Constructing Identities over Time

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Published by Central European University Press

Dunajeva, Jekatyerina.
Constructing Identities over Time: “Bad Gypsies” and “Good Roma” in Russia and Hungary.
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Bad Gypsies and Good Roma in Historical Perspective
Chapter 3

Early Nation and State Building in Empires

The indisputable truth is that a whole could never be perfect if the parts remained in disorder and disarray.

Catherine the Great (1761–1796)
(Quoted in Slezkine 1994, 67)

This chapter assesses pre-modern and early-modern state and nation building efforts, which formed the foundation of the enduring bad Gypsy image. I highlight that initially control and extraction of resources were the primary goals of states. Hence, series of efforts targeted itinerant Roma and rewarded settled or “useful” Roma. With time, due to factors such as the rise of nationalism, industrialization, and the consolidation of the state, Roma in both Russia and Hungary were increasingly targeted by the state through “civilizing” policies. These policies can also be seen as governing methods and means of rational administration that were supposed to help multiethnic empires manage their diverse population. However, in the Habsburg Monarchy, assimilation dominated, and this was characterized by the oppression of everything that defined Roma at the time—their language, culture, traditions, professions, and way of life. In the Russian Empire, the civilizing mission seemingly took the form of “civic integration,” but also harbored assimilationist undertones. In other words, if in the Russian Empire “Gypsies were poised to flourish as productive, mature, assimilated members of Russian society,” then civic integration clearly led to the “extinction of Gypsies as a distinctive people” (O’Keeffe 2014, 113).

Early State and Nation Building: Control over the “Other”

In the time of early empires, primarily in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a pre-modern state was not yet fully consolidated and the focus was on profit-making; in order to increase revenue, the state had to manage the popula-
tion by imposing taxes and enforcing tax collection mechanisms. Importantly, in pre-modern societies the state had no interest in promoting cultural homogeneity as the cultural differentiation ensured a society, where “below the horizontally stratified minority at the top, there [was] another world, that of laterally separated, inward-turned [communities], tied to the locality by economic need” (Gellner 1983, 10). Consider the following excerpt from an influential study about “Gypsies” written in 1783 by the historian and geographer Heinrich Moritz Gottlieb Grellmann:

Every man has taxes to pay, and powers to exert, the Gipsies none of the least; if he does not know how to make use of them, let the state teach him, and keep him in leading strings till the end is attained. If the root of this depravity lies so deep, in the first generation, that it cannot be removed immediately, a continuation of the same care will, in the second or third descent, be sure of meeting its reward. Now let us reflect on a Gipsey, when he has discontinued his Gipsey life, consider him with his fecundity and numerous family, who being reformed, are made useful citizens, and we shall perceive how great want of economy it was to throw him away as dross. (Quoted in O’Keeffe 2013, 3)

Arguably, the state was interested in “extracting taxes, maintaining the peace, and not much else” (Gellner 1983, 10). I disagree with Gellner’s “not much else” clause, and suggest that most importantly, states needed to be able to administer their population, which necessitated a thorough scientific understanding and classification of various groups living on the territory of their states, which took the form of census, ethnographic examination and formal registration, in order to make them into profitable subjects. State control over subjects was also important for modernizing and civilizing missions, which were to further improve profitability of the subjects. As a result, groups not under state control were particularly vulnerable to being framed as “deviant” and “backwards,” providing a sharp contrast to state-led modernization efforts, exemplified through the lifestyle of the “modern” society.

It is only after “normalizing” and “civilizing” the “savage Gypsies” that more explicit efforts of homogenization arose. It took a relatively consolidated state to establish a sufficient bureaucratic mechanism able to permeate the entire society and make sufficient bonds to constitute a nation, either by assimilating, integrating or excluding groups of people. Both Hungary and Russia were part of multi-ethnic empires that formed before the emergence of
national consciousness. With nation building efforts and the rise of nationalism, the “affinity of modernity with the nation-state” made the abolition of “unwanted elements” even more urgent (McVeigh 1997, 20). The goal, therefore, became to create a “standardized . . . metric world of facts” with a “mass society” by “regrouping [the population] in the internally fluid, culturally continuous communities” (Gellner 1983, 22).

Increasingly, direct rule substituted intermediaries and indirect rule (Tilly 1992). At this time, “In one of their more self-conscious attempts to engineer state power, rulers frequently sought to homogenize their population in the course of installing direct rule” (ibid., 106–107). This ensured loyalty, more effective communication, and easier administration. Systematic and centrally enforced homogenization was an essential component, which enabled states to create not only a manageable and legible population, but also a coherent nation that was loyal to the state. Admittedly, however, “homogeneity is the Scylla [monster in Greek mythology] of exclusionary politics of a dominant identity” (Grotenhuis 2016, 111). In other words, an indispensable byproduct of homogenization was marginalization of groups deemed as outsiders.

For Hungary and Russia, the rise of nationalism, and with that, intensified efforts of nation building, came at the end of the second half of the nineteenth century, sparked by the 1848 Revolution and the 1867 Austro-Hungarian Compromise for Hungary, and for Russia with a series of uprisings and war losses in the nineteenth century, especially the Polish rebellion of 1863. These events marked the beginning of a more pronounced Magyarization and Russification of minorities. Russification and Magyarization policies had cultural as well as administrative components. Cultural homogenization was a “state-led policy aimed at cultural standardization . . . [and] top down process where the state seeks to nationalize the ‘masses’” (Conversi 2010, 719), whereas the administrative component refers to the imposition of the dominant language in administrative and bureaucratic state structures (Weeks 2004, 474–75). The two components did not have to appear together. Homogenization—Magyarization and Russification—manifested differently, assumed distinctive policies, approaches, and goals over time. Even the meaning of what Magyarization and Russification meant differed over time. I use temporal demarcation for analytical purposes, while I recognize the processual nature of the changes— discrete events might have accelerated, rather than caused homogenization.

In Hungary, by the late nineteenth century, practically all minorities were under pressures to assimilate:
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As the nationalist creed spread to the masses, nobody could escape the constant pressures for Magyarisation . . . Ever since, non-Hungarian speakers have been looked upon with suspicion, marginalised or eventually assimilated. This led to a situation of “entry” versus “exit,” where “entry” meant assimilation, without which the only other available alternative was “exit,” that is, emigration and asylum. The majority of Hungary’s inhabitants were therefore Magyarised. (Conversi 2007, 374)

In contrast, the Russian Empire was arguably more inclusive and relatively tolerant, which was appealing to non-Russians as a path to progress. Cultural homogenization was only a “latecomer to the arsenal of tsarist state-building” (Suny 2001, 53).

Roma in Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Hungary

The edited volume of Barna Mezey (1986) is a valuable source of historical knowledge about Hungarian Roma. The volume is a detailed chronicle of the “Gypsy question” in Hungary from the fifteenth century until 1985 through meticulously selected letters, documents, and archival sources. The author concludes that one of the primary lines of tension in the feudal era (until the end of the nineteenth century) was the difference in political attitudes between the tax-extracting absolute state and the autonomous Roma communities (Mezey 1986, 12). Policies concerning Roma at the time reveal a desire to reach the group for the purpose of state control, regulation, and tax extraction.

For administrative purposes, the Habsburg state established the office of Gypsy Affairs, which functioned from 1783 until 1786 to oversee and regulate Roma in the monarchy (Mezey 1986, 16). Another institution of control was that of vajda. In H.M.G. Grellmann’s writings from 1786, originally titled Historischer Versuch über die Zigeuner, about the mechanisms of control and governing of Roma in Europe, he detailed the institution of vajda in Hungary and Transylvania. Grellmann, perhaps credulously, posed the question of how a legitimate state could allow such self-rule within its territory. In fact, the purpose of vajda was indeed to assure state control over Roma, as Mezey suggests in his study:

1 In this context, vajda refers to the leader of given Roma group(s). An apt definition of this title is the following: “Both vaida (vajda) and voevod were titles used historically in Hungary, Romania, Wallachia and Moldavia that designated leadership, combining varying degrees of non-Romani authority with internal election” (Sierra 2019, 288).
through their vajda they [Roma] were more easily mobilized and used for various purposes . . . these superintendents, who ruled over groups of Gypsies in various counties . . . were placed to their position by the [imperial] court . . . Each Gypsy had to pay them one forint each year. By the deadline, a tax collector visited each county seat, when Gypsies had to appear to fulfill their duty. In order to assure that all taxes are collected, town and village authorities were ordered to support the tax collectors . . . to support them through military means if needed. (Mezey 1986, 58)

The decrees of the Transylvanian Principality from as early as 1560 clearly stipulated the regulation of "Gypsy taxation": “every Gypsy with a tend must pay twice a year 50–50 dinár, on the day of Saint George and Saint Michael” (Mezey 1986, 71). And the vajda was instrumental in extracting and collecting these taxes.

Legal documents at the time make a striking contrast between two “types” of Roma: the valuable Roma who were to be protected, and the vagabonds who should be expelled or normalized. In the Habsburg Empire, Roma were continuously targeted by efforts to sedentarize, control, and modernize, and often framed in early legal documents as itinerant, vagrant, and looting peoples (Mezey 1986, 9). Similar to the Russian sources from this time, Roma are described as cowardly, not trustworthy, and reckless. Gedeon Ács, a clergyman who published his observations in 1856 about Roma from before the 1948 Revolution, wrote that the professions of Roma were “not too many”: they were horse dealers, “half-thieves and half-traders,” who excessively praises their horses that can be “in-foal or not in-foal, whatever they wish,” while a “scientist Gypsy” is nowhere to be found (Mezey 1986, 65).

At the same time, early sources also mention Roma who excelled in metalworking skills, for example, and were invaluable for weapon making and repair (Mezey 1986, 9–10). In some cases, Roma received letters of entitlement granted by the state to assure the protection of the profitable Roma. For example, Vladislaus II, King of Hungary from 1490 to 1516, wrote in a letter about their mandate to

Separate Tamás Bolgár Gypsy vajda and his twenty-five traveling tents of Gypsies from the company of other Gypsies and their vajdas, and order them . . . to make bullets and military weapons . . . providing them with safe and free journey on the territory . . . and ability to freely stay and sell their goods. (Mezey 1986, 76)
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Ferdinand I, King of Hungary between 1526 and 1564, acquitted “ten tents of Gypsies” from the town of Dés from paying taxes, who were unjustly moved to Újvár “to the detriment of the mines.” In his letter from 1552, he ordered Roma to be moved back to Dés for continuous service, with the assurance that their “freedoms and traditions are maintained” and they are spared of “paying any regular or unusual taxes” (Mezey 1986, 77). Overall, Roma, if they fulfilled some essential functions as metalworkers, barbers, executioners, or street sweepers, tended to become a more integral part of the society, but did not necessarily integrate or assimilate (ibid., 10–11).

A more centralized politics towards Roma in Hungary was first formulated under Maria Theresa (1740–1780), primarily due to the continuous need for taxation, as “one of the main goals of the absolute monarchy was to increase the number of taxpayers,” as well as to improve public safety and modernize the population (Mezey 1986, 14). At this time, some Roma communities were expelled from the Habsburg Empire due to their unacceptable transient lifestyle (Koulish 2005, 313) or as a result of Roma becoming “obsolete,” that is, their work was no longer considered necessary (Mezey 1986, 11). Furthermore, Maria Theresa issued a proclamation in 1773 in an effort to sedentarize and modernize Roma—their huts were demolished, and there was an order to imprison those Gypsies who abandoned their new homes (Wagner 1987, 34). Many Roma children were kidnapped to be “re-cultivated”—they were placed in foster homes to be turned into “good Hungarians and Christians,” and were to be called “new Hungarians” or “new peasants.”

The Empress’s son, Joseph II (1780–1790), who continued Maria Theresa’s policies of enlightened absolutism, ordered Roma groups to settle in villages that were closely watched and controlled by government officials (Koulish 2005, 313). In his own rulings, Joseph II referred to “virtuous Royal Decrees” regarding “better regulation and returning [Gypsies] to the proper course of action,” such as his decree from 1783 which forbade Roma marrying other Roma, prohibited horse keeping and begging, ordered Roma to settle and work in the fields or acquire a profession, and allowed for punishment in case of resistance (Mezey 1986, 85–94). Furthermore, it was Joseph II who recognized the significance of education and targeting the youth in order to permanently settle nomadic groups and make Roma communities manageable. The emperor also issued a decree to force each Roma child to enroll in state-owned educational institutions (Wagner 1987, 39). The “Gypsy politics” of both Maria Theresa and Joseph II was described by observers at the time as a “humanitarian solution” and as “enlightened” policies (Mezey 1986, 14).
In short, until the eighteenth century, Roma in the Habsburg Empire co-existed as part of the broader society, and often distinguished themselves with their sought-after skills. Then, beginning in the eighteenth century, the “Gypsy question” was treated in a more centralized manner and with growing urgency (Mezey 1986). The approach to minorities, including Roma, once again changed in the aftermath of the 1848 Revolution. The Revolution was sparked by the cultural and political oppression that Magyars experienced by their Austrian counterparts; at the time, Hungary was characterized by a nationalist revival and the ideology of “one nation in one state” was gaining popularity.

The subsequent compromise (1867) that restored peace with the Habsburgs and created two internally sovereign kingdoms in essence left minorities defenseless against “Hungarian hegemonist ambitions” (Crowe 1994, 82). Magyarization efforts in Hungary started after the 1867 Austro-Hungarian Compromise (for example, see Bancrof 2005 for placing the time of Magyarization at this event). What perhaps best illustrates the change in ethnic composition of Budapest: “Budapest went from about 80 percent German-speaking in 1848 to about 80 percent Magyar-speaking in 1880” (Freifeld 2001).

Intensified industrialization and capitalist transformation also contributed to the rise of nationalism and marginalization of Roma at the time (Horváth 1963). As a consequence of industrialization and capitalist transformation, Roma labor was no longer in demand and their services did not constitute an integral part of village life any more (Mezey 1986, 18). In addition, a significant number of Roma immigrated to Hungary between 1840 and 1893, virtually doubling the number of Roma, causing anxiety among the non-Roma population and fueling antigypsyism in the country (Kállai n.d.).

The Nationality Law of 1868 declared Hungarian as the state language, and education policies were used as vehicles of Magyarization, making Hungarian a compulsory subject in schools and mandating all teachers to speak the language. Initially, however, appeals for Magyarization were balanced by demands for tolerance and equality, hence immediately after the compromise there were relatively moderate nationality policies, for example, permitting the use of minority languages. However, “by 1879 when the act was revised, official enthusiasm for national minority language education, or the use of minor-

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2 The Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867 marked the beginning of dual monarchy and partially restored the sovereignty of the Kingdom of Hungary.

3 Although these rules were sabotaged in some schools, nevertheless the imbalance between the developing Hungarian and non-Hungarian cultures was heavily shifted towards the former (e.g., Maracz 2012).
ity language in other official capacities, had waned and there was a reversion to a more extreme policy and practice of Magyarization” (New 2014, 174).

Assimilationist policies often took the form of “grammatical Magyarization” through education, which was “the most important means of culture and social development” (Crowe 1994, 82, 84–85). Initially, however these policies “had promoted the Magyarization of schools and of local administration [with] only infrequent attempts to interfere in the activities of the nationalities’ own organizations. The established practice was to legislate Magyarization and to avoid repressive measures as far as possible” (Szász 2002, 696).

Increasingly, Hungary was re-conceptualized as “a unitary Hungarian national state, where the ideas of state and nation were to be equal” (Crowe 1994, 82). In the pursuit of national autonomy, minority groups were first ignored and later outright repressed by the Hungarian state. The policy of Magyarization was explicitly formulated “in an attempt to transform the Kingdom of Hungary into the Magyar nation-state,” according to Kálmán Tisza, who was the Prime Minister of Hungary between 1875 and 1890 (Kamusella 2009, 553). When Baron Dezső Bánffy became the Prime Minister of Hungary from 1895 to 1899, he considered that this [earlier, more moderate] approach was “unsystematic and inconsistent” and looked for a more lasting solution. He wanted to deal with the problem in a more institutionalized and bureaucratic fashion. The government, in his view, had to monitor closely the national minorities’ cultural and political activities, and to consistently apply nationalistic principles in legislation and administrative practice, as well as in its policies regarding economic, educational, and Church affairs. (Szász 2002, 696–97)

Roma were also repressed by these policies, and seen as not integrated, deviant and a threat to the fabric of national society. Andres Blomqvist’s well-researched study of Szatmár (Satu-Mare) County in nineteenth-century Transylvania illustrates well how despite the suspicion of the authorities, Roma, in fact, were economically well-integrated:

half the Roma in Szatmár County worked in industry (42 per cent) or were musicians (7 per cent). In the city of Szatmár-Németi most Roma industrial workers were employed in brick factories . . . and carried out heavy physical work. In other parts of the county and in Hungary in general, Roma were mainly employed as agricultural workers. (2014, 84)
Nevertheless, the nationalist discourse that permeated Hungarian politics called on “landowners not to hire day laborers from among the Romanian and ‘Gypsy’ populations,” as expressed Count István Bethlen (who also served as the Prime Minister from 1921 to 1931) in his 1907 speech (Blomqvist 2014, 84).

Some refer to the implementation of austere Magyarization policy as “Hungary’s regional colonization” (Blomqvist 2014, 33), referring to the subjugation of non-Magyars and establishing an ethnic hierarchy among the population. This paternalistic, colonial mentality is unyieldingly clear in the ethnographic and scientific studies of the time. For instance, Herrmann Antal, one of the most known Hungarian ethnographers in the early twentieth century, wrote that

the Gypsy race [czigány faj] is essentially childish, unable to decide about their own fate. Appropriate people, the society, the state must educate, guide them . . . if needed with force . . . a little cruelty must be done in the name of humanitarianism . . . the state must take guardianship of those children of the nation, whose biological guardians have failed in terms of today’s civilization. (quoted in Dupcsik 2018, 66)

Other sources, such as the visual representation of Roma at the time, similarly represented Roma as uncivilized, beast-like peoples (Szuhay 2002).

The end of the nineteenth century brought with it several changes that culminated in an increasingly consistent and pervasive bad Gypsy image. In the past, Roma constituted part of the everyday life of agrarian and early industrial societies, yet slowly, as industrialization and modernization intensified, their place in society became unstable. With their economic role depreciated, Magyarization efforts further downgraded Roma language, culture, and traditions. With assimilationist policies, the “Gypsy stigma” persisted, and consequently, the bad Gypsy image was further preserved and reinforced.

As the ardent report by the Ministry of Education and Culture claims, “the early nineteenth century witnessed the overwhelming victory of the Hungarian language at all level of education, following the decision in 1840 by the National Diet declaring Hungarian the official language of the State,” assuring “overwhelming power and control of the state over the content and organisation of the whole education system” (2008, 7). After six years of compulsory education were introduced in 1868, a year after the 1867 Compromise, the goal was to reach out to all peoples; a testament to that is the drop of illiteracy from 68.7 to 31.3% between 1870 and 1910 (ibid.).
Roma in Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Russia

In the eighteenth and nineteenth century Russian Empire, the state’s dual goal of maximizing profit and modernization was equally dominant. In the eighteenth century, nomadic groups in the Russian North were subjugated to paying a tribute (initially a fur tribute) and were considered “foreigners” until they took “a solemn oath of allegiance” to “soldiers, mercenaries and Cossacks led by Moscow-appointed administrators” (Slezkine 1994, 18). Scientific inquiry aimed at discovering “if foreigners in question possessed anything of value” so as to make annexing the new land profitable for the state (ibid., 38). These examples demonstrate that the goal was to make distant groups into tribute-paying, registered subjects under the control of the state.

Assimilation or homogenization was not the primary objective. State-policies “were based on the understanding that the Russians would uphold the local customs . . . [a]s long as the iasac [fur tribute] kept coming in” (Slezkine 1994, 30). Furthermore, “the natives who agreed to pay iasac received royal protection and the title of ‘peaceful,’ but they did not become Russian” (ibid., 43). Modernization was imperative for making a profitable and obedient society, as well as reaching out and exercising control over the furthest groups that inhabited the vast Russian Empire. Similarly, in the case of Roma in the Russian Empire, the central goal was bringing them under state control, hoping to “turn Gypsies into human beings . . . and then keep them within the state as useful subjects,” so they can lead “productive and settled lives” (Crowe 1994, 76, 156). Their deviancy was expressively described by a minister in Lithuania in 1787: “Gypsies in a well-ordered state are like vermin on an animal’s body” (quoted in Crowe 1994, 157).

Under Peter the Great, who ruled the Russian Empire from 1721 until 1725 and significantly expanded the land under his control, the Russian Senate oversaw the administration and collection of taxes and issued decrees regarding Roma settlement. In 1733, Roma in Russia were ordered by Anna Ivanovna, the Empress of Russia from 1730 to 1740, “to pay taxes to help form a military regiment”; in 1766, under the rule of Catherine the Great, the Senate imposed a 70-kopek tax on Gypsies (Crowe 1994, 154). At this time, in the Ukrainian territories Roma were regarded as “unpleasant” and were ordered to pay “a fixed tax into the Military Treaty of Little Russia”; in the Polish territories,

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4 Also known as “Peoples of the North,” which refers to the indigenous groups in the Russian North, Siberia, and the Far East.
a prefect arrested a Roma man, against whom no offense had been proven, simply because “from [his] way of life there is no profit” (ibid., 154–160). For better control, Roma were settled in government villages, starting in 1803 (Crowe 1994, 158). Nicholas I, who ruled the Russian Empire from 1825 until 1855, settled 752 nomadic Roma families in two villages in Bessarabia (today Moldova), with houses and fertile land.5

Russification policies under the rule of Catherine the Great (1762–1796) referred to “promoting uniform Russian laws,” while respecting “local traditions, privileges, and laws” and fostering “ethnic and religious tolerance” (Hoogenboom 2012, 83). In this sense, Russification denoted political and legal integration rather than cultural and linguistic assimilation. According to the historian Theodore Weeks, this type of administrative Russification “became nearly universal after the 1860s . . . [while] cultural russification . . . limped behind” (2004, 474). The driving force behind administrative Russification was to assure loyalty to the Tsar and preserve the borderlands, especially with expected secessionist movements and the rise of anti-Russian nationalism.

Affiliation with the nation in a vast and diverse empire like Russia could hardly take on a strictly ethnic character. With its enormous peasant population, even if they were of the “Great Russian nationality,” nevertheless they “had little national consciousness in the sense of a feeling of solidarity and shared experience with other Russians throughout the empire,” and tended to identify with their village or region, rather than the nation (Weeks 2004, 474). After the Polish uprising of 1863, “there was a hardening of the official line taken toward non-Russians” (Weeks 2001, 105). Some scholars argue that the uprising marked the beginning of more intensified Russification policies: “strictly the policy of ‘Russification’ can be spoken of as the government’s official line only after the Polish rebellion of 1863” (Polvinen 1995, 18; see also Weeks 1996).

Similarly, Brigid O’Keeffe, a historian of imperial Russia and the Soviet Union, maintains that governing and managing the population in the late imperial period in Russia was through “forging of civic unity in the face of ethnic diversity” (O’Keeffe 2014, 127). Rationalization and control of Russia’s population—enormously sizeable and diverse—was to be done through “civic integration” (ibid., 111). To that end, the imperial state attempted to modernize and civilize groups such as Roma to turn them into proper citizens. As historian M. M. Plokhinskii wrote in 1890:

5 Kalinin and Kalinina suggest that by the 1880s these villages ceased to exist, and Roma families burned down their houses (2001, 243).
The Russian government in the eighteenth century treated the Gypsies of Little Russia (tsygane Malorossii) in an extremely caring manner: in all cases when it was possible, it attempted to guard the Gypsy population from any insult . . . [the imperial Russian state had attempted] to make ordinary citizens of Gypsies without employing violence, but instead acting with meekness, words, and respect. (Plokhinskii 1890, 109–110, 113; quoted in O’Keeffe 2014, 120)

O’Keeffe, in her thorough analysis of six ethnographic studies about Roma published in the Russian Empire between 1878 and 1901, showed that the imperial Russian state deemed Gypsies “capable of civilization,” and that the state must take on the responsibility of guiding and uplifting them (2014). This approach starkly differed from that in Europe at the time; European and Russian treatment of Roma at the end of the nineteenth century was a point of comparison, and seen as an “irrefutable argument for the practical and moral superiority of imperial Russian rule” for offering a “just, tolerant, and rational” solution to the “Gypsy question” (O’Keeffe 2014, 112).

Martin Aust (2016), a historian of early-modern Russia, came to a similar conclusion: the bureaucrats of the Russian Empire from 1855–1914 were keenly aware of governing models of European countries, which may have served, in part, as guidance for the Russian reforms. Yet, the Russian Empire also strove to distinguish itself and establish supremacy in some areas:

Compared with the other European colonial powers, the approach of the Russian Empire appeared an exception. In this discourse, the peaceful expansion, inclusion of non-Russians and sympathetic attitude towards foreign cultures in the Russian Empire and Asia were contrasted with the violent expansion and exclusion which were a feature of other European colonial powers. (Aust 2016, para. 38)

Treatment of Roma and their incorporation as citizens was then a paramount test of Russian superiority and better policies. Put differently, the paternalistic, yet seen as enlightened, rational and tolerant treatment of Roma by the Russian imperial state was portrayed as evidence for the supremacy of Russian imperial might, especially in comparison with their European counterparts.

Similarly, some ethnographic studies of the time accused the Habsburgs—and by extension European enlightened states—of irrational use of force and rushed decrees, without making an attempt to fully understand Gypsy cul-
ture and traditions. In contrast, the patient and benevolent approach of the Russian Empire, as ethnographic accounts from the time suggested, had provided rational guidance, instead of force and coercion (O’Keeffe 2014). O’Keeffe illustrates this mindset with the study of K. P. Patkanov entitled *Gypsies*, a book published in 1887 by the Imperial Academy of Sciences, and in the book, Patkanov criticizes the Habsburg Empire’s “merciless” policies towards Gypsies. Furthermore, in his meticulous description of Empress Maria Theresa’s and Emperor Joseph II’s reforms, aimed at absolute assimilation of Gypsies through forced measures of denying their group identity, language, right to culture and traditions, Patkanov concludes that these “measures designed ‘for the complete destruction of Gypsies’” were “soullessly cruel” and “simply senseless” (Patkanov 1887, 5–6; quoted in O’Keeffe 2014, 118).

Overall, Russian ethnographers “not only advocated state efforts to settle and educate Gypsies, but also unambiguously embraced the goal of transforming Gypsies into integrated citizens of the autocratic empire” (O’Keeffe 2014, 113). Elena Marushiakova and Vesselin Popov, renowned experts of Roma history, come to a similar conclusion, that is, “the policy of the Russian Empire towards Roma was subordinated to the striving to make them fully fledged subjects of the Empire, enjoying full civil rights and parallel to that carrying out their civil obligations” (Marushiakova and Popov 2013, 8).

This integration into society as citizens undoubtedly assumed an effort to modernize and civilize Roma. The question whether Roma (and other groups, for that matter) were capable of civilized existence was definitely one of the most principal questions that occupied bureaucrats and intellectuals. Although some ethnographic studies at the time speak of Gypsies as “poised to flourish as productive, mature, assimilated members of Russian society,” nevertheless it was also clear “not all groups within the empire were considered adequately capable of cultural progress and the attendant civic integration” (O’Keeffe 2014, 111, 113).

In a review of Roma in nineteenth-century Russian Empire written in 1877, Anatoliy Bogdanov, an anthropologist and zoologist,6 concluded that the backwards lifestyle of Roma—which he saw manifest in nudity or inappropriate clothing, holding on to old habits, resistance to modern practices, such as going to school, living in permanent houses, or holding a profession—

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6 Bogdanov was instrumental in organizing the “All-Russian Ethnographic Exhibition” in 1867, which was “Russia’s first major ethnographic exhibition . . . [that] consisted of dioramas with at least 500 mannequins portraying over 60 ethnic groups, and a wide range of additional displays representing the material culture and physical features of the peoples of the Russian Empire” (Knight 2001, iii).
explained their “low development” (Bogdanov 1877, 1). Although “naturally good singers and beautiful people, with fiery black eyes,” Bogdanov wrote, they hold on to their traditions despite decades of contact with other nations.

In his study, Bogdanov extensively quotes archpriest Rudnyev, who was deeply skeptical of Gypsies’ ability to progress towards civilization. Archpriest Rudnyev was “closely familiar with the lifestyle of Moscow Gypsies” and claimed that although these “aliens initially received some privileges”—being “equaled with Russians [uravneny s russkimi],” following the Orthodox belief and practicing religion “no worse than Russians”—and “one hardly heard about burglary among them”; yet, Roma seemed to have been unable to use these privileges (Bogdanov 1877, 1–2). According to Rudnyev, they were dishonest and never changed their backwards traits: “Despite the unprofitable nature of their profession, Gypsies, due to their intellectual undevelopment, simply fail to lead another path,” and “cheating . . . is not even a sin for them” (ibid., 2). Rudnyev describes Gypsies as “loud and cowardly,” who neither educate their children, nor allow them to schools: “As hard as I tried, only one Gypsy widow agreed to send her child to the ‘shelter’ [prijut, where children were educated to grammar, religion, and handcrafts],” remembers Rudnyev (Bogdanov 1877, 2).

Despite quoting Rudnyev’s pessimistic account, Bogdanov claimed that modernization would indeed elevate them: Gypsies are “not without brain”—there is a Gypsy doctor (“who nevertheless still has a Gypsy accent”) in Romania, wrote Bogdanov, and Gypsies living in villages and cities are “less dark” than those living in the forest, and are already somewhat mixed with the Caucasian race (ibid., 5). Bogdanov trusted that backwardness could be eradicated with appropriate state approach and civilizing policies.

This ethnographic description illustrates well the common juxtaposition of backwardness and civilization, where Gypsies represented the former. As another account quoted by O’Keeffe in the popular weekly Priroda i liudi in 1878, written by amateur ethnographer A. Shile, revealed, “In character, appearance, and lifestyle—in everything, the Gypsy is the opposite of a Russian person” (quoted in O’Keeffe 2014, 113). Indeed, the nineteenth-century imperial Russian state “maintained vital distinctions between Russians and non-Russian”; “Russians were contrasted with the other peoples within the empire,” as a common practice to highlight “difference from and fear of the ‘other’” (Suny 2001, 44, 52). This juxtaposition helped construct the image of the Other in contrast with the “civilized” Russians, while at the same time justify the actions of the civilizer. It was the creation of the Other that allowed the state to assume responsibility for dealing with the “Other.”
Edward Said’s Orientalism is particularly pertinent to understanding how this juxtaposition in fact upheld an oppressive social hierarchy:

... for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short. Orientalism as a western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. (1978, 3)

Educating the backwards Others was evidently one of the most effective ways of dealing with the Orient. The importance of education is evident from the change in elementary school enrollment, which swelled “fivelfold from 1856 to 1885 and another fourfold by 1914” (Suny 2001, 53). The state supported and prioritized Russian education, transmitting not only Russian language, but also culture and values (Thaden 1964). The state insisted on tight control over popular education “in defense of the regime’s traditional prerogatives” (Thurston 1984, 54) and in order to exert social control and create cohesion among its subjects to assure loyalty to the state. Despite these state policies, systematic cultural homogenization through schooling was untenable in the nineteenth century, as Russia lacked the proper resources to reach its vast territories (Weeks 2004).

Enduring “Backwardness”

This chapter demonstrated that in the context of consolidating European nation-states and the rising power of nationalism, both empires struggled to maintain their sovereignty over a diverse population. Homogenizing, civilizing, and modernizing efforts were directed at groups deemed as deviant, backwards, or foreign, to make them into useful subjects and bring them under state control. As both Russians and Magyars were believed to be “Great Nations” and the only historic nation of their land, a union with these nations was seen as inevitable for progress. In both countries the general goal was to unite the entire society and to replace the “diversified, locally-tied low cultures by standardized, formalized and codified, literacy-carried high culture” (Gellner 1983, 76).

Several lessons can be drawn from this historical discussion of the Roma population in early Hungary and Russia. First, transition to the modern world initially implied scientific progress and “humanizing of the backwards”; prog-
ress and modernization required a basic administrative framework with clear categories measuring the “degree of backwardness” of various groups (Slezkine 1994, 88). The concept of backwardness in the official discourse enabled a more scientific description of the subjects, in an effort to render “filthy aliens” or “the provincial and undeveloped” groups “totally and permanently transparent” (Slezkine 1994, 55, 115). As Slezkine aptly put it, “just as all the sciences can be ranked according to their usefulness . . . so could customs and religions” (ibid., 57).

Second, education emerged as the essential tool for civilizing and for forging unity among ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse groups in both empires. In the Russian Empire, this unity was arguably defined along cultural rather than ethnic terms. In the Austro-Hungarian Empire after 1867, “the German-Magyar hegemony against other nationalities” was the organizing principle of the society (Monticone 1968, 111). Developing social order was imperative for both empires; increasingly, “at the base of the modern social order [stood] not the executioner but the professor” (Gellner 1983, 34).

Nomadic groups were viewed as “non-civilized” and “savage,” but “ignorance and foolishness . . . could be overcome through education” to move “from infancy to maturity” (Slezkine 1994, 57). Gypsies were considered backwards, and their backwardness was seen as rooted in their antiquated traditions and primitive lifestyle, which made them less governable and accountable to the state. Hence, they had to be educated and civilized. In both cases, however, the Gypsy as an ethnic label was increasingly associated with negative characteristics and attributes, such as being foreign, backward, uncivilized, unproductive, uneducated, and the like. This negative content and accompanying marginalization emerged alongside consolidation of state and nation building.

The most important conclusion of this chapter is the emergence of antigypsyism. Antigypsy policies, attitudes, discourse, and state orders were steadily built into the fabric of society and incorporated into the institutional landscape, to remain intact for many more centuries. To borrow Said’s theory of Orientalism to highlight the importance of juxtaposing the uncivilized with civilized: just like the Orient is constructed as the opposite of the Occident, backwardness was constructed as the trait of the “Other” opposed to that of the “civilized.” Hence, one concept could not exist without the other.

Put differently, antigypsyism is the discourse of subjugation, producing distinction between Roma and the majority, rendering the former inferior, and with that, the subordinate subjects, the bad Gypsies, were created. The close relationship between state and nation building on the one hand, and
antigypsyisms on the other hand, was similarly highlighted in the research of Dimitrina Petrova, a scholar and human rights advocate. Petrova emphasized that “anti-Gypsy laws and other persecution of the Roma” in the early history of Europe “are best understood in the context of the fight against vagrancy and other forms of idleness . . . condemning all forms of life that seemed nonproductive . . . [while] ethnicity played a lesser role” (ibid., 125). With time, Petrova added, “repression strengthened and anti-Gypsy laws began to be implemented more strictly and uniformly across the territory of sovereigns, in line with the process of nation building in modern Europe” (2003, 125).

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7 To be accurate, Petrova placed the emergence of the anti-Roma stereotype as early as the fifteenth century. More precisely, her study identified “the formative historical event that forged the core of the anti-Gypsy stereotype the . . . encounter of the nomadic Roma with Western European civilization,” in the fifteenth century in Europe (2003, 127–28).