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 policymakers 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,

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Introduction

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. 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. 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


'citizen of gypsy origin’ who could help train other Roma as good socialist citizens. She worked as a cultural activist for the socialist government in Prešov and later in her life gained a degree from the prestigious Charles University in Prague. After 1989, however, the ideals that Lacková seemed to represent were discredited, redolent only of the paternalism and lack of freedom that had accompanied the socialist dream of liberation from oppression on the basis of class, race, or sex.

Lacková’s life story is known mainly among scholars of Romani studies who have read her memoir, originally published in Czech and translated into English as *A False Dawn: My Life as a Gypsy Woman in Slovakia*. This moving book was based on interviews with Lacková conducted and edited by another woman who is a central character in this book: Milena Hübšchmannová. Although not ‘ethnically’ Roma, Hübšchmannová was fluent in Romani and became the leading expert on Romani language and culture in the former Czechoslovakia; after 1989 she founded a Romani Studies department at Charles University in Prague, one of the very few such departments anywhere in Europe. Hübšchmannová was ten years younger than Lacková and grew up in a middle-class family in Prague. Her father was interned as a political prisoner during the Nazi occupation of Bohemia and Moravia. As a young woman, Hübšchmannová threw herself into studying Indian languages at Charles University. Since her father’s background marked her out as politically unreliable, Hübšchmannová was unable to pursue her dream of travelling and working in India and instead embraced Romani culture within the borders of Czechoslovakia as her life’s passion. Against the assimilationist policies of the socialist state – which Roma activists of Lacková’s generation often supported – Hübšchmannová remained deeply committed to an ethnonationalist belief that Roma were a nation originating from an Indian homeland and unified by language, customs, and even physical characteristics.

By the 1970s, a new generation of Romani activists with no personal memories of the war or prewar years began to take a more critical view of the socialist state’s assimilationist approach to the so-called Gypsy Question. Anna Klemprárová was a young journalist working for a regional party newspaper in eastern Slovakia when she managed to circumvent the official restrictions on foreign travel to attend the World Romani Congress in Geneva in 1979. There she witnessed the high point of efforts by a new international Romani movement – largely led by Eastern European Roma – to gain collective rights as a nation. After the collapse

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4 Elena Lacková, *A False Dawn: My Life as a Gypsy Woman in Slovakia* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2000); Elena was known to friends and family as Ilona.
of socialism, Klempárová (now Koptová) became the first Slovak MP who publicly self-identified as Roma. In subsequent years she petitioned the United Nations to recognise Slovakia’s institutionalised discrimination against Romani citizens and founded a private Roma secondary school in Košice. The lives and activism of these three women connect the social history of Roma in socialist Eastern Europe to larger histories of human rights, showing how Roma have actively sought to redefine the meaning of citizenship and minority rights over the course of the twentieth century.

Why Roma Rights Matter to the Human Rights Story

The story of Roma rights is a crucial chapter in the larger history of human rights that scholars such as Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, Samuel Moyn, and Jan Eckel have begun to write over the past decade. Challenging our assumption that human rights exist as the unquestioned doxa of our times, these histories argue instead that our contemporary notions of universal rights emerged as a result of ‘concrete political struggles among social actors in particular times and places’. Human rights are not simply legal or moral abstractions but are fundamentally historical. Samuel Moyn has argued in The Last Utopia that human rights in their current form – understood as individual rights granted to every person beyond the nation state – have existed only since the 1970s. The loss of faith in revolutionary socialism among Western intellectuals, Moyn argues, was one of the factors that resulted in the breakthrough of human rights as a utopian politics of morality in that decade. In a recent essay, Stefan Hoffmann pushes this historical revisionism even further and suggests that we cannot speak of human rights as a ‘basic concept’ in global politics until the 1990s, after the end of the Cold War. Coinciding with a historiographical shift towards memory and genocide studies, Hoffmann writes, “trauma”, “victimhood” and “witnessing” became the key words used to create a way of coming to terms with the past, oriented especially around the Holocaust as the event from which human rights had supposedly emerged.

At first glance, the history of ‘the East European Roma’ seems to fit neatly into the moral narratives about the crimes of Nazism and Stalinism, genocide, and ethnic cleansing that legitimated the emergence of human rights after the Cold War. Moreover, the perception that Roma epitomise the suffering victims of human rights violations in Europe today illuminates another crucial aspect of this story: human rights since the 1990s have gained moral traction not only by appealing to past suffering but also through their connection to the ‘new humanitarianism’ that centres on the suffering of individual victims and displays of physical and psychological proof of persecution and trauma. This observation is amply borne out by the rhetoric and images about Roma deployed by the numerous non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and advocacy organisations that have sprung up to campaign on their behalf since the 1990s. Studies by legal scholars and political scientists have also documented the failure of international law and neo-liberal economic policies to protect the rights of Roma in post-socialist Europe. However, they tend not to ask why or how the supposed ‘problem’ of Roma ended up being framed in the language of human rights.

Against these images of Roma as victims, this book reinstates activists such as Elena Lacková as political subjects rather than objects of humanitarian empathy. This story also matters for another reason. It sheds light on the crucial – but often forgotten – role of socialist regimes in developing their own vision of human rights in national and international politics during the Cold War. The reasons for this neglect are not hard to fathom. During the Cold War, legal scholars of human rights in the United States or Western Europe positioned Soviet ideology in opposition to Western freedom and democracy when writing about the rise of human rights after 1945. Many of the founding legal conventions of the postwar human rights order, from the European Convention on Human Rights to the 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees, were aimed at containing Communism as well as fascism in Western Europe after World War II.

8 Hoffmann, ibid.
11 For a more complex interpretation, see Marco Duranti, The Conservative Human Rights Revolution: European Identity, Transnational Politics, and the Origins of the European Convention (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); on the Geneva convention, see
Totalitarianism, a term used by political scientists during the 1950s to describe the total domination of society by the state in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, was contested by a wave of self-described ‘revisionist’ historians in the 1970s who sought to write a social history of the Soviet Union from below. But the term was revived again after 1989, this time by historians in East Central Europe seeking to draw a thick line around the periods of both German occupation and Communist rule. It was institutionalised in the government-funded institutes that were set up across the post-socialist countries to document, prosecute, and commemorate the crimes of Communism and Nazism and thus to separate the post-socialist present from the not-so-distant socialist past.12

By showing how activists, government officials, dissidents, and ordinary citizens – both Romani and non-Romani – struggled to define citizenship rights for Roma in postwar Czechoslovakia, this book refocuses attention on the history of social citizenship under socialism after 1945. Conceptions of rights in socialist regimes were embedded in a Marxist philosophy that emphasised the materiality of rights as entitlements guaranteed by the socialist state. Rather than legal or moral abstractions protecting individual citizens from the state, rights under socialism provided access to goods and services – such as health care, education, food, or housing – provided by the state in return for citizens fulfilling their collective duty to work. Against Cold War narratives that viewed human rights as a symbol of Western freedom and democracy in the ideological clash against totalitarianism, historians such as Benjamin Nathans, Mark Smith, Paul Betts, and Ned Richardson-Little have shown that the Soviet Union and the German Democratic Republic developed discourses of rights that aligned with Marxist values.13 With a focus on postwar Czechoslovakia, this book demonstrates that discourses of rights were not the monopoly of states in the Eastern bloc, and that ordinary people also struggled to claim rights of social citizenship under socialism.


Czechoslovakia has frequently appeared as a victim in narratives about human rights and dictatorship in twentieth-century Europe. One of the multi-ethnic but notionally ‘national’ states created out of the ruins of the continental empires of the Habsburgs, the Ottomans, the Hohenzollerns, and the Romanovs after World War I, Czechoslovakia was known as the ‘island of democracy’ in interwar East Central Europe – an image carefully crafted by Czech politicians of the First Republic.14 Following the dismemberment and occupation of the country by Nazi Germany after the Munich Agreement of 1938, the 1948 Communist coup in Czechoslovakia was a watershed in Western states’ treatment of displaced persons, as attention swiftly turned from protecting survivors of the Nazi camps to providing sanctuary for escapees from political repression in the totalitarian East. Western perceptions of ‘dissidence’ were subsequently cemented by the 1968 Prague Spring, the Charter 77 movement led by Václav Havel, and the non-violent Velvet Revolution of 1989. But a recent wave of scholarship by social historians has challenged these narratives.15 Tara Zahra, for example, has demonstrated that the revered First Czechoslovak Republic of the interwar era was far more indebted to collectivist notions of democracy, in which citizens accessed their rights through membership in a national community, than to liberal individualism.16 The continuities between the interwar, wartime, and postwar periods are much starker when viewed through the prism of ethnic and social cleansing, as Eagle Glassheim and Matěj Spurný have shown; the ‘liquidation’ of class enemies under socialism rested on a longer tradition of ‘liquidating’ enemies of the nation, including the expulsion of three million German-speakers by presidential decree in 1945–1946.17 During the Cold War, émigrés in the West constructed an image of Czechoslovakia as a victim of Communism that was at odds with the relative satisfaction of many Czechoslovak citizens with the quiet lives they enjoyed under socialist rule.18

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Socialism, Social Rights, National Rights

Socialist attempts to extend citizenship rights to Roma were replete with contradictions, as discourses of equal rights jostled with deeply paternalist notions about Roma as ‘citizens-in-training’. Assimilationist notions of citizenship promoted by the socialist state existed in tension with Romani activists’ nationalist ideals of collective rights to language and culture. This mingling of paternalism and a commitment to equality was evident in the way official agents of the state viewed Roma citizens, as illustrated by the remarks of a Czech civil servant responsible for educational work with national minorities at the height of Stalinism in 1953. Travelling to remote Slovakia, she was shocked to find communities of Slovak Roma who were still living in remote settlements, the legacy of eviction and ghettoisation in the wartime Slovak Republic. She saw emaciated children covered with ulcers and sores who were terrified when ‘white men’ approached. Local officials, she reported, would only allow her to visit the local Gypsy settlement with an armed guard, who fired off a couple of shots as they approached. Speaking to these people in Romani, however, elicited joyful responses of *Buťake bacht! Česť práci!* [Honour to work, a Communist greeting, in Romani and Slovak]. Many of them have worked in Bohemia, in the towns, or in the war. They have already known another life, they know their rights, they were conscious that their situation is unjust. They want to live among the others, to build, to move, to work; they want a new life. ‘We don’t want to live like gypsies, but like white people. Give us that chance!’ We heard the same words from all of them, in them all we saw the same eager desire for a new life.19

Socialist legality, as a means of guaranteeing rights to welfare and disciplining social deviance, was crucial for maintaining stability in Czechoslovakia and elsewhere in the Eastern bloc after the political violence and extrajudicial repression of Stalinism. In the Soviet Union, socialist legality had been invoked by Vyshinski during the Terror of the 1930s and was revived by Khrushchev after the death of Stalin. Socialist states did not have the rule of law, writes Hoffmann, but they did have laws, and these became increasingly important as a means of maintaining stability and social order. This was the context in which alternative and oppositional social movements emerged during the last decades of socialist rule, such as the Charter 77 movement in Czechoslovakia.20

Mistakenly interpreted at the time by Western observers as a revival of a post-national ‘civil society’, as Michal Kopeček and Jonathan Bolton

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have observed, Czech dissidents such as Václav Havel were influenced more by ideals of authenticity and community drawn from existentialism and phenomenology – as well as older discourses of national identity – than the liberal notion of ‘human dignity’ mentioned in the 1975 Helsinki Final Act as the legitimating principle of individual human rights. The story of Romani activism challenges the ‘Helsinki narrative’ that has been so influential in studies of human rights activism in late socialist Eastern Europe.

During the 1970s, Eastern European Roma were at the head of a new international movement battling for minority rights for the Romani nation. With the turn to individual human rights at the United Nations after World War II, following the catastrophic failure of the collective minority rights regime, Stalinist conceptions of national cultural rights – underpinned by social and economic rights backed up by material guarantees from the socialist state – represented a possible alternative for Romani activists in postwar Europe. Roma had been largely excluded from the first system of minority rights protection in Europe, established after 1919 to secure the peace in Eastern Europe under the oversight of the League of Nations. Socialist and post-colonial states achieved recognition for the right to national self-determination at the United Nations in 1960 as Article I of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples. Decolonisation played a crucial role in establishing the universality of human rights, Steven Jensen has argued, by providing opportunities for states from the global South to redefine the human rights project around race and religion.

For the countries of the South – as for the Soviet bloc – collective social and economic rights remained at the forefront of the human rights idea between the 1940s and the 1970s. Collective recognition as a nation as a means of gaining citizenship rights for Roma around the world was the ideal that motivated the Yugoslav and Czechoslovak activists who were among the leaders of the international Romani movement during the 1970s.
In this book I draw on a wide range of archival sources, memoirs, propaganda, press reports, photographs and films, interviews, and contemporary social science texts to trace the evolution of state and social responses to the so-called Gypsy Question in Czechoslovakia from 1919 until the late 1990s. At the heart of this story is a network of activists, some of whom were Roma, who saw the Gypsy Question as a social, political, and moral challenge for the socialist state and its citizens. Studies by Czech and Slovak historians, ethnographers, linguists, and anthropologists have focused on the history of Roma as a minority group; this book is indebted to such scholarship — conducted both during and after the socialist era — as well as to the important collection of documents from Slovak archives compiled by Anna Jurová. Archival research and fieldwork conducted by the British sociologist Will Guy in Czechoslovakia in the early 1970s was invaluable for understanding the implementation of policies on the ground. This book complements these studies by placing the history of Roma in both the Czech and Slovak republics within a broader social, political, and international history, combining a narrative about the evolution of state policy with an exploration of the effects of policy on everyday life, as well as on broader international debates about human rights.

An excellent study of the history of Czechoslovak Roma under socialism by Věra Sokolová has argued that the state’s official ideology of equality provided space for racist ideas about Gypsies to be reconfigured as ‘cultural deviance’ by local agents of the state, such as doctors, social workers, and teachers. Drawing on an extensive analysis of the shifting social policies targeting Roma in areas such as child welfare, education, and health care, especially from the 1960s, my argument in this book is somewhat different. I suggest instead that the official ideology of the socialist state was itself changing in the post-Stalin era. This interpretation chimes with recent scholarship on the social and cultural history of Czechoslovak socialism by historians such as Pavel Kolář, Michal Pullmann, and Matěj Spurný. This book also places the history of Roma in socialist Czechoslovakia in a broader transnational perspective,