

Donert, Celia: *The Rights of the Roma. The Struggle for Citizenship in postwar Czechoslovakia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2017. ISBN: 9781107176270; XI, 297 S.

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In this rich and rewarding study of Roma history in postwar Czechoslovakia and beyond, Celia Donert gives face and voice to Czech and Slovak Roma not only as victims of persecution or paternalist interventions from a „problem solving“ state, but also as advocates for their own interests. She achieves this by centring her analysis on citizenship and rights, and by historicizing these concepts. Different perceptions of rights were, as Donert persuasively argues, a symbolic and political battlefield throughout the Cold War and again in the 1990s, as minority rights became part of the EU enlargement „conditional package“.

Human rights were, however, not just a western tool to unmask the Communist dictatorships of the East. These regimes self-confidently promoted their own vision of human rights as entitlements to work, education, housing, healthcare and further dimensions of social citizenship, arguing that only the socialist state could deliver these. It is a major virtue of Donert's study that she takes the aspirations of Communist politicians, planners, social and health workers, and educators seriously. This allows her also to show how activists from the Roma intelligentsia, often sincerely committed to socialist ideals, interacted with these in numerous ways.

Donert's analysis of four decades of Communist policy in Czechoslovakia reveals that „the regime“ was no monolith and that societal pressure was frequently able to bring about policy changes. Her analysis of the „Gypsy Question“ thus generates broader insights into the everyday functioning of Communist rule. Donert is attentive to the historical contingency of what it means to be Roma, and to the plurality of understandings of how to represent Roma identity. While some activists called for collective recognition of a Roma „nationality“ with its own language and culture, others – whether sincerely con-

vinced that integration was possible and desirable or driven by historically grounded fears of persecution if standing out – chose to declare their belonging to the majority Czech or Slovak population.

The book is chronologically organised. Chapters 1 and 8 offer excellent surveys of the history of Roma persecution until 1945 and of developments after 1989, with proper European contextualisation of national policies. Donert convincingly argues that the emergence of Roma human rights as an international issue in the 1990s was not an attempt to solve problems caused by communism, but a response to the vacuum created by the collapse of citizenship rights after its demise in 1989. Still, the six chapters on socialist Czechoslovakia make up the core and the most original contribution of the volume.

Chapter 2 shows how after 1948, the Czechoslovak Stalinist regime took sincere steps to end racial discrimination, often despite popular opposition, and how it mobilised Roma activists to re-educate Roma to become proper, hard-working socialist citizens. The Party saw industrial jobs, housing, and education as key to solving the „Gypsy question“, and the later rather notorious policy of placing Roma children in special remedial classes originated here as often well-meant attempts to help Roma children catch up.

Chapter 3 studies the Slovak countryside where – despite regime fantasies of Gypsy model workers – the overwhelming majority of the country's Roma still lived. Roma activists and villagers sought to claim their newly won social rights as citizens, but local authorities were reluctant to prioritise an unpopular issue and so housing shortages and local resistance stymied radical state policies. While Marxist ethnographers began to do fieldwork on the transformation of „Gypsy settlements“, planners and experts took aim at these as a health issue and social problem.

The post-1956 welfare expansion and turn towards socialist legality increased government interest in disciplining „antisocial“ behaviour. Chapter 4 analyses how the Party in 1958, strongly influenced by popular calls for „law and order“, issued a secret decree on „Work among the Gypsy Population“ and a Law on the Permanent Settlement on Roma-

dic Persons that criminalised „nomadic lifestyles“. Of the 46.000 people registered as „nomadic persons“ in February 1959, however, fewer than 900 lived in caravans, and Donert documents how the maligned Roma mobility was essentially a function of the socialist labour market, which made ample use of temporary Roma brigades without caring about their housing. The regime now cracked down on any „separatist“ national ideas among Roma activists.

Inevitably, mere demobilising did not solve any social problems and in 1965, the Party adopted a new ambitious Gypsy policy, the theme of Chapter 5. It contained the demolition of Roma villages and a massive population transfer from Slovakia to the richer Czech Lands, but the policy stranded again on a massive housing shortage and local resistance. Abandoning the optimistic belief of the 1950s that industrial labour alone would secure assimilation, the authorities now increasingly defined Roma culture, in particular among women, as the main obstacle to integration. Perversely, the state institutionalised the widespread cognitive link between „asociality“ and Romani ethnic identity statistically by introducing a classification system for Roma based on indicators of social „adaptability“, which left out fully integrated Roma.

The Prague Spring and its aftermath offered unique opportunities for Roma activism, discussed in Chapter 6. Although the newly federalised state still refused to recognise a Roma nationality, activists got permission in 1969 to establish Czech and Slovak Unions of Gypsies-Roma. Until their forced liquidation in 1973, the unions focussed on cultural activism and economic self-help, and addressed the sensitive issue of racial persecution during the War. The Unions had 15.000 members in Slovakia and 7.000 in the Czech Lands, about 10 per cent of those counted as Roma in 1970. This leads Donert to discuss the internal differentiation within Roma communities and the certain gulf between the Roma intelligentsia and their potential constituencies, crucial issues that might have deserved fuller attention in the volume.

Chapter 7 covers the last two decades until the fall of communism in 1989. Social policies brought a new strategy of building special es-

tates in areas with high concentrations of Roma and the introduction of monetary incentives to persuade Roma women to undergo sterilisation. These policies were strongly criticised in a 1978 report from Charter 77 on the situation of Czechoslovak Roma. Donert tells how social workers had played a significant role in framing the report, and she highlights the irony of how they had to turn to a language of individual human rights to support their quest for an authentic Roma collectivity within socialist society. Finally, Donert analyses how an International Roma Union was established in Western Europe in the 1970s, an initiative that met with significant resonance among Czech and Slovak Roma, despite massive official suspicion.

Donert deserves high praise for covering all of Czechoslovakia in her book, an approach to the country's history that has become all too rare after its partition. To some extent, however, the book succumbs to another common temptation, that of treating the second half of Communist rule far more cursorily than the first. Politically, these decades were bland in comparison with their predecessors, but a social and cultural history should not let high politics determine priorities.

The account is too solidly embedded in the framework of socialist Czechoslovakia to be a transnational history of Roma rights, but Donert never loses sight of international contexts or the transnational circulation of ideas and practices. I doubt that „[r]acial discrimination against Roma threatened to tarnish Czechoslovakia's international reputation“ (p. 54) in the early Cold War, since – as Donert shows elsewhere – older practices of discrimination continued long into the post-war era in Western Europe, but such minimal issues take nothing away from an outstanding and pioneering work that deserves a wide readership.

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