Chapter 4

The End of Empires

We want, if possible, a closer cooperation and fraternal unity to emerge among the oppressed classes of all the nations living in Russia... There is only one thing we do not want: the element of compulsion.

Vladimir Lenin
(Lenin 1914; quoted in Bilinsky 1981)

Whereas there was considerable overlap in the attitudes, perceptions, and approaches with respect to the Roma minority in the Habsburg and Russian empires, the period following World War One saw notable divergences as major political transformations reconfigured the states governing the territories of Hungary and Russia.¹ The subtle distinction between the models of “civic integration” in Russia (but with assimilationist overtones) and aggressive assimilation in Hungary in the pre-modern and early-modern phases of state- and nation-building gave way to pronounced differences after World War One, in the wake of the Treaty of Trianon and the Russian Revolution. Ideological, demographic, historical, and cultural factors as well as the differing political regimes contributed to a striking contrast in the state’s relationship to Roma in the Soviet Union (USSR) and Hungary between the 1920s and the 1940s.

The logic of national self-determination drove the approaches in both Hungary and Russia during this period, but the concept was interpreted and carried out differently in Europe (including Hungary) and the USSR. Notably, popular stereotypes of Roma apparent during the period of imperial rule—as backward, dirty, disorderly, and prone to theft—and the negative evaluation of nomadism, traditional Gypsy occupations, and other common char-

characteristics of Roma prior to World War Two remained intact in both Russia and Hungary. However, as I explain below, the Soviet Union pursued a series of unique, coordinated state initiatives as components of their so-called nativization campaign, aimed at integrating Gypsies into the new socialist political system. In the political, economic, and social upheaval in Hungary between the World Wars, xenophobia and nationalism took root. Although ostensibly, a nationalities policy assured equality for all Hungarian citizens (Crowe 1994, 86), exclusion and discrimination against Roma took an increasingly aggressive and violent form.

In this chapter, I synthesize secondary sources and draw on sources from the period including newspaper articles, political texts, as well as textbooks used in primary schools in Hungary and the Soviet Union, to illuminate the logic behind each state’s Roma policies and illustrate popular attitudes toward Roma. I focus particularly on the area of education and how these were manifested and contested in the domain of the schooling of Roma children.

The End of Empires: World War One and the 1917 Revolution

The Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires were not sustainable, and many blame nationalism and emerging ethnic tensions for their demise. These tensions were present in the realm of education as well; it was a common practice for central authorities to shut down or suppress “unpatriotic” schools that educated in national languages other than the state-supported language. In Hungary, for example, from the late nineteenth century, “the ministerial bureaucracy required that increasing numbers of subjects in non-Magyar schools be taught in Magyar and granted or withheld state subsidies in order to make Magyar the language of instruction in the vast majority of Hungary’s primary and secondary schools” (Cohen 2007, 262). In the Russian Empire, similarly starting with the mid-nineteenth century, the previously autonomous schools had to incorporate Russian language, history, geography, and other subjects in their curriculum, with the aim of creating Russian-medium schools (Pavlenko 2011). At times these efforts were met with resistance, contributing to the consolidation of national identities within empires and bolstering ethnic tensions. These tensions, however, in most cases did not advocate for independence from the empire; instead, the aim was greater empowerment within a reformed multinational state (Cohen 2007, 242). World War One, however, brought profound political changes.
The End of Empires

When a young Bosnian Serb, Gavrilo Princip, assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in 1914, Hungary entered the war almost immediately. Allegedly, Hungary was motivated to join the war for fear of losing its influence in the empire due to the growing Slavic population, and to avoid jeopardizing the “special imperial mission for the Magyardom and its civilizing qualities” that were affirmed with the 1867 Compromise (Piahanau 2014). The Russian Empire entered World War One to protect their Slavic brothers, the Serbs. Other countries quickly joined the war as well, mainly due to claims to territorial integrity or retention of great power status. It was a war so bloody that it (ironically) came to be known at the time as the War to End All Wars.

Neither an assessment of the causes that led to the war, nor its progression or conclusion are within the scope of this book. However, contribution of Roma to the war effort in both Hungary and Russia, in the form of combat and non-combat service, is noteworthy as it is a little known or recognized fact. Recruitment efforts in Hungary in 1914 assumed military service from Roma men as well. The Budapesti Hírlap, a Hungarian daily newspaper wrote in 1914:

The Gypsy fought like a lion. He endured any fatigue, had no needs, withstood cold or heat, and when it came to fighting, there was no one braver in the whole regiment than him. He wanted to show that the Gypsy, ousted from everywhere, looked down by everyone, also has a homeland. (Magyar Múzeumok [Hungarian Museums] 2018)

Some Roma served as musicians in the army, while others as cavalrymen or infantry (BOON 2018). Still little is known about this topic, although some research is conducted, most notably by the Hungarian historian Róbert Gergely Scholcz.

Similarly, already in pre-revolutionary Russia, settled Roma expressed their patriotism to their country by serving in the army. Based on the historical study conducted by Nikolay Bessonov, Russian artist and researcher of Russian Roma, there is evidence that Roma contributed to the 1812 war and the First World War (without pointing at the evidence itself, regrettably; Bessonov 2010). There is also evidence that Roma, who immigrated to the Russian Empire throughout the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth cen-

---

2 This research was done for a traveling exhibition called “Hegedűvel és puskával—a Nagy Háborúban” (With a violin and a gun in the Great War), which uncovers the enormous contribution of Roma during World War One in Hungary based on the research of historian Róbert Gergely Scholcz.
Chapter 4

tury, such as some Kalderash Roma, often engaged in metalwork and tinning of dishes for military units, staying near military camps and providing useful labor (Chernykh 2018). Overall, the involvement of Roma in World War One merits more research and discussion in both countries.

Soon the involvement in the war effort led to food shortages and crumbling of the countries’ economies and infrastructure, which was especially the case in the Russian Empire. The war also exposed the poor leadership of Tsar Nicholas II, and delegitimized the tsar of Russia in the eyes of many. As a result, in 1917 two revolutions shook Russia: one known as the February Revolution, when starving demonstrators demanded to end the war and replace the Tsar, and the second known as the October Revolution, led by Bolsheviks. As a consequence of the latter revolution, the provisional government that was formed after the February Revolution was overthrown and the Bolsheviks took power, quitting the war effort and establishing a communist state. The Soviet Union was finally established after the destructive and lengthy civil war, which lasted until 1923.

The end of World War One and the 1917 October Revolution proved to be a decisive breaking point for the political order at the time, and they unleashed an unprecedented challenge: the fall of empires and a growing sense of nationalism. Since former empires encompassed a wide range of ethnic groups, the newly formed European states faced the task of re-defining the sense of belonging, nationhood and statehood; it was the logic of national self-determination that redrew the borders of Europe and redefined social order. The Soviet Union remained a multiethnic state, which also employed the narrative of national self-determination, yet it was interpreted and carried out differently than in Europe.

In fact, the question of national self-determination was discussed as early as 1896 during the International Socialist Workers and Trade Union Congress in London (also known as London Congress of the Second International); this discussion was later brought up in 1903, and again on the eve of World War One by the leftist parties of the “great Eastern states,” the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and Russia (Bari 2016, 85). The European counterpart, Otto Bauer “utilized self-determination in order to argue for the federalization of the Habsburg Empire means of extraterritorial national autonomy,” while the Russian counterpart, V. I. Lenin “understood the term as a right of ‘national territories’ to secede from the empire . . . essentially accept[ing] that the multi-ethnic structures of the East would break up with the utilization of the notion” (ibid. 85–86).

Fundamentally, the Austro-Marxist position on national self-determination envisioned “cultural autonomy for nationalities within the federation of
autonomous regions with a firmly centralized government” (Tarr 1999, 106). Lenin’s definition was meant to gain the support of national movements for the Revolution, “improve relations among the diverse proletariat elements of national groups,” and allow the party to “represent all the working class elements of a multinational state” (ibid.). It is clear, therefore, that national self-determination was supposed to serve the state-building endeavor in the European case, while in the Russian case the concept was mobilized in the interests of furthering the idea of socialism. Lenin stated:

It is not the business of the proletariat to preach federalism and national autonomy; it is not the business of the proletariat to advance such demands, which inevitably amount to a demand for the establishment of an autonomous class state. It is the business of the proletariat to rally the greatest possible masses of workers of each and every nationality more closely, to rally them for struggle in the broadest possible arena for a democratic republic and for socialism. (Lenin 2002, 13).

In the aftermath of the October Revolution, Lenin’s ideas were put to practice, and Soviet Russia was on the path of re-imagining its society driven by the ideology of Marxism-Leninism. The ultimate goal was the establishment of communist society, built on a socioeconomic order structured upon the common ownership of the means of production and the absence of social classes. In theory, Marxist ideology assumed the creation of classless political communities based on work ethic and Marxist belief, rather than nationalism or race. In this society, everyone had the obligations to assume a soviet working-class identity and with their labor contribute to the communist effort; all people needed to be proletarianized.

In Europe, meanwhile, the Austro-Marxist position on national self-determination proved to be utopian. Instead, Woodrow Wilson’s interpretation of self-determination, described in his 14-point program, dominated the peace talks concluding World War One and resulted in the establishment of a number of smaller states, more or less with homogenous populations. In fact, Wilson’s understanding of national self-determination was justified when nation-states emerged on the ruins of multi-ethnic empires. Wilson claimed that:

No nation should seek to extend its polity over any other nation or people, but . . . every people should be left free to determine its own polity, its own way of development, unhindered, unthreatened, unafraid, the little
along the great and powerful . . . This war had its roots in the disregard of rights of small nations and of nationalities which lacked the union and the force to make good their claim to determine their own allegiances and their own forms of political life. (Quoted in Leonhard 2017, 330)

Nation-states in Europe were structured around the premise that the state enjoyed a virtual monopoly on culture, so “culture-mediated nationalism” became “pervasive in the society” (Gellner 1983, 138–140). Since a nation-state represented a particular nation and assumed a high degree of cultural cohesion, such states fostered national unity that became the central idea behind the political legitimacy of the state.

In other words, while the Austro-Hungarian Empire was replaced by nation-states and Hungary emerged as a relatively homogenous country, the Soviet Union remained a multi-ethnic country. Moreover, in Hungary, an explicit Magyarization policy—an oppressive and discriminatory treatment of ethnic minorities (White 1992)—characterized the official approach to minorities staring at the end of the nineteenth century, that endured after the Trianon peace treaty, which concluded World War One for Hungary, while arguably the Soviet Union was not envisioned as an instrument for a given ethnic group (although there are debates about this in academic and political circles).

Overall, after the colossal political changes that World War One and the October Revolution brought, both countries engaged in a renewed effort of state and nation building. To return to my argument presented in Table 3, in the interwar period while the Hungarian state was increasingly aligned with the Hungarian nation, excluding and marginalizing other ethnic groups, the early Soviet Union had an international vision of communist society, that Roma were to be part of.

Soviet Nativization Policies in the 1920s and ’30s

A few years after the 1917 October Revolution, at the Eighth Congress of the Russian Communist Party (RCP(b) March 18–23, 1919, Moscow) the question whether the clause on the right of nations to self-determination should

---

Although the Russian Empire did suffer some territorial losses, integrity here refers to the fact there was no separation of the Russian Empire into independent states as in Europe.
be preserved or abolished was widely discussed. Lenin remained faithful to his standpoint and addressed this question categorically—all nations must have the right of self-determination. He believed that the clause on the right of nations to self-determination retains its significance for the entire transitional period of the proletarian dictatorship. Lenin stated: “All nations have the right to self-determination . . . Throwing away the self-determination of nations and substituting it with the self-determination of working people would be completely wrong because such a statement does not take into account the difficulties, with which differentiation takes place within nations” (Lenin 1968, 212).

The foundations of the Soviet nationality policies were declared at the Tenth Congress of the RCP(b) (April 17–25, 1923, Moscow); upon the establishment of the Soviet Union, the problem of the national policy of the new state has been included in the agenda of the Congress. The new nationality policy was defined as nativization (korenizatsija, literally “taking root”), and beginning with 1923, the most important task of the party in terms of the national policy was the “nativization of the apparatus.” Nationalist tendencies were present in Russia in the early twentieth century, and “the virtues of the periphery and non-Russian nationalism were being loudly proclaimed by increasingly self-assertive ethnic elites,” yet, instead of repressing this national revival or breaking up the country into nation-states, the “revolutionary regime called on the former exiles to perform the task [of representing their nations]” towards a common goal of building a communist society (Slezkine 1994, 129).

The course towards accelerated nativization has been confirmed by the resolution of the Fourth Meeting of the Central Committee of the RCP(b) with the responsible officials of the national republics and regions in Moscow (June 9–20, 1923). The resolution also stressed the need for the “ideological unity” of the party. The aim of the nativization policy had been raising “young communist organizations of the national republics and regions from the proletarian and semi-proletarian elements of the local population” (Stalin 1947, 293), forming truly internationalist communist leadership. Examining data and

---

4 Part of this chapter was published in Dunajeva (2021c).
5 The way the Soviet Union engaged in state and nation building is debated among academics. Some call it “a new model of colonization” (Hirsch 2000), others argue it was empire building (Dallin 1959) or unique type of federation (Tewatia 1975). What is clear is that the Soviet Union from its very creation inherited a complex question concerning a multitude of nationalities living with their borders; questions that extended beyond the political unit of the nation state. I only focus on how minorities, and Roma in particular, were treated during this process.
6 Nativization was not a unanimously agreed upon direction. In fact, it “was contested by party members suspicious of concessions to nationality and the inclusion in the party and state of peoples less committed to the rigidifying vision of the dominant faction in the Communist Party” (Suny 1992, 27–28).
Chapter 4

figures for membership in the communist parties at the time, Ronald Suny, an expert on non-Russian nationalities of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, concludes that “steadily Russian officials were replaced by national leaders” (Suny 1992, 26).

According to Lenin, cultivation of national identity was necessary because exploitation of minorities under the Russian Empire could only be “undone” by the establishment of national governments, which through cultivation of their own lifestyles would “direct at the dark masses a ray of enlightenment” (Slezkine 1994, 136). Consequently, one of the goals of nativization was to promote native cadres into leadership positions. To achieve communism, everyone needed “special guidance” from a “special communist party,” which had to reach all groups in their native language (Slezkine 1994, 142). Nativization policies reinforced and, in many instances, transformed national identities in the Soviet Union, which led to amplified national awareness and politicization with time (Suny 1992).

While national cultures were promoted, the goal also remained to modernize nations, as only modern, class-conscious groups can develop further into communist and Soviet men and women. Promotion of national cultures manifested in various ways:

The policy of “nativization” . . . contributed to the consolidation of nationality in three important ways: in support of the native language, in the creation of a national intelligentsia and political elite, and the formal institutionalization of ethnicity in the state apparatus. On the language front the Soviet governments, already in the years of Civil War, adopted laws establishing the equality of languages in courts and administration, free choice of language in schooling, and protection of minority languages. The central state promoted alphabets for peoples who had no writing, opened schools for those who had none under tsarism . . . Soviet activists set out to create educational systems and literary languages for their peoples by selecting the dialect to be promoted and by systematizing, refining, “purifying” the lexicon. (Suny 1992, 25–26)

In the case of Roma, the Soviet government recognized Roma as a national minority in 1925, and besides granting them the right to be educated in Romani language, the Pan-Romani Union and Romani Congress were organized, and Romani collective farms were established in 1926–27 (Kalinin and Kalinina 2001, 244). Since the language as a medium of education was of lesser
importance than its content, as “Marxist schools would have the same curricula irrespective of their linguistic medium” (Slezkine 1994, 142), accordingly, Soviet Roma were to be educated in Roma schools in order to instill Marxist-Leninist values through their own cultural channels and language, and, eventually, become incorporated into the fabric of Soviet society. Importantly, these policies were seen in line with the “official Soviet doctrine repeated Lenin’s prediction of sblizhenie (rapprochement) and sliianie (merger) of Soviet peoples and of the creation of a single Soviet culture” (Suny 1992, 30).

Top-down management of group identities during this period also involved a form of homogenization and standardization into distinct groups, which resulted in reification and essentialization: one Romani dialect—that of the Ruska Roma or Russian Gypsies, which was “spoken by Moscow’s activist Romani elite—was pronounced as standard language and consequently taught in Roma schools” (O’Keeffe 2013, 80; see also Kalinin 2000). Standardization based on such criteria was far reaching, and even “Gypsy-like nomads” like the Liuli in Central Asia had to learn this selected dialect (Kalinin 2000).

Indeed, nativization was not without its paradoxes, and several researchers pointed out inherent contradictions (e.g., Hajda 1993), inconsistencies (e.g., Goreenburg 2006) or even counter-productivity (e.g., Liber 1991) integral to nativization policies. For instance, while the formation of autonomous regions based on ethnic groups was the official state policy, independence movements were crushed (Slezkine 1994, 142). Similarly, while ethnic consciousness was cultivated, celebrated, and institutionalized, the ultimate goal was that “the interests of the small ethnic group as well as the larger national group would be subsumed under the category of proletariat class interests” (Gleason 1990, 143). Furthermore, non-Russian nationality continued to be equated with backwardness and Soviet policies aimed at “eliminating the backwardness . . . that the nationalities inherited from the past” (Slezkine 1994, 144).

It is worth looking at the realm of culture and education to better understand how nativization policies were implemented and affected Roma identity formation. To illustrate that, below I mention the Romen Theater and give a detailed analysis of education directed at Roma from the time. To that end, I present research on the topic and the results of my own archival work, especially Romani language textbooks from the 1920s and ’30s.

In 1931, the unique Romen Theater was built, which until today is considered the cultural center of the Russian Roma, employing Roma actors and holding performances in Romani language (see Figure 1 below). The Romen Theater was a testament to the “national in form, socialist in content” approach
to national policy, and it also epitomized the contradictions of promoting nationality culture but with a civilizing mission:

Established with the express purpose of eradicating the “bourgeois decadence” . . . and replacing it with didactic folk art, the theatre throughout the 1930s served as the site of multiple reimaginings of Gypsiness as ethnographically authentic and ideologically appropriate Soviet entertainment. Long after its creation in 1930, Romen persisted as a mobilizer of Soviet ideology and a professional home for Romani actors increasingly marginalized within Moscow’s wider theatrical milieu. Not least of all, Romen persisted as the dependable, state-sponsored site of performances of Gypsies as fiery, excitable, tantalizing lovers of liberty—poetic, peculiar, yet capable of Soviet civilization. (O’Keeffe 2013, 238)

In other words, a cultural site that was meant to “preserve” and “perform” Roma culture, the theater was also created to help assimilation, sedentarization, education, and “transform[ation of] Gypsies from wild parasites into productive workers” (Lemon 2000, 130-31). To that end, the directors in the theater changed plays “to fit within both Euro-Russian theatrical expectations and the bounds of socialist realism” (Lemon 1998, 150).

A similar paradox clearly manifested in the realm of education as well. Schools were continuously used to manage identity and to change Roma into

Figure 1 Performance in the Romen Theater in the winter of 2013, photo taken by the author.
hard-working, rational, and literate socialist members of Soviet society. Roma were to be liberated by the values of communism, join the socialist working class, and enjoy the equality and freedoms of that system—that was the content of education. For instance, Crowe described that Romani literacy books “include[ed] articles explaining the new land tenure system, the five-year plan . . . how to become atheists, live in houses and go to school (Crowe 1994, 177). Overall, educating the “backwards Gypsies” served the goal of enlightenment and acculturating youth to Soviet culture (O’Keeffe 2013).

An outstanding examination of the early Soviet Romani educational initiatives is Brigid O’Keeffe’s book, New Soviet Gypsies (2013). O’Keeffe argues that education of Roma at the time attempted not only “to teach Roma literacy and hygiene, but also . . . to transform backward Gypsies into conscious Soviet citizens” (2013, 67). In closely studying Gypsy schools in Moscow, the author describes the cooperation of the Gypsy Union with the Moscow Department of Education in delineating the particularities of Romani-language elementary education and assisting in popularizing the schools among Roma parents. Then, in 1926, “the Soviet Union’s first Gypsy schools formally opened in Moscow” where “students were instructed in reading, writing, arithmetic, drawing, crafts, music, hygiene, physical education, history, and civics” (O’Keeffe 2013, 69).

Although O’Keeffe points out the initial lack of success—low enrollment, resistance from some communities, Russian teachers’ inability to communicate with Roma children, tremendous linguistic and cultural diversity within the Roma communities—nevertheless, these early defeats led to a meaningful realization: “In the absence of a native language common to all of Moscow’s Romani schoolchildren . . . one must be created for them” because “without an alphabet, textbooks, or their own cadres of native language schoolteachers, Romani schoolchildren were thus deprived of their right to an education in their presumed native language” (O’Keeffe 2013, 75–77). A year after the first Roma school opened, a decree “On the Creation of the Gypsy Language Alphabet” was adopted with the goal of creating a Cyrillic script-based alphabet and uniform language for the Roma of the USSR, which immediately led to “composing the first Romani-language textbooks to be published in the USSR” in 1928 and beyond (O’Keeffe 2013, 82).

Below I consider examples from textbooks circulated at this time, translated from Romani language to English. 7 I show excerpts from primers and

---

7 Translation was done with the help of Kirill Kozhanov, PhD, a Romologist and linguist at the Institute of Slavic Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences. I am grateful for his assistance.
analyze how education of basic grammar sought to alter Roma students’ identities from “unsettled fortune-tellers” to enlightened, hardworking socialist Roma. Through textbooks building on stereotypes about Roma, the Soviet state strove to recreate Roma as part of the socialist working class. I suggest that in these textbooks, there was an obvious attempt to juxtapose stereotypical Roma culture with the desired qualities of a Soviet citizen, as well as teach socialist values. Textbooks taught discipline, work ethic, Marxist-Leninist ideology, and socialist values, while contrasting those with undesirable social elements, backwards traditions, and poor work ethic.

Figure 2 is the inside cover of a textbook for first-grade Roma students. It depicts a Roma home at the top and a classroom at the bottom of the page. The former is a chaotic, filthy, disorderly environment, representing backwardness. The latter, however, is an orderly and disciplined atmosphere, with obedient chil-

![Figure 2 Inside cover of N. A. Pankov and N. A. Dudarova, “Dzhidi buty” (Джиды буты). Moscow: Centrizdat, 1930. Book accessed from the Russian State Library (Khimki, Russia)]
The End of Empires

dren, clear social hierarchy and clearly defined social roles for the teacher and students. Evidently, it was the school that possessed the ability to transform Roma living in antiquated conditions to civilized, enlightened, and modern. Schools were also to transform the dirty and disorderly way of life to tidy, disciplined, and orderly habits through lessons like “teeth brushing, hair combing, and face scrubbing [taught] in the classroom” (O’Keeffe 2013, 72). The schools then became not only institutions that teach these values, but the very analogy to the Soviet society: a well-disciplined, homogenous society of hard-working citizens.

Similar juxtaposition existed between “backwardness” and the Soviet way of life, where the latter was characterized by a sanitary, urbane, and diligent lifestyle (see Figures 3 and 4). Soviet schools evidently played a vital role in overcoming “Gypsy backwardness,” in teaching not only literacy, but also habits that come with a more educated routine, such as keeping order and hygiene. Enlightenment also took a form of exposing old traditions—such as the oppression of women or itinerant life—and overcoming those through the enlightened Soviet school system. Undoing injustices of tsarist Russia, where these backwards traditions were rooted, was thus imperative, as the following excerpts from textbooks demonstrate:

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

Lifestyle changes fast. Roma understand well that a house is better than the field. Those who work, eat. We won’t sit hungry, we are working Roma. (Dudarova 1933, 28–29)

O’Keeffe pointed out that there was disagreement regarding how much “the voices of the prerevolutionary Gypsy past [should be allowed] to speak to the New Soviet Gypsies of the future,” and whether textbooks should include “folkloric tales of drunkenness, thievery, and oppression served as valuable illustrations of ‘Gypsy backwardness’” (2013, 88).

Textbooks contained not only practical advice on hygiene, but were also filled with political messages, educating Roma in Romani language about Lenin, Stalin, the values of socialism, and the Bolshevik Party. Political education, in line with broader Soviet education policy at the time, was inevitable for instilling class consciousness, improving socialist awareness, and teaching communist morality. As Lenin claimed, “the whole task of the upbringing, education and teaching of contemporary youth should be the creating of a communist morality” (quoted in Zajda 1988, 391). The goal was no different in schools, and in the case of Roma who embodied “moral poverty of backwardness,” moral education was even more imperative to rid them of “ideological impurities that unwashed hair and shoeless feet implied” (O’Keeffe 2013, 72–73). Romani textbooks celebrated the socialist way of life, the Communist Party, and the leaders of the USSR. For instance, Figure 3 translates from Romani as follows:

**Lenin**
For us, he was a leader, teacher, friend.
We are on the path that Lenin paved for us.
So say workers in all countries.
So say Communists in all countries.
We are on the path that Lenin paved for us.
Stalin
Lenin died, but the Leninist party, the
Communist party, the Bolshevik Party—it lives and grows.
Stalin—the best student of Lenin.
Beloved leader of our party.
Under his leadership, we are building a new life.
Stalin—the best student of Lenin. (Dudarova 1934, 64–65)

For sovietization, then, besides overcoming backwardness, it was also
important to recognize “enemies of the people,” also referred to as the “en-
emies of the proletariat,” and participation in collectivization. These enemies
were political opponents of the Soviet regime, so educating the young Romani
pupils to identify such traitors was essential. In a similar vein, kulaks—affluent
peasants who were viewed as enemies of communism—were seen as remnants
of the inequalities of tsarist Russia and class enemies who posed an obstacle to
collectivization efforts.
Chapter 4

Teaching Roma children about the importance of goals of collectivization was yet another goal. Collectivization was not only a crucial goal of the state’s industrialization effort (Slezkine 1994, 188), but it was also particularly important in the case of Roma because nomadism was seen as incompatible with collectivization. In addition, collectivization was considered a way to manage the backwards peoples: it cultivated qualities such as strength and determination, and taught economic rationality and modern technology (Slezkine 1994, 205). These messages are addressed in the excerpts from a Romani textbook below (see Figure 4) that translates as follows:

**Kulaks**

Gypsies have kulaks
Kulaks should not be admitted to collective farms
They are enemies of collective farming
Together with the priests,
We must drive them off,
They are the enemy of collective farming
And they are called kulaks
On the collective farm
Kulaks said that we will not have bread in the collective farms,
that we will not have vegetables
Kulaks are our enemies.
Kulaks told the poor peasants not to join collective farms.
Collective farms follow a plan.
Each worker completes their tasks. ...
Kulaks lied to us. (Dudarova 1932, 32–33)

Working class identity assumed a certain attitude to labor as well. Roma
were to be introduced to working habits that were socially useful to advance
economy and boost communism. Socialist labor also bonded workers through
solidarity to a common cause of building a communist society. In Lenin’s
words, “To the old world, the world of national oppression, national bickering,
or national isolation, the workers oppose a new world of the unity of the work-
ers of all nations, in which there is no place for a single privilege nor for the
slightest oppression of one human being by another” (quoted in Muradov 1974,
292). Indeed, Lenin believed that the lack of national tension and national dis-
trust would draw people together (Slezkine 1994, 143).

Textbooks instructed Roma about their participation in the labor mar-
ket with clear message about women’s contribution as well. Through labor,
“Romani workers were called upon to attach heartfelt meaning to their con-
tributions to socialist construction as well as subscribe to the Soviet values of
discipline, transparency, and consciousness” (O’Keeffe 2013, 104). Particularly
important was to modernize Roma women, stereotyped as fortune-tellers and
beggars. In textbooks, women in the traditional Roma household were por-
trayed as subordinate to men and victims of patriarchal social order, yet their
submissive status changed by engaging in proper work in a socialist society
(Figures 7 and 8). Joining the working class implied more autonomy for women,
and Roma women were shown fulfilling occupations previously thought of as
only for men, like tractor drivers and factory workers.

Through education and work, Roma were to be liberated of their “back-
wards habits” and ultimately join the socialist masses. Socialism, therefore, was
portrayed as emancipation and empowerment, especially for Roma women.
This transformative effect is evident in the following abstracts from a Romani
textbook:
Masha works in a factory. Her husband works in a factory. Their children go to Roma kindergarten. Masha doesn’t have a father. The school gives food to Masha. Masha is given shoes and clothes. Masha goes to school. My mother was a fortune-teller. My father was a trader. Now my mother is no longer a fortune-teller. My father does not trade. I go to school. My mother works in a factory. My father works in a factory. Find your happiness in work. (Dudarova 1932, 24–25)

In summary, the “civilizing work” in schools aimed “to ensure correct progress through education,” training of native communist intelligentsia, and instructing previously backwards groups about appropriate work ethic, lifestyle, and ideology (Slezkine 1994, 157). For Roma, just like many other “backwards” groups, the ultimate objective was then to integrate into the socialist society. Effectively, Roma identity was expected to become “nested in” the larger Soviet working-class identity, and the ultimate goal was for nationality-based identities to become obsolete with time.

The early Soviet nationalities policy, with their governing ideology that minorities must reach equal status with the Russian majority, lasted until the 1930s, and was in retreat by the end of that decade (Gorenburg 2006). As a result, by the end of the 1930s Roma educational institutions in the USSR were discontinued as “harmful” and an “ideological turn” changed the direction of nationality policy in the country (Demeter and Chernykh 2018, 19). The national minority status of Roma in the USSR (along with national schools,
newspapers, and the like) was withdrawn as soon as in 1936. By 1938, a secret resolution discontinued (minority) national education and national classes for the Roma (Demeter et al. 2000, 207). Cultural institutions such as the Romen Theater were “simply a rather small hangover of the Bolshevik legacy,” writes Michael Stewart, a social anthropologist and expert on Roma (2001, 74). Nevertheless, Lenin’s regime was arguably known by the Russian Roma community as “the beginning of civil rights for Roma in USSR” (Crowe 1994, 174), and nativization policies had long-lasting consequences.

Nativization policies, however, may have played a role in the sense of belonging of Russian Roma—a topic further analyzed in later chapters. For example, Alaina Lemon, a socio-cultural and linguistic anthropologist who works in Russia and the former Soviet Union, demonstrated a strong sense of belonging and rootedness among Russian Roma in her research (1998; 2000). I similarly found a sense of rootedness among Roma in Russia during my fieldwork, with nearly all Roma respondents considering Russia as their homeland and classifying themselves as Rossiyane.8 In contrast, considerably fewer Hungarian Roma respondents considered themselves Hungarian. I describe this finding in more detail in the following chapters.

Hungary After the Treaty of Trianon

After World War One, Hungary was a nation-state with a relatively homogeneous population, yet nationality politics remained paramount, with a significant number of ethnic Hungarians outside of newly established Hungarian borders and minority groups within its borders. Even though “virtually all the successor states [in Eastern Europe] claimed nation-statehood, they were in reality mini-empires,” as Raymond Pearson, an expert on national minorities in Eastern Europe aptly notes, that had to deal with their “antagonized minorities and their territorially dissatisfied neighbors” (Pearson 1992, 500–1). In addition, an economic depression swept through Hungary as the aftermath of World War One further aggravated nationalist sentiments.

After the treaty of Trianon in 1920, Hungary lost 67% of its territory and 58% of its population, considerably changing the ethnic composition of the country: before World War One, approximately half of the population

---

8 Laitin described identity categories and the distinction as Rossiyane—members of the Russian state and raskiye—an ethnic category of Russians (1998, 265–66).
belonged to one of the minority groups, which by 1920 changed to only 10% (Olasz 2014, 251). “By depriving the Hungarian nation of most of its minorities . . . the framers of the peace treaty unwittingly encouraged the dream for a homogenous Magyar ethnic state,” the historian Thomas Spira wrote (1970, 165). As a result of this trauma, radical political views gained ground.

In 1919, the communists assumed power for a brief four-month period, which was not sufficient to formulate and carry out any systematic nationality policy. The politics of the Hungarian Soviet Republic under the leadership of Béla Kun never gained sufficient popularity in the country, which only strengthened the support of counter-revolutionaries, also known as “Whites.” The Whites were led by István Bethlen and Miklós Horthy, the latter having already earned his fame as the former commander-in-chief of the Austro-Hungarian Navy became the Regent of Hungary in 1920.9

“Next to ever present revisionism,” writes the historian Steven Vardy, “the first of the two interwar decades in Hungary was characterized primarily by a policy of political, economic, social and ideological-cultural consolidation,” and Bethlen was responsible for this consolidation (1983, 28–29). After the Trianon Treaty, national minorities were regarded as the cause of the unfavorable treaty and the country’s dismemberment, and were increasingly excluded. As a consequence, Roma found themselves in a relatively homogenous nation-state pursuing a national mission of Magyarization that was also quite xenophobic (Kamusella 2009, 662; Spira 1970). Donald Kenrick, a linguist and researcher who studied Roma, writes that “apart from the musicians, Gypsies have been viewed with mistrust [and from] the mid-1930s, calls were made in the Hungarian Parliament for the internment of Gypsies in labor camps” (2007, 117).10 The work of the previously mentioned Barna Mezey (1986), with its collection of original letters and other written sources from the time, remains one of the most instructive resources of historical knowledge about Hungarian Roma from this time period, which I use extensively for my analysis as well.

In the interwar period, solving the epochal “Gypsy question” remained a continual task of the state, with a growing urgency and an increasingly aggressive approach. There was hardly a coherent Roma policy that the government

---

9 For an intriguing discussion of Horthy’s rule as a “moderating influence” that in fact “saved Hungary too far to the radical right before World War Two”, see Steven Vardy’s “The Impact of Trianon upon Hungary and the Hungarian Mind: The Nature of Interwar Hungarian Irredentism” (1983).

10 With the exception of the musician Roma, who were arguably still highly regarded in the interwar period, as their description published in the 1937 Budapest Hírlap (Hungarian daily newspaper) demonstrates as well: “Gypsy musicians are . . . the most noble representatives of Hungarian Gypsies” (Binder 2018, 24).
was able to formulate. The inability to address the “Gypsy problem” sufficiently was criticized in 1931 in one of the weekly papers (Magyar Közigazgatás 1931/40, 4; quoted in Mezey 1986, 181):

It is public knowledge that Gypsies are the biggest threat to public safety. Their low intelligence, nomadic life, evasion of regular work predestines them to criminality. I am convinced that if we succeeded in making them settled and assume regular work, criminality country-wide would improve. Finding a solution to this issue is rather hard and we must admit, we do not have a program. Occasionally there are partial decrees, which must be guided by good intentions, yet they fail to treat the roots of the problem and often instead of improvements, they do more harm . . . The Gypsy question is difficult, but it is futile to attempt a solution through chasing, aggravation of their subsistence, making them wild . . .

Some scholars disagree. David Crowe, a renowned specialist in the history of the Roma people in Eastern Europe and Russia, suggests that there was indeed a nationalities policy, at least during the government of Count István Bethlen from 1921 to 1931, which allegedly assured equality of all Hungarian citizens, yet it was “compromised by a subtle, ongoing campaign of Magyarization” (Crowe 1994, 86).11 Whether there was a comprehensible Roma policy immediately after World War One might be debatable, but what was certain is that Roma were targeted by various policies as non-desirable members of society.

Official communication and reports from the time consider imposing restrictions, constraining rights, and holding police raids as solutions to the “Gypsy problem” (Mezey 1986, 180). Sedentarization efforts continued, and wandering Roma were described as a health, security, and social threat. According to a 1928 decree signed by the Secretary of State on “More efficient regulating of itinerant Gypsies and renewed effort of data-collection,” a keener cooperation with the police and defense forces was described as imperative to manage Roma within Hungary and prevent more from entering the country (Mezey 1986, 200).

Similarly, a 1932 report from the high sheriff of Vasvár county to the county commissioner also protested against “a large number of Gypsy caravans” going through towns, suggesting various prohibitions, such as complete ban on horse

---

keeping, to impede on itinerant lifestyle (Mezey 1986, 206). An increase in the police force is suggested as the only way to make Gypsies comply with the prohibition and observing rules on registering their activities in animal husbandry with the authorities. With that, a state-sponsored collective criminalization of Roma accelerated. This political atmosphere of exclusion and discrimination was prone to violence and radicalization.

Tensions between Roma and Magyars were palpable. A description of Roma in Ondód from 1933 complains about their “poverty and shocking reproduction,” which will “plunge the entire town into poverty” if the “Gypsy question” is not addressed sufficiently (Mezey 1986, 162). This writing highlights the idleness of the local Roma, depicted as socially, economically, and even morally destructive for the community: “Even the chimney-sweeper’s fee is paid by the smallholders. A small part of Ondód Gypsies are musicians, but the majority of them are beggars . . . in addition their societal and moral tremendous destruction merits its own discussion” (ibid.).

What deteriorated the situation of Roma was the rapidly changing society and economy: work opportunities were continuously shrinking as old professions became gradually obsolete, and competition for jobs further increased with Roma moving to Hungary from neighbouring countries (Kállai n.d.). “We are nail-smiths,” complained a Roma in 1932, “but nowadays our work is no longer needed. By working all day we make no more than one pengő. There is no construction, no one buys the good quality hand-wrought nails. If no one buys [nails], we are unemployed” (quoted in Dupcsik 2018, 89). The conditions were no different for many other professions like tinkers, basket weavers, and many more. Not only their labor was superseded, but in rural areas the local population tended to have less means to pay for the traditional, hand-made work that Roma provided. Urbanization further marginalized Roma, often pushing their settlements away from the edges of cities and towns.

Under the pretext of protecting the society, children were especially targeted. For example, “child protection” decrees called for placing “abandoned” children of “itinerant Gypsies” or those who “do not have family members taking care of them” to state care (Mezey 1986, 211). In reality, however, it often led to forceful acts of robbing Roma families of their minors, provoking resistance and contempt of state authorities (ibid.). Requiring school attendance—albeit erratically throughout the country—for Roma children also continued, although obliging adherence to these regulations was rather challenging for state authorities (Bábosik 2009, 178). The fine for non-attendance was often overlooked due to poverty, which impelled a teacher in Csíktapolca to suggest
more drastic measures of incarceration or forced labor of the head of the family (Pomogyi 1995, 183).

My archival inquiry through newspapers from the 1930s showed that the rationale behind the urgency to educate Roma children was framed in terms of societal protection against deviance, diseases, and criminality. It was less about “enlightening” or “civilizing,” as it was about public security and safety, to which Roma were defined as a threat. A newspaper article from 1933 with the title “Gypsy School of Diósgyőr” proudly announced that the first Gypsy school was opened in town, highlighting that “one of the main subjects taught is hygiene” (Új Barázda, January 22, 1933). The newspaper continues: “Those who come to school with dirty hands, they have to get washed on the spot; those who defy the soap will be threatened with a brick. This is no longer necessary, however.” The Gypsy school of Diósgyőr was also mentioned as an exemplary school to be replicated throughout the country, where “teachers wash and cut hair” of the “coal black Gypsies,” as Reggeli Hírlap newspaper writes in its June 8, 1935 edition. Other papers, such as the May 1, 1938 edition of the Miskolci Reggeli Hírlap, mocked young Roma girls who escaped attempts to cut their hair and “refused to part with their one and only pride.”

In Székesfehérvár, according to the newspaper Pesti Hírlap from November 9, 1930, since the local Gipsies were settled and “tamed,” the area became safer; the local administration opened a separate Gypsy school for the “new generation of Gypsies.” Undoubtedly there was a strong motivation to make Gypsies into useful and safe members of society, and some teachers like József W. Vadas, who established and taught at the above-mentioned Székesfehérvár Gypsy school until 1932, were hopeful that it was possible to teach Gypsies, although they were “hard to tame” (Surányi 2005, 124).

In other places the growing number of Roma, especially school-age children, necessitated a solution to the “schooling of Gypsies,” formulated as part of the “Gypsy questions.” A report from the general town meeting of Pankasz, immediately before the outset of World War Two, attests to just that: “Establishment of a separate Gypsy school is critically important . . . because their number grows year after year” (Pomogyi 1995, 186). Kemény István, one of the most known Romologists in Hungary, pointed out that until World War Two, “children were just as numerous in the non-Roma families as they were in Roma families” (Kemény 2005, 34).

---

12 The newspaper was made available at the National Educational Library and Museum in Budapest, Hungary. I hereby express my gratitude to Károly Szabó at the Library for his invaluable help.
School attendance among Roma generally grew in the interwar period, especially among those who could access the school and lived near villages; yet, many quit school after a few years of study (Kemény 2001). Absenteeism of Roma children was common in the entire country, which was likely the consequence of discrimination in schools and state institutions, as well as bureaucratic failure. Some documents also suggest that school-age Roma children were not registered properly and subsequently left out from the catalog of students (Pomogyi 1995, 184).13

Segregated education was becoming widespread. Often Roma schools or classes were realized only if sufficient funding and resources—depleted or scarce at the time—were provided. The Tárkányi Gypsy School, which opened in 1935 with a dedicated teacher, Dénes Jász, was housed in the village school, where a dedicated classroom was assigned for Roma. Although there were plans for a “single classroom separate school,” due to the disruptions of the war these plans never materialized (Tárkányi Elementary School 2021). A few years after its establishment, local newspaper (Esztergom és vidéke 1938) proudly announced that the Tárkányi Gypsy School “had a great effect on the moral, intellectual and sanitary development of Gypsies” (Hungarian Cultural Heritage Portal 2021). A pedagogical paper from 1937 expressed its admiration for the work of Jász by going beyond the expected curricula and paying special attention to “moral and hygienic” education of Gypsy youth (Néptanítók Lapja és Népművelési Tájékoztató 1937, 564). In the town of Pankasz, instead of a separate school, a classroom was rented in 1942 to realize the education of Roma (Mezey 1986, 214).

This negative stigma attached to Gypsies and, consequently, Gypsy schools, is abundantly clear through newspaper articles, such as the one describing the fervent protest of Roma from the town of Ács against the creation of a Gypsy school in 1938. The newspaper Kis Ujság from December 4, 1938 described the objections of Ács Gypsies:

[Ács Gypsies] protest . . . against the opening of the Gypsy school. They are not Gypsies, they claim, and they said with pride they are Hungarians. They won’t attend the Gypsy school. They begged not to take them out to this shame. Rather, they will make sure their children attend the local school.

13 These issues were not new; as early as in 1909 there were instances when Roma demanded their own schools. Such was the case in Öszentanna and Pankota in 1909, where Roma parents complained of their children being teased, which instilled in them “the thought that they are an ulcer on the society” (Pomogyi 1995, 184).
In terms of textbooks, although there were no policies regarding Romani language textbooks like in the Soviet Union at the time, Roma did appear in Hungarian-language textbooks, usually as part of educational tales in readers. For example, a second-grade reader from 1925 contained a tale about “Pejkó,” a horse that was stolen by a Gypsy (Mócsy, Petrovácz and Walter 1925). The rightful owner of the horse, having found the Gypsy thief at the market, ingeniously proved that the horse was stolen. In the end, the Gypsy protagonist faced the law. Another second-grade reader, Pista és Juliska, written by László Kozma and published in 1925, contains a short story about a Gypsy who stole a goose. After a warning to stop, the Gypsy sarcastically replies that he will not stop because he is chased.

In sum, it was evident that Roma were popularly seen in Hungary after World War One as a societal problem that required an ample solution from the state. It was also increasingly apparent that Roma were not seen as capable of adaptation, but rather as a social nuisance or source of danger, to be contained or confined. The approach to minority groups inevitably became increasingly xenophobic. Intolerance of certain minority groups, coupled with economic hardships and depression of the 1930s, and the political leadership of Prime Minister Gyula Gömbös who “set immediately to work on the creation of a ‘fascist state system’” led to the growing popularity of the Hungarian National Socialist movement (Crowe 1994, 87).14 Caught in the middle of it all were Hungarian Roma and Jews.

The striking contrast between the Soviet Union and Hungary after World War One is that in the former, a multi-ethnic society was initially organized around the socialist ideology, whereas in mono-ethnic Hungary, the trauma of losing the war, economic depression, and political volatility led to the re-imagina-tion of a nation-state strongly defined by ethnicity, pursuing exclusionary policies towards Roma.

In the realm of education, the early Soviet Union pursued a mission to enlighten and civilize Roma through schools. To that end, a standardized Romani language was codified and used for school education. Roma traditions and way of life, which were seen as source of backwardness, were condemned in the name of socialist progress and Sovietization of Roma. In Hungary, Roma were also targeted for their perceived idle and unproductive lifestyles, and the policies were predominantly defined in terms of eliminating the threat they

---

14 When the war broke out, the Hungarian political elite also hoped to reverse its territorial losses by allying with fascist Italy and Nazi Germany (Csepeli and Örkény 1996).
allegedly posed to public security and safety. Roma in Hungary were increasingly criminalized, marginalized, and excluded; during the interwar period, with the radicalization of the political scene, the “Gypsy problem” was also discussed in chauvinist and racist tones.

A Note on the Holocaust

The Holocaust during World War Two is perhaps one of the most tragic, destructive periods of Roma history.\(^{15}\) Scientific racism dominated the discourse in those decades, with claims of the inferiority of the “Gypsy race.” There were numerous anti-Roma measures already in the 1920s and ’30s, but those intensified as Hungary became increasingly militarized (Bársony and Daróczi 2008, 32).\(^{16}\) Demands to establish concentration camps for “criminal Gypsies” were widespread in the country, often citing the German example (Holokauszt Magyarországon [Holocaust in Hungary] n.d.). For instance, in 1939 Győző Drózdy, a party of National Union Members of Parliament, called for a special Roma census in the name of racial preservation, and Ferenc Orsós, who later became the President of the Hungarian Medical Chamber, insisted on the adaptation of German race laws in Hungary during his address to the Upper House of the Parliament in 1941 (Bársony and Daróczi 2008, 32; Holokauszt Magyarországon [Holocaust in Hungary] n.d.).

An intensified wave of anti-Roma atrocities began in 1944 when the Hungarian Arrow Cross Party assumed power. Many Roma became victims of mass shootings, which happened in Szolgaegyház, Nagyszalonta, Doboz, Várpalota, Lajoskomárom, and Lengyel, among other places. By 1944 there were at least 30 ghettos or work camps in the country, where tens of thousands of Roma were forced to labour in inhumane conditions (Szalayné Sándor 2017, 4). Thousands of Roma were hauled in the infamous “Csillagerőd” near Komárom, on the bank of the Danube. From “Csillagerőd” some were transported to concentration camps in Dachau, Bergen-Belsen, and Ravensbrück.

The exact number of victims of the Pharrajimos (a term that means “destruction” and refers to the Roma Holocaust) in Hungary is still debated; numbers are difficult to estimate as many deaths were not accounted for and countless bodies lay in unidentified mass graves (Tóth 2019). Moreover, some sources suggest that

---

\(^{15}\) Part of this section was published as Dunajeva, “Roma Holocaust in Hungary: Importance and implications of Roma resistance” (2020).

\(^{16}\) See a detailed description of anti-Roma measures and pogroms during the 1920s, ’30s and ’40s in Purcsi (2004).
not all Roma were categorized as such, but some were transported as asocials or political prisoners (Fábiánné Andrónyi n.d.). Some, like historian László Karsai, assess the number of Roma victims in Hungary to around 5,000, with thousands more as persecuted, while others estimate up to 50,000, like Menyhért Lakatos, a well-known Roma literary figure and writer, or somewhere in between (Tóth 2019; Holokauszt Magyarországon [Holocaust in Hungary] n.d.). Some suggest that extermination directly affected at least one-third of the Hungarian Roma (Márton-Tóth 2015; Fábiánné Andrónyi n.d.).

In the Soviet Union, Stalin signed a non-aggression pact with Hitler’s Germany, which was in turn violated in the summer of 1941 when Germany invaded the USSR. Roma served in the Red Army and participated in aid programs (Bugay 2015). In the fall of that year, mass killings of Roma—nomadic and settled—began in the occupied territories and intensified in 1942 (Demeter and Chernykh 2018, 489). It is important to note that accounts from the time attest to Roma who were well integrated in the Soviet society before World War Two broke out. A description of Roma in Smolensk characterized them as part of the “normal Soviet population, who worked on the kolkhozy and some in the factories, many of whom were educated” (quoted in Demeter and Chernykh 2018, 493). When Smolensk was occupied by the Nazis in 1941, the locals were shocked when “98 people were taken away” after a gas van arrived to the local Gypsy kolkhoz (ibid.). Similarly, in towns of Smolensk oblast, two hundred of “working, law-abiding Gypsies” were murdered in two Gypsy Kolkhozy and thrown into holes (ibid.).

Heavy massacres took place in Western Ukraine, Smolensk, Leningrad and Pskov regions (Demeter and Chernykh 2018). Roma of Pskov region recalled:

We all lived together, all of my family members . . . then we received a message to prepare food for three days . . . even though my father was not literate, he was farseeing. Many Gypsies gathered and all asked “where are they taking us?” and the Germans responded: “you will be sent to Bessarabia, you are Gypsies after all.” And many Gypsies believed. But my father said: “What Bessarabia? . . . everyone will be shot like dogs! I have a horse—take your children and let’s hide in the woods” . . . My dad took my mother and us, children . . . and only one family survived—ours. (quoted in Demeter and Chernykh 2018, 492)

In the woods near Leningrad (today’s Saint Petersburg), Nazis demolished several Roma settlements with nearly 800 people (ibid.). During the Nazi mas-
sacre of Roma in Babi Yar, which is “considered a single largest Holocaust mas-
sacre in Europe,” between 1941–1943 hundreds of Ukrainian Roma were mur-
dered (Kotljarchuk 2015) and five Roma settlements liquidated (Demeter and 
Chernykh 2018).

Soviet Roma participated in the war effort as soldiers at the front, and 
Roma are proud that there are eleven heroes of the Soviet Union (Demeter 
and Chernykh 2018, 495). Wartime heroism of Soviet Roma was through their 
participation as infantrymen, tankers, drivers, pilots, gunners, medical work-
ers, and partisans (Amelin 2013, 4). They also performed as artists and musi-
cians for the Soviet Army. Among Soviet Roma heroes was the “legendary 
reconnoiter” Ruza Tumashevich or Polya Morazevskaya, a young Roma parti-
san who gathered valuable information for her unit (Demeter and Chernykh 

Once again, it is difficult to estimate the exact number of victims. Often, 
Roma were not deported to concentration camps, but rather were killed on the 
spot by Nazi einsatzgruppen and local collaborators. Some estimates suggest 
that “German military and SS-police units . . . shot at least 30,000 Roma in 
the Baltic States and elsewhere in the occupied Soviet Union” (United States 
Holocaust Memorial Museum n.d.). Meanwhile, Demeter and Chernykh 
argue that it is “practically impossible” to determine the number of Roma 
deaths during World War Two (2018, 493).

After the profound destruction of World War Two and its disparaging rac-
ist ideology that resulted in the persecution and genocide of Roma, the trauma 
was hardly overcome. Recently, there have been more efforts to uncover the 
mechanisms of coping, resisting, and surviving the Roma Holocaust, as well as 
recognizing the trauma felt by the community and victims to this day (see for 
example Mirga-Kruszelnicka and Dunajeva 2021). However, for decades the 
Roma Holocaust was hardly discussed. Both countries focused on rebuilding 
their countries after the destructions of the war, and renewed efforts of nation 
building were guided by the ideology of state socialism after the end of World 
War Two. With abundant literature on Roma during post-war socialism, the 
next chapter provides a brief summary of this era, with a special focus on edu-
cation policies.