



THE RIGHTS OF THE ROMA

The Struggle for Citizenship in
Postwar Czechoslovakia

CELIA DONERT

HUMAN RIGHTS IN HISTORY

THE RIGHTS OF THE ROMA

'Donert places the lives of Roma in twentieth-century Czechoslovakia within the larger context of citizenship and human rights. What results is a superbly researched history that resonates far beyond this small country's borders.'

Paulina Bren, Vassar College

'Histories of Roma in Eastern Europe have often focussed on their experience as victims: in this important work, Donert provides a much more complex and intriguing account, not only highlighting their varied idealisation and suppression by a socialist state, but also giving them agency as advocates for their own rights under socialism. This will be invaluable reading for those interested in understanding the historical roots of Roma issues in contemporary post-communist Europe.'

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'*The Rights of Roma* is the best work available on the history of Roma in twentieth-century Europe. Donert's powerful social and political history of the Romani population simultaneously forces us to rethink our understanding of socialism, minority rights, and human rights in twentieth-century Czechoslovakia.'

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*The Struggle for Citizenship
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The Rights of the Roma

The Rights of the Roma writes Romani struggles for citizenship into the history of human rights in socialist and post-socialist Eastern Europe. If Roma have typically appeared in human rights narratives as victims, Celia Donert here draws on extensive original research in Czech and Slovak archives, sociological and ethnographic studies, and oral histories to foreground Romani activists as subjects and actors. Through a vivid social and political history of Roma in Czechoslovakia, she provides a new interpretation of the history of human rights by highlighting the role of socialist regimes in constructing social citizenship in postwar Eastern Europe. The post-socialist human rights movement did not spring from the dissident movements of the 1970s, but rather emerged in response to the collapse of socialist citizenship after 1989. This is a timely study in light of the major refugee crisis facing Europe, which raises questions about the historical roots of nationalist and xenophobic attitudes towards non-citizens.

Celia Donert is Senior Lecturer at the University of Liverpool. She received her PhD from the European University Institute, Florence, and has held research fellowships in Berlin, Bratislava, Paris, Potsdam, and Prague.

Human Rights in History

Edited by

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Samuel Moyn, Harvard University, Massachusetts

This series showcases new scholarship exploring the backgrounds of human rights today. With an open-ended chronology and international perspective, the series seeks works attentive to the surprises and contingencies in the historical origins and legacies of human rights ideals and interventions. Books in the series will focus not only on the intellectual antecedents and foundations of human rights but also on the incorporation of the concept by movements, nation-states, international governance, and transnational law.

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For my family

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Parts of this book draw on arguments that I have published elsewhere. Chapter 2 draws on my article “‘The Struggle for the Soul of the Gypsy’: Marginality and Mass Mobilization in Stalinist Czechoslovakia’, *Social History*, 33:2 (2008), 123–144. An earlier version of Chapter 6 was published as ‘The Prague Spring and the “Gypsy Question”: A Transnational Challenge to the Socialist State’, in Hara Kouki and Eduardo Romanos (eds.), *Protest without Borders: Contentious Politics in Europe since 1945* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), 32–48, while the argument in Chapter 7 builds on an earlier article, published as ‘Charter 77 and the Roma: Human Rights and Dissent in Socialist Czechoslovakia’, in Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann (ed.), *Human Rights in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 191–211.

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Introduction

Roma have typically appeared at the centre of human rights stories as victims rather than actors. Advocacy organisations such as the European Roma Rights Center in Budapest speak about ‘Roma rights’ to draw attention to the multiple abuses of human rights that are inflicted daily upon Europe’s largest transnational minority. Just as Hannah Arendt spoke of stateless people in Europe after World War II as the litmus test of our ‘right to have rights’ by virtue of our humanity, so today the European Roma seem to embody the paradoxical failure of human rights to guarantee the humanity of those who most need their protection. The plight of Roma in Eastern Europe is often central to this story of Roma as victims, since it was after the collapse of Communism in 1989 that migrant Roma from former socialist countries such as Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, or Romania began appearing on the streets of Western European cities, sparking accusations in the media about begging, petty crime, and benefits fraud. More recently, stories about the internment of Roma migrants in camps in France and Italy have hit the headlines. Romani activists have been struggling to convince European policy-makers to recognise Roma as victims of genocide during World War II; the European Parliament recognised the genocide of Roma only in 2015. As a result, Roma either have been vilified by populist politicians as a ‘menace’ or upheld as the quintessential human rights dilemma for democratic societies in a Europe that now encompasses the formerly socialist countries of East Central and South-Eastern Europe as members, or applicants for membership, in the European Union.¹

Yet a far more complex history lies behind these preconceptions about ‘the Roma’ as an undifferentiated group of victims of human rights violations in twentieth-century Europe. In this largely forgotten history,

¹ Michael Stewart (ed.), *The Gypsy Menace: Populism and the New Anti-Gypsy Politics* (London: Hurst, 2012); Eva Sobotka and Peter Vermeersch, ‘Governing Human Rights and Roma Inclusion: Can the EU be a Catalyst for Local Social Change?’ *Human Rights Quarterly*, 34 (2012), 800–822.

Roma were not on the margins but at the very centre of struggles for citizenship rights as activists, intellectuals, workers, students, or women. Moreover, these struggles took place in a region that rarely enters into conventional narratives about human rights: state socialist Eastern Europe. The ‘people’s democracies’ established in the Soviet bloc after World War II were home to the largest Romani minorities on the continent. Today a large proportion of an estimated 10–12 million European Roma live in the post-socialist states, although the question of who counts as Roma remains highly politicised.² Eastern Europe was also the region that bore the brunt of the most vicious occupation regimes and military conflict in Hitler’s empire. Between 1933 and 1945, more than 200,000 people were murdered as ‘Gypsies’ by the Nazis, their allies, and other states across Europe; many more were subjected to forced labour, arbitrary internment, sterilisation, or medical experiments.³ Persecution and mass murder, as paradigmatic of genocide as the Holocaust, cast a long shadow over the politics of identity and identification of European Roma after World War II. However, the relatively small number of histories of Roma in postwar Europe have centred on Germany and Austria, neglecting the experience of the much larger Romani communities in Eastern Europe.

Claiming that socialism provided the ideology and mobilising power to reform society’s most oppressed groups, the Eastern European people’s democracies saw themselves at the vanguard of just policies to emancipate ‘citizens of Gypsy origin’ from their history of discrimination, a problem that prewar regimes had failed to address and one that continues to trouble liberal democracy in Europe today. Elena Lacková, who was twenty-seven at the time of the Communist coup in Czechoslovakia in February 1948, seemed to embody this promise of emancipation. Born in a Romani-speaking village in north-eastern Slovakia just after World War I, as a young woman she witnessed the persecution of Roma under the Slovak fascist state established during World War II. After creating a voluntary Roma theatre group that performed a play about Gypsies under the Tiso regime, she was feted by Communist officials as a model

² The figure of 10–12 million Roma in Europe is cited by the European Commission and in Jean-Pierre Liégeois, *The Council of Europe and Roma: 40 Years of Action* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2012). On the politics of statistics, see Mihai Surdu, *Those Who Count: Expert Practices of Roma Classification* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2016).

³ Estimates of the death toll vary greatly, from 96,000 to 500,000. See Anton Weiss-Wendt (ed.), *The Nazi Genocide of the Roma: Reassessment and Commemoration* (New York: Berghahn, 2013); Michael Zimmermann, *Rassenutopie und Genozid: Die nationalsozialistische “Lösung der Zigeunerfrage”* (Hamburg: Christians, 1996).