identity did not exist in its current state, and it cannot be assumed—even in light of knowing and analyzing Gypsy politician Mária László's actions—that Gypsy groups or Gypsy intellectuals demanded minority rights and self-government in any unified way in the 1950s. Admittedly, given the dictatorship, there was no means of doing so.

The director of the Planning and Balance Department, Pogány and Bán's superior, finally recommended to the Salary and Labour Force Management General Department that the task be split up among various "social organizations" and ministries, and that a special committee be set up to solve the problem. He initiated a joint submission with the Agricultural Ministry to the government, which would distribute tasks among state organizations according to spheres of competence.

Party coordinators at first put aside the social action plan. Based on the Soviet model, they proclaimed the Gypsies a national minority. In the summer of 1957 the National Minorities Department was established in the Ministry of
Culture, which would oversee national minority associations (Slovak, Romanian, German and Southern Slav). In October the leaders of the Ministry established the Cultural Association of Hungarian Gypsies, based on the example of the other national minority associations. In the initial period the association was led by Mária László, whose goals, among others, were the support of Gypsy literature and music and the care of Gypsy languages. The organization actually dealt foremost with individual complaints. Mária László, who was always proud of her Gypsy heritage, worked as a journalist before the war. In 1937 she organized a protest in the village of Pánd, and was in turn arrested for incitement. In 1945 she became a member of the Social Democratic Party. In the first half of the 1950s she wrote to ministries and the Council of Ministers, requesting permission to establish an independent Gypsy organization. In the latter part of the ’50s, as secretary general of the Association, she often tried to stand up to state authorities in the interest of Gypsies and Gypsy communities. In late 1957 Mária László learned of the Labor Ministry’s developing plans and wrote a letter to the Secretariat of the Ministry, asking them to nominate a staff member she could liaise with. On the surface, the authorities had assigned tasks related to the Gypsy issue to the Association, but in the meantime various ministries were preparing a slew of recommendations on how to “solve” the Gypsy issue.

In the early days of operation, the Association effectively tried to become a viable interest group and to help redress individual complaints and problems. This, however, was often a losing battle with authorities. Given the times, the work of the Association was not given enough publicity. It also had limited opportunities, but the interest-protection role and the activity of the secretary general were making those in power uncomfortable. In 1959 Mária László was removed as the head of the Association.

The key reason for this, as indicated in Erna Sághy’s report, was the Gypsy politician’s opposition to the internment of Gypsies during the post-Revolution retaliation period. She protested at the Ministry of the Interior and the Attorney General’s office: “We suggest that there are mistakes in the current process of internments.” The letter was signed by Mária László on June 16, 1958, at the height of official retaliations following the 1956 Revolution. It was the day the revolutionary Prime Minister Imre Nagy and his fellow martyrs were executed. The leaders of the party at first placed a trustworthy bureaucrat at the head of the Association, and then in 1961 the Association was formally disbanded.

Sometimes quite openly and sometimes in a more clandestine manner, state socialist systems all executed unique nation building policies: under the cloak of vulgar Marxism they consciously sought to linguistically and culturally homogenize society. The concept of a unified nation state did not die out in Hungary either. It could no longer be an official point of reference, but as a principle of develop-
Modernization and Gypsy communities

Analysis of the phenomenon called nation building, or the relationship between the birth of the modern state and nationalism, shows that nations are not fixed and perpetual actors in history. In the age of modernization, nationalism was on the one hand a means to legitimize ruling elites, and on the other hand, and in a related fashion, a way to strengthen the state’s spatial, administrative and economic powers. Modernity or modernization can be seen as an organizing principle through which power fundamentally changed the relationship between individuals and society. All those who were left out of the reorganization or “nationalization” of society became the so-called internal outsiders. Members of excluded and marginalized groups maintained their own historical time and space, and as such created for themselves spaces for “survival” within society.

The paradigm for analysis of Western history is the theory of modernization, and some historians describe the plans of social engineering of socialist states as a top-down modernization attempt. It was in the interest of the “socialist” state to
create a social foundation for its policies and future grandiose plans. Undoubtedly, part of the propaganda of these systems was to announce that “socialism” would bring economic and social development and welfare to the countries of East-Central Europe. Thus, changes in the life of Gypsies under state socialism can be interpreted within the modernization paradigm, should we accept its validity.

In Hungary Gypsies were the only minority group given a special status—one lying outside “socialist society”—by the state power. The leaders of the party-state, besides seeking quick and violent solutions to social problems, viewed the Gypsy population as a backup labor force for extensive industrialization and rapidly developing heavy industry. For several decades state propaganda emphasized that social “integration” (or to use an older expression, fitting in) of Gypsies could not proceed because they migrated within the country’s borders and traditionally made a living from “begging.” (In official forums this was offered as an explanation for the existence of prejudice in “majority” society.) This argument served foremost to cover up the fact that no matter who was in power, the representatives of the Hungarian

Gypsy settlement, circa 1950
state had done painfully little to improve the social situation of Gypsies, or to help along their social assimilation (which was called “pliancy”—beilleszkedés—in Hungarian in official documents, but the contemporaneous meanings of this word were a far cry from the sense of the recent term “integration”).

With the first “Gypsy study” in 1893, 13,000 Gypsy smiths were recorded, who, along with their family members (presumably 60,000 people), made up more than one-fifth of the Gypsy population at the time. The data from the study also indicated that 23 percent of smiths at the time were Gypsies.35 (In several cities smiths’ guilds were suing Gypsy smiths, but in villages, where there was no competition, the work of Gypsies was irreplaceable.) The traditional Gypsy vocations (smithing, woodworking, spoon carving, basket weaving, adobe work) were already vulnerable to modern industry’s expansion at the beginning of the century, and this was later exacerbated by extensive industrialization and nationalization.

Between 1948 and 1952 nationalization came to a boiling point, and the state virtually decimated local industry and commerce. As a result many Gypsies were stripped of their traditional means of making ends meet. Although it was always a goal to incrementally nationalize industry and trade in general, this nationalization was not supposed to affect Gypsy traders and artisans. The representatives of power declared that Gypsies could not receive craftsman licenses, and they tried to “solve” the Gypsy problem by criminalizing traditional Gypsy occupations. All this was done to speed up the forceful assimilation of Gypsies. In 1956 the Party leadership ordered “policing organizations” in order to “cooperate with the appropriate councils and economic organizations to examine migrant industries, to use appropriate full-time job provision to ensure that migrant craftsman licenses that beget unwanted begging not be granted to Gypsies… The operations of Gypsy horse traders must be stopped, and Gypsy barter commerce and rug- and tablecloth selling, which is widespread in cities and is a cover operation for thieves, be brought to an end.”36

Over modern times the representatives of the Hungarian state have viewed Gypsies as a group that stands outside of the world of modernity, and explained their outsider position by pointing to their traditional occupations. However, the work and income of village artisan Gypsies conformed to the needs of village residents for centuries. The traditional trades, from the social science point of view, were “ceded occupations.”

Hence, such work was “ceded” by local communities and handed over to Gypsies, who depended on these communities. But from another point of view, from that of local Gypsy communities, these were instead acquired trades, and being daytaler in nature afforded a higher degree of freedom to Gypsies within the local community. However, when demand for products of Gypsy masters
decreased, the village poor usually succeeded in excluding Gypsies from farm labor, and thus within local society they found themselves in a position of dependence. Later, during the period of industrialization, they were put into similar positions in factories and workers’ hostels, and had to maintain their communities under such conditions. At first these job opportunities were obviously “ceded” positions, but their meaning changed over time: in a changing world Gypsy communities had to once again experience the distance separating them from the rest of society, to reorganize their lives, and to acquire their freedom.

The situation of individuals and groups was basically defined not by survival strategies but by positions held in the local community and more generally in society. Social position was experienced by individuals and members of minorities and the “majority” in numerous ways. Though we can see and present Gypsy communities as either vassals, victims of constant oppression, or the embodiment of freedom, reality is better served by acknowledging the wide array of behaviors, adaptations and forms of resistance. This pluralism, however, can only be alluded to, but it can in no way be illustrated. Contrary to the homogenizing (majority-
building) efforts of the state—and as a result of the diction and point of view of the authors of this book—Gypsies and Gypsy communities are presented as heroic fighters in a lopsided but not hopeless struggle for freedom, those who represent the exception as opposed to the average, those who are different as opposed to the all-encompassing same, or those who are free as opposed to the powerful.

Under state socialism one of the goals of violent and forced actions was to bring all social groups under the control and supervision of the state. State interventions, however, had their limits or their "social borders." When nationalizing small industry and small commerce the state had to make concessions because of reduced capacity. Because of increased challenges in providing for village populations certain forms of local commerce and household industry were tolerated, while others the state could never successfully eradicate. For example, nail smiths produced unique products that expansive industry could not, or could only produce at prohibitive costs. Nationalizing the work tools of Gypsy smiths would have been in vain, given that they used traditional methods, forming their heated metal with hammers on anvils. Gypsies could use almost any scrap metal to do their work. In several places, in the interest of pulling Gypsies into the state nationalized economy, nail smith collectives were formed. Naturally, the press of the time emphasized the help offered by the state. From today’s point of view, the estab-
lishment of the collectives can be interpreted as successful resistance and as a sign of protecting their own interests.

Over the twentieth-century several waves of modernization swept over local societies, including those in Hungary. According to the logic of modernization theories, these changes were similar everywhere and always pointed in the same direction. Statistical data of the time appears to reflect a mass migration of the population involved in agriculture (of dirt roads and adobe shacks) to the factories, smoggy cities, sooty milieus and jungles of concrete and cranes. In reality, it was a fundamental interest of factories in the 1950s to have a large proportion of skilled laborers. Unskilled workers were generally given seasonal work in large projects. Workers themselves often migrated between various work locations. When they found other means of making a living, they “voluntarily exited” and terminated their work contracts. It was also typical for many of them to keep their previous streams of income and hence just occasionally take on work in the factory, per labor contract.

In general, the majority of Gypsies were forced to give up their traditional occupations or their main streams of income. András Faludi, the author of a book published in 1964, acknowledged the tragic situation through the example of a Gypsy community in Rákospalota, and had the following to say about the “achievements” or effects of state actions, and the dismantling of local industry and commerce: “Most of them [the members of Gypsy community of Rákospalota] had used up the horse's value and were unable to buy a new horse. They were stuck and had to go to work. From month to month they drank away their income, or spent it, later buying a few pieces of furniture, clothing, and the only mark they’ve left is their orphaned wagons: with proper interventions, and a bit of force, migration can be stopped.”

The advance of modernization, however, did not move at a regular pace and did not bring changes as drastic as we might think today. In villages the news of large factories seeking workers was often verbally announced in the main square. Unemployment continued to be a serious problem, yet the new powers tried to keep it secret. In the 1950s local councils administered unemployment assistance. The Ministry of Labor tried to use administrative means to limit the number of beneficiaries, though investigations ordered from above generally found no breaking of the rules. In fact, the “socialist” state did not offer job opportunities for all, and the unemployed disappeared from national statistics. The writers of “labor force balance sheets” did not want to and could not track daily changes in labor trends, nor calculate proportions of permanent and temporary workers or part-time workers on collective farms. When necessary, individuals were able to procure proof of employment to show the authorities. It was in the interest of the “socialist” state to create the illusion of full employment.
Forced industrialization certainly transformed the traditional lifestyle of most Gypsies, but it did little to change their situation within society. “Socialist” industry generally viewed them as unskilled labor, and as such most Gypsies filled the lowest positions in nationalized industries, while some were able to maintain their profession in areas where difficult conditions and low pay led to labor shortages. Thus, large numbers worked in road construction, building construction and mining. Many were forced to leave their earlier homes and migrate to industrial zones, move into workers’ hostels, or commute. In the 1950s the modernization logic of so-called “industrializing principles” came into play in city planning. The first encompassing plan was prepared in 1950, calling for the development of a “unified, socialist city and community network,” with 1,291 settlements labeled as “unfit for development.” With this move the state practically defined a group of settlements and residents that would not benefit from the achievements of “socialist” modernization.

The continued existence of traditional communities caught the attention of ethnographers. In the period of industrialization the archaic lifestyle of certain Gypsy communities offered a chance to portray the remnants of the old, “pre-socialism” days. In these pieces Gypsies were portrayed as the last heralds of the time before “socialism” (or “socialist” modernity), as if they lived outside the “socialist” world. But such phenomena exist neither alongside one another, nor one after another, nor as a result of one another. They exist in their own time. They
Pál Vajda Sr., Gypsy voivod, 1961
cannot be understood in their own realities if we analyze them as parts of the same process, using a traditional linear sense of time. Ethnographic research, while fitting in well with the dominant narrative of the time, speaking of the emancipation of society and “socialist” development, still worked according to the principles of getting to know groups and understanding them. Tibor Bartos’ collection of stories and histories from Gypsy nail smiths, called Sosemvolt cigányország (There was never a Gypsy country) was published in 1958. The afterword was written by an ethnographer who attempted to refute the image of Gypsies that had developed in Hungary: “Gypsies live in common knowledge as people who never got used to regular work, who are lazy, untrustworthy and vacuous, but who are at the same time like a dodgy and laughable but remorseful figure in a musical or a folk tale: someone who anyone can play the worst kind of trick on with the least amount of remorse.”

Today, a portion of social scientists continues to accept the value system of modernization, and in turn views the past through, at least in part, the linguistic and conceptual frameworks of the state socialist ideology and capitalism characteristic of the nation state system. As emphasized earlier, the emancipatory future vision is what the two ideologies have in common. Often states view themselves and their time as the beginning of the future and as its depositories, which is a logic echoed by principles of modernization theory. The basic phenomena associated with modernization—industrialization and urbanization—are viewed as the only possible logic for social progress. Recent historical studies, however, refute the validity of this narrative. The theory of multiple modernities and studies inspired by this theory draw our attention to the fact that modernization was not a singular phenomenon, and it affected various social groups and actors in divergent ways.

Disciplinary state

“Every gendarme unit has his area. When we come across Gypsy caravans in that area, we beat them up and escort them to the border of the next area. There another unit will discover them, beat them up, and escort them to the next neighboring area. And it goes on like this for eternity”—this is a quote from a Szabolcs County Gendarmes officer and printed in the pages of the social science periodical Huszadik Század (Twentieth Century) by Béla Bergstein in 1910. The author furthermore claimed: “Where there is an economic need for the work of Gypsies, questions of public administration seem to solve themselves. Roles reverse. The physical brutality of public administration is replaced by economic exploitation.” Starting from the point of the Gypsy residents of the town of Pécsőc, he surmised
that “permanent job opportunities and the continuing search for laborers will bring about the settlement of the Gypsies and their continued assimilation.”

Politicians of the expanding single-party system initially treated the Gypsy issue as a public order issue, like before 1948. State socialism was also characterized by police brutality when authorities confronted Gypsies. The declared goal in such instances was to force them into salaried work, or in the case of migrant groups to settle them. When in 1956 the Hungarian Workers’ Party Administrative Department wrote a recommendation on “the solution to the Gypsy issue in Hungary” to the Politburo, the police were to be granted a significant role in carrying out public administration tasks, given their “deep knowledge of the Gypsy problem.” The recommendation declared that the police should offer help in “solving the many types of tasks that crop up for local bodies when solving the Gypsy issue.”

Voivods, or Gypsy judges, were allowed to remain active in Gypsy communities under state socialism, which they could attribute to their longstanding relationship with figures of power over time. Traditionally, these designated leaders of Gypsy communities were more representatives of local power than of their own communities. A typical case is of one city Voivod, who in May of 1947, not forgetting the months of Arrow Cross Party rule, recommended to the mayor of Győr that he send the “responsibility-evading” Gypsies “to work camps, if you please.”

Local councils and party organizations in the 1950s tried to use their chosen Gypsy representatives (Voivods and Gypsy judges) to supervise and control Gypsy communities. As a result, such representatives were viewed in their own communities as informers, or people of the police, councils, or the Party.

The new and old representatives of state power and public administration found novel methods to follow Gypsies who continued to lead migrant lifestyle and to keep them under strict police surveillance. In 1953 the Minister’s Council—on the recommendation of the Politburo of the Hungarian Workers’ Party—ordered the introduction of personal identification documentation, which was to be distributed by June 30, 1955. On June 17, 1955, a meeting at the Ministry of the Interior decided “wandering Gypsies” would be granted “temporary identification documents that were different in form and content.” The so-called black IDs had to be renewed every year. They were eventually revoked in the first quarter of 1961, when all general IDs were changed.

The authors of the recommendation quoted above said the following: “A large proportion of the Gypsies truly lives on the periphery of society, and is often parasitic. The large majority does not have regular work, a part of them (!) still has traditional Gypsy occupations…” In the 1950s not only the police, but also county councils kept registers of Gypsies.

Despite the public order decrees, Gypsy caravans continued to criss-cross the entire country. Court records of the time show that these caravans occasionally
had encounters with “socialist law.” The Supreme Court judged that Fardi Rostás’ Gypsy caravan had traversed the land between the Danube and Tisza rivers in the cold and snowy winter of 1959, moving an average of 10 km per day. The representatives of state authorities (councils, attorney’s office, and courts) described their life as “a typical criminal lifestyle.” They viewed the theft of wood as a characteristic crime, and Gypsies needed wood as their caravan often camped under the stars and they lit campfires. The court estimated that in two months they had burned at least two quintals of wood. “Avoiding work” and begging were similarly deemed as crimes in that time. While migrating, an infant passed away, and according to the accusation the Gypsies had taken the child to the doctor, but failed to give appropriate care afterwards. When the child died, they buried the body in a tree trunk. The defence claimed that their behavior should be measured against their own traditions, which was accepted by the court, and as such they did not commit a crime.\textsuperscript{56} It is clear that the acts of Gypsies only go against norms when
those acts are seen by the representatives of the state as harmful or dangerous to the “majority” (i.e., themselves).

Alongside the Ministry of the Interior, the staff of the Ministry of People’s Welfare was also active in “solving the Gypsy issue” in the 1950s. They introduced the institution of health sanitation designated for “Gypsy settlements” in the 1950s. Along with health officers they supervised these settlements, and where they deemed it necessary they ordered “forced bathing and disinfection” (at first they used a chemical designed as a pesticide to do this). It should be noted that many Gypsy Voivods were complicit in the execution of these forced bathings.

Organizations of the Ministry of the Interior, familiar with the Gypsy issue, and their experts appear in documents from the period. Our sources—official documents of the time—present these violent acts as humane, people’s welfare interventions: “KÖJÁL’s mobile bathing and disinfection service has this year [1959] washed 2339 Gypsy persons and disinfected their clothes. There was some opposition to the bathing in the beginning, but this has ceased, and there are places where they request it. Everywhere, children are very happy about the washing.” Recollections provide a different reading of how the “forced bathings” took place. An old man, decades after the fact, remembered the following:
We went into the tent, and we all had to strip naked. We stood in line. Someone came in and we had to show our palms, and they squirted a very smelly chemical into our hands. All they said was it would make our hair nice, it would shine, we would be nice and clean. We had to put it in our hair and rub it over our bodies... It was so strong that when the soldiers went away the grass never grew back where the tents stood, the whole area turned yellow, even the weeds died... There was one shower area with six shower heads. First they sent in the men and boys. Then the women, girls, old women... They didn't care how inhumane this all was, that Gypsies are shy. On more than one occasion, when the women and girls were showering, someone made up some excuse and a man or two went in there, gave instructions, and asked whether "there is enough of the chemicals."61

Institutions and institutional systems are never independent of the social environment of state interventions. The disciplinary mechanisms of state power of the time

Mounted police, 1957
did not merely seep into everyday life. Sources indicate that violent state interventions were generally acceptable in the circles of the “majority” society. We can assume that they were rooted not only in the intentions of those in power, but were at least partly rooted in the web of relations of local societies. As László Kardos stated about the local function of “extreme nationalism,” in the Horthy era its function was to compensate “for the low social prestige” of the poorest with “the principle of belonging to the Hungarian nation.” Although such extreme principles based on race theory were not given state sanction in public forums, this trend persisted under the decades of state socialism.

**The impossibility of self-organization**

In 1958, in the village of Hernádvécse, the local shepherds established a Gypsy cultural organization. After their first show they had a difference of opinion with the local secretary of the party-state’s youth organization (the Communist Youth Alliance, known as KISZ). The secretary issued an ultimatum. They could only play shows if the income from the show was given to KISZ. The organization was not willing to do this, and thus the local council secretary and the KISZ secretary obstructed them from doing a second show. They denied the necessary police authorization and claimed that the cultural organization was not a member of any umbrella organizations. The shepherds resisted and rejected the offered KISZ membership, which would have drained their income (the leader of the group was forty-eight years old, while the oldest member was fifty-six years old). They were offended that the young Gypsies, as they put it, would be “earmarked members of KISZ.” They could have joined the Women’s Council, but the cultural group contained only one female member, while the other nine were men. They applied to the People’s Front but were rejected. They met again and decided that they would form the Pasture Company cultural group. The council president and KISZ secretary blocked this as well. Eventually, they performed in another village, where the district police captain granted authorization. Given their treatment, the shepherds turned to the Cultural Association of Hungarian Gypsies.

It was a transient time in the history of Hungarian Gypsies, when a Gypsy organization could truly defend the interests of Gypsies; this is why the documents left to us are of particular interest. These individual submissions and letters of complaint give us a snapshot of the lives of those people who apparently left only a faint print on history, but whom in reality were forgotten by the writers of history.

Besides fighting with offices and local authorities in the interest of Gypsies—and given the balance of power these fights were often hopeless—the Association
also dealt with individual cases and seemingly minute issues. For example, the soccer club of Alsószentmárton—which won its first match in the county championship playing barefoot—needed shoes. The Association also received letters in which the complainants wrote directly to János Kádár, the First Secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party, showing trust in the all-encompassing power of the state. These documents nicely characterize the period’s paternalistic style. Some addressed Kádár as “Dear Regent” (this was the rank used by Miklós Horthy, who ruled the regime between the two World Wars), while some signed their letters as “the new Hungarians of Döge village”: “We ask Comrade Kádár to make sure that we are not denied our rights and that we may sing the song of truth, ‘Let the world sing! Long live! Long live Comrade Kádár!’”

The appropriate authorities regularly forwarded to the Gypsy Association those problems they did not want to deal with, and a peculiar situation developed—which, considering the period, was quite surprising—whereby complaints arriving from members of the “majority” society were directed to the Gypsy association. The authors of these kinds of submissions generally requested the expulsion of Gypsies from their towns. In the town of Pácin, Hungarian residents asked the Minister of Health to move the village Gypsies to another town.

In this period Gypsies did not have many opportunities to protect their interests or organize themselves at the local level. Democracies that were emerging after the Second World War, as shown by Kymlicka, were nation-building states in the sense that their citizens were tied to institutions that projected the vision of a unified nation state. Given the nature of dictatorship, it was not a stretch for state socialist regimes to also aim for the homogenization of society. State socialism continued to institutionalize identities, with the main difference that these were exclusive, and citizens had no public recourse to communicate their separateness. Individuals were stripped of the opportunity to act as a collective.

Characteristic of the time, nail smith collectives—given that the state had acknowledged them, for reasons explained above—often took action in the interest of local Gypsy communities. Complaints clearly show that the members of small industry production collectives (Ktisz) were consistently harassed as soon as they left the area where the authorities knew them. The Nail Smith Ktisz of Rákospalota held a get-together in a pub in 1959. Their complaint claims that the workers of the collective behaved according to the “rules of socialist coexistence,” but they were beaten by police in the pub. Mária László took the collective’s letter addressed to the Budapest Police Precinct, and forwarded it to the Attorney General and the Secretariat of the Ministers’ Council of the People’s Republic of Hungary. The authorities did not bother to respond.
Minority issue

“At the beginning, the Association’s work, for a long time, was based on an erroneous principled position. Gypsies were viewed as a national minority, and the Association as an interest organization, and given this malformed starting point we took malformed measures”—responding to pressure described above, the leaders of the Gypsy Association wrote these thoughts into their work plan for 1960.

In the 1950s Mária László took several steps to support the use of Gypsy languages as official languages, to teach them in kindergartens and schools, and to establish a Gypsy-language press. She requested support for Gypsy culture and worked for official recognition of its existence. In August of 1954 she turned to the Budapest Party Committee, while on January 9, 1956, she turned to the Ministers’ Council (i.e., the executive body) to seek support for Gypsy culture and the Gypsy people. In the latter case she attached letters from famous Gypsy musicians (Sándor Járóka, Kálmán Oláh, Vince Lakatos, Gyula Toki Horváth, József Pécsi), as well as a submission written in the name of Gypsies of the village of Pánd. In this submission the Gypsies of Pánd asked to be taught to read and write, and learn trades (most of the forty-two signatories, instead of signing their names, wrote three “x”-s): “We would like to be citizens with equal rights, and we feel it is our duty to become so. Our lives are dark and sad, and we are excluded and scorned. We ask for help to rise up as persons.”

Mária László, as the general secretary of the Gypsy Association, urged that Gypsy communities be able to form “artist groups” and that they perform the works of Gypsy writers. She used all means possible to support Gypsy musicians who had lost their work thanks to the nationalization of the hospitality industry, and planned the establishment of a “Hungarian Gypsy folk troupe.” She sought to popularize Gypsy culture in Hungarian villages alongside the “ancient, original culture” of the Hungarian people, in order to show the connections and common themes among them.

Even later on, she saw national minority culture as the road to the “elevating” of Gypsies, which could increase solidarity within society. When she died, she left notes behind for a Gypsy language textbook and dictionary, a manuscript on Hungarian Gypsy musicians, and notes for a book on Gypsy history. The attitude of Kádár’s state to these efforts, however, is characterized by the fact that the Gypsy politician, having fallen out of favor, was put to work at the Post Office, and retired as a head cashier.

The granting of minority status in the 1950s was naturally just window dressing. When the leaders of the Association took steps to protect the interests
of Gypsies, they were consistently rejected. In 1960, after Mária László had been
removed, the Gypsy Association wrote about a role in its work plan, whereby
the Association would write an “informative situation report” for the Party and
would work out the “principled theses of the Gypsy issue.” Before the work plan
was accepted, it was debated at a meeting with the representatives of various min-
istries. The Ministry of Education warned the leaders of the Association not to
work on reports without the involvement of the Party bodies and Ministries, and
to refrain from making public any material on principles. They also recommended
studying the Gypsy policies of “friendly countries” (with the Soviet Union and
Czechoslovakia serving as models).75

Discourses on social policy and equality

“Rise, Hungarians / With the flag high / So the people of the world / May see, may
see / Who is Lord on earth / With the flag on high / So everyone will know / The
red flag has won. / The Party and the people are victorious / Let the world see /
All peoples, may they read / The word of liberty / Long live the people / Long
live the Party”—this poem was sent by the distressed young man István P. to the
Ministry of Labor in 1958. He sent another poem, which began as follows: “The
question of going to a party or the Party, is not an indifferent one.”76 A question was
included with the poems: “I would like to know if the comrades would take me to
music school or acting school.” In his short letter he wrote that his father had “died
a heroic death on the Russian front” (the lad was clearly not aware of the rules of
political correctness at the time), his mother had grave heart disease, he had two
siblings and no opportunity to study. “I am as orphaned as an oak leaf,” he wrote to
close his letter. He asked the “comrades,” “if you have a heart, help me.”77

We know nothing about what followed for the author of the letter. All we
know about the letter itself is that the Ministry forwarded it to the Cultural
Association of Hungarian Gypsies, even though nothing—neither the Party-
patriotic poems nor anything else for that matter (like the boy’s name)—indicated
that the boy was a Gypsy or of Gypsy descent. The question is, what inspired the
authorities, or what was it in the poor social situation or spelling and grammatical
errors that led the bureaucrats at the time to label someone as Gypsy? The ques-
tion of whether we should be serious about finding an answer, despite the poetic
introduction, is not rhetorical. Why was social policy made under an ethnic marker
at the time? Why and how did the “Gypsy question” become social policy in the
discourse of the time? How did these discourses become tools for discrimination
and segregation?
In the 1950s social policy was hardly regulated centrally. Under state socialism working class equality was supposed to emerge, and thus, in principle, underclasses could not have existed. In 1949–50, despite the political changes, the charitable institutions (caring for the poor) of the Horthy era were still in operation. In the Rákosi era local authorities defined social policy through ad hoc decisions. The decisions of the councils followed the old patterns, which were based on personal networks and acknowledgment of local hierarchy. Surviving council documents show that the authorities still had to deal with phenomena that had in theory disappeared, like unemployment and begging.

City workers often equated Gypsies with begging, and prejudice toward Gypsies and official behaviors of bureaucrats were embodied in how beggars were dealt with. Consequently, when local authorities asked for reports on beggars, these texts attributed the root of the problem to Gypsies. Their texts and interventions were subdued by the authors of summary reports. In Szombathely, for example, the city’s local council’s social committee’s leader reported that the Gypsies could not be given lunch at the soup kitchen. He laid out his concept concerning Gypsies as follows: “The only way we can reach a solution here is to put their children in
state care and put their parents into forced labor. However, forced labor, as such, does not exist here. This enthusiastic bureaucrat was commended for his work.

In principle the Party’s social policy was to serve nothing but to assure the equality of workers within the “socialist society.” However, a rather wide and flexible interpretation of the whole concept formed, which excluded certain groups. In other words, while public discourse maintained the equality of given social groups, below the surface earlier differences, Hungarian society’s traditional relations and old conflicts—for example deeply rooted ethnic animosities—persisted. For the state it became increasingly urgent to somehow care—or at least present the illusion of caring—for individuals and groups pushed to the periphery of society in the interest of quelling tensions. In 1961 the Party leadership of the Kádár era issued a decree on the “situation of the Gypsy population.” (This document, which defined a new era in Gypsy policy in Hungary, will be discussed in the next chapter.) According to surviving documents, the primary model for this decree was the Gypsy policy of Czechoslovakia, where in 1958 the “socialist” state had begun the forced assimilation of Gypsies. Those in power declared that Gypsies had no ethnic culture and no traditions. The authorities forced those still migrating to settle, and it appeared that the Gypsy population was led en masse into industrial labor.

Notes

1 An authoritarian yet parliamentary style (i.e., with limited party competition) regime under the leadership of Regent Miklós Horthy developed in Hungary between the two World Wars and was in place until 1944. On October 15, 1944 Miklós Horthy was forced to resign and power was taken over by Arrow Cross forces (Hungary’s national socialists) with German backing.
3 In 1948 the Czechoslovak state revoked their minority status. From the 1950s they disappeared from official statistics in Bulgaria. In comparison, in 1957 in Hungary they were able to form a minority organization within the state institution system for a short period. We will return to this episode below. Actions toward them were various, but from the middle of the 1950s the “Gypsy situation” became an important question for the state, and the expressed goal was short- or long-term assimilation. Barany, *The East European Gypsies*, 115–116.
7 Donald Kenrick and Grattan Puxon, *The Destiny of Europe’s Gypsies* (London: Chatto Heineman, Sussex University Press, 1972), new edition: *Gypsies under the Swastika* (Hat-


9 The most common names for the Roma Holocaust in international literature are Porrajmos and Samudaripen. In 2000 in Hungary, Roma intellectuals protested against the use of the term Porrajmos, claiming that within circles in Hungary of those who speak Roma language it does not mean “devouring,” but “gender self-revelation.” (See the letters between József Ráduly, József Choli Daróczi, György Rostás Farkas, Imre Vajda and Gábor Bernát, Beszélő, November, 2000, 121–124.) As a result, János Bárszony recommended use of the term Pharrajimos, meaning “cutting up” or “destruction.” For a summary see: Csaba Dupcsik, *A magyarországi cigányáság története*, 128.


13 House plots and one or two acres of plowing fields were given to “worthy” Gypsies in a handful of villages. Pál Nagy, ed., “Úgyanolyanok, mint mindenki más ember.” Válogatás a Szabolcs-Szatmár megyei cigányáság történeteinek forrásaitól (1951–1961) [Selection from the resources of Roma history in Szabolcs-Szatmár County (1951–1961)] (Nyiregy-


16 Bársony, “Romák sorsa az 1940-es évek második felében,” 239–244.

17 His life history is described in Bársony, “Romák sorsa az 1940-es évek második felében,” 237–238.

18 Like others, he did not emphasize the securing of minority rights. András Kálman “A magyar cigányok problémája” [Problems of the Hungarian Gypsies], Társadalmi Szemle 8–9 (1946): 656–658.

19 Many attempts have been made to reconstruct this history: Zsuzsa Vidra examined the situation in Ózd based on life history interviews and local documents. Zsuzsa Vidra, De l’invisibilité à la visibilité. Politiques d’intégration et stratégies identitaires des Tsiganes de Hongrie dans une ville (post)-industrielle. PhD Dissertation, manuscript, 2008.


21 The “College” of the Ministry was the first body to debate the report. HNA XIX-C-5 3. cartoon (from here on in c.). 34.160/1957.


23 In the report they claimed: “An ‘ethnic group’ is one that is at a developmental stage further than that of those based on blood lines (tribal, national minority), a social group (community) that contains class differences, but lacks one or more criteria for becoming a nation.” Pogány and Bán, A magyarországi cigányság helyzetéről, 14.

24 Ibid., 15.


26 HNA XIX-C-5 3. c. 34.160/1957.


28 On November 22 the Ministry assigned György Pogány to the task. HNA XIX-C-5 3. c. 34.329-1957.

From November 1958 to March 1959 the organization was led by György Gere, who was followed by army officer Sándor Ferkovics.


Angus Brancroft, Roma and Gypsy-Travellers in Europe: Modernity, Race, Space and Exclusion (Burlington: Ashgate, 2005), 18, 51.

Herrmann, 1893. Czigány összeírás.

Recommendation to the Politburo on the ordering of the Hungarian Gypsy issue. HNA M-KS-276. f. 96. cs. 87. doboz/ 300. fold.


For example, in 1978 the paper Nógrád printed a report on a “metal collective in Nógrád County” which had been formed 28 years previous by “a few strong-willed Gypsy men.” The county president of KISZÖV (another county’s industrial collective) announced an investment of 16 million forints that would “move a social segment that has had a strong will for the past quarter-century and wants to move up, out of the old world and fossilized lifestyles.” The report was about those who “dare to change, want, and know”; as the reporter states: “Here in Megyer the Gypsies are flooded with the light of security.” T. Patakki László, "Haza a Hajnal-völgyben" [A home in the Hajnal valley], Nógrád (6 April, 1978): 5.


In September of 1957, for example, by the order of the Minister of Labor, council administrative heads in counties, Budapest and large cities conducted investigations to determine whether city or village councils were giving unemployment aid to those who were not entitled to it. HNA XIX-C-5 3. c. 27.229/1957.

Miklós Fűzes et al., eds., Dokumentumok a baranyai cigányzság történetéből [Documents from the history of Gypsies of Baranya County], ( Pécs: Baranya Megyei Levél, 2005), 53.

Péter Szuhay, "Foglalkozási és megélhetési stratégiák a magyarországi cigányok körében" [Strategies for employment and living among Gypsies in Hungary], in A cigányok Magyarországon [Roma in Hungary], ed. Ferenc Glatz (Budapest: Magyar Tudományos Akadémia, 1999), 43–44.


46 The volume’s afterword was written by Ilona M. Ladvenicz. Bartos, Sosemvolt cigányor-szág, 85–86.


50 Javaslat a Politikai Bizottsághoz a magyarországi cigánykérdés rendezésére (Recommendation to the Politburo on solving the Gypsy question in Hungary) HNA M-KS-276. f. 96. group (from here on g.) 87. c./ 300. fold. At the same time the authors of the document acknowledged: “In certain places the state bodies do not treat the Gypsies humanely, and use demeaning methods against them.”


54 Javaslat a Politikai Bizottsághoz a magyarországi cigánykérdés rendezésére (Recommendation to the Politburo on solving the Gypsy question in Hungary) HNA M-KS-276. f. 96. group 87. c./ 300. fold.

55 Council of Zala County Executive Committee Administrative Committee Decree on keeping records of Gypsies. Zalaegerszeg, May 12, 1959. The leadership of this council
stated: “Every Gypsy person (with the exception of Musician Gypsies), regardless of age and gender, must be included in the public records.” HNA P 2153 3. c. Individual and family forms were filled out for the Roma. These mapped out family relations, health and personal data.


59 State Institution on Public, Health and Epidemics.


61 In 2001 and 2002 the staff of the Roma Press Center looked up Roma who had been through, or suffered through, these violent acts. (The site www.rroma.hu and its partner site www.ciberom.hu are held by the Roma Press Center. They contain oral history collections and documents, as well as a photo archive.)


63 The Patriotic People’s Front was an organization founded in Hungary in 1954. Its declared goal was to assist in the formation of “socialist national unity” among the “working people.”


65 HNA P 2153 2. c.

66 The “new Hungarians of Döge” wrote a letter complaining of the hygienic condition of the settlement and the exclusionary behavior of the local Executive Committee Secretary, who claimed “we will not hire Gypsies to work machines.” HNA P 2153 2. c. 1031–1032.

67 In such cases Mária László would listen to complaints and the Roma on site, and then ask the responsible state and council bodies to deal with those local problems in which she saw the roots of the ethnic conflicts.


70 The collective wrote a complaint to the Budapest Police Precinct, a copy of which was sent by the Cultural Association of Hungarian Gypsies to the Attorney of District XV of Budapest, the Attorney General and the Ministers’ Council of the People’s Republic of Hungary. According to the authors of the letter, the collective held a get-together at a pub on August 11, 1959. “The goal of the get-together was to provide an opportunity for the galvanized group of new member workers to get to know the old workers of
the Collective. Our membership spent the evening in a relaxed environment, with no disturbances and in accordance with the rules of socialist coexistence until the incident described below took place. A drunk police officer provoked them in the pub, and then seven or eight other policemen appeared. The letter continues: "One of the members of the group of police saw our group, immediately used his billy stick and began beating the president of our collective's oversight committee, Mihály D. At the same time the police present began to push and tussle the members of our collective, our women workers, and used reprehensible language: 'damn slut Gypsies, trash tramp hooligans, just wait, you'll be exterminated, just come on into the precinct, you'll get what you deserve.' The letter writers claimed that the police had lined up several people and harassed them later. "We must note that our collective was formed in March of 1957 with the goal of providing a proper, humane solution to our Party and Government on the minority, or say Gypsy issue. Our collective is a 'Gypsy collective' and serves to integrate into socialist production work the large numbers in Rákospalota who do not yet have full time work." HNA 2153 2. c. 925.

75 Earlier, the Association had been informed of Western Gypsy policy as well. Among others, the following translations can be found in the Association's archived materials: "The European Council and the minority issue," Freiburg Federal Representative Hermann Kopf's presentation; "They don't want to be second-rate citizens. In Frankfurt a Central Committee covering the entire territory of the Federation was established for the Gypsies." Frankfurter Rundschau, March 15, 1960; "Propaganda material on Roma policy in Czarist Russia and the Soviet Union," Vaclav Kopecky's introduction (Opening speech on the Gypsy issue for the national meeting, November 20, 1958); "Work conducted among the Gypsy population." Education and Culture Minister Dr. František Kahuda's presentation in Bratislava, at the meeting on February 26, 1960 (Chapter from the publication Work conducted among the Gypsy population); "On questions concerning work conducted among the Gypsy population of Czechoslovakia (Report presented by Otakar Zeman, CKP KV Secretariat at national assets meeting on November 20, 1958); "Cultural education work among the Gypsy population," Eva Bacikova's introduction; "Most important tasks in the education of Gypsies." Deputy Minister Jindrich Kotal's presentation. Source: HNA P 2153 2. c. On the recommendation of Sándor Vendég, Department Head at the Ministry of Education it was decided to use the "foreign materials" to draft a joint position; and instead of a situation report a decree recommendation be prepared which the appropriate Party bodies could submit to the higher Party leadership. "Work plan of the Cultural Association of Hungarian Gypsies Labor Committee." Budapest. May 23, 1960. (Following this, on May 24, by the Education Committee's meeting, then by the the meeting of the Health Committee on the 25th.) Source: HNA P 2153 4. c. At the May 24 meeting the following was stated: "The goal is to provide some initial momentum for the social elevating of the Gypsy population. The
comrade from Hajdu-Bihar recommended melting in or separation. We do not use this terminology. We must assist the social assimilation of the Gypsy population. This is not an easy thing to do, but the goal is clear.” HNA P 2153 4. d. For a general overview of the Gypsy policy of state socialist countries: Apor, “Cigányok tere: kisérlet a kommuni- 

76 The question of going to a party or the Party / is not an indifferent one / These are two things / Two that cannot be / I say to you go / to the Party, listen to me / It is not indif- 
ferent / Whether you learn or play / But I say learn / Two cannot be. / I say learn / Little one.” HNA P 2153 (former Archive designation: HNA XXVIII-M- 8) 2. c. 787.

77 HNA P 2153 2. c. 786–788.

78 Tibor Valuch, “Szegény ember vízzel főz… Adalékok a magyarországi szegénység törté- 
etéhez a XX. század második felében” [Contributions to the history of poverty in Hungary in the second half of the 20th century], in Megtalálható-e a múlt? T anulmányok Gyáni Gábor 60 . születésnapjára [Is the past findable? Studies dedicated to Gábor Gyáni to commemorate his 60th birthday], ed. Zsombor Bódy, Sándor Horváth and Tibor Valuch (Budapest: Argumentum, 2010), 270.

79 Sándor Horváth, “A társadalmi gondoskodás gyakorlata: szociálpolitika Szombathelyen 


81 David Crowe, “Conclusion,” in The Gypsies of Eastern Europe, ed. David Crowe and John 