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Racism

The Gypsies' Tortuous Journey

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The New York Times reports that France has become one of the most hostile European countries for the Roma. In 2013, there were 19,000 forced removals of Roma people; 13,500 in 2014, and an average of 150 each week in 2015.

“Well, Hitler may have not killed enough [Roma].” That’s what Gilles Bourdouleix, a member of the Union of Democrats and Independents Party, mayor of the French city of Cholet, said in the summer of 2013 to a group of Roma who were expelled from the land they occupied. This is perhaps the most radicalized example of a deeply reactionary tendency—“anti-Roma racism”—growing in France and other European countries.

These speeches and racist acts against the Roma population are far from new—they have a long history. However, since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the deterioration of mass living conditions in Central and Eastern Europe, the Roma population has again become a scapegoat. With the deepening international economic crisis, the anti-Roma discourse is being promoted by a large group of political parties ranging from the extreme right to reformist sectors. Various political leaders seek to cynically channel frustration and discontent against the Roma and other exploited and oppressed sectors of the society.

These leaders and the media promote tropes that are very old, but still ubiquitous, including the idea that the Roma do not want to work and do not want to fit in; that they are profiteers who live off of swindling and theft beginning at an early age; that they live off of taxpayers’ contributions through state benefits; and that they are the “dangerous poor” who have nothing to lose and thus are a threat to the entire society. While these characterizations may appear cartoonish, they serve as the basis of a discourse that, first, normalizes the misery in which the Roma are currently living and, second, criminalizes poverty. To counter these stereotypes, it is necessary to examine the evolution of the social and economic conditions of the Roma people in Europe. These conditions explain the extreme poverty of the Romani people, especially after the fall of the Stalinist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe.

Slavery and Serfdom

Although it is very difficult to determine the exact number, it is estimated that there are about 12 to 15 million Roma people in the world. Most live in Central and Eastern Europe, though they also live in Western European countries like Spain, Italy and France. Romania has the highest Roma population (between 800,000 and 1 million, nearly 10 percent of the total population). They comprise a significant portion of the population in Bulgaria (8 percent of the total population) and Hungary (5 percent of the total and the largest national minority).

According to some researchers the Roma are native to the Indian subcontinent. For unknown reasons they began migrating to the West in successive waves beginning in the 10th century through the 17th century. It is believed that in the beginning of the 14th century, they arrived in Europe through the Balkans and spread throughout Eastern and Central Europe. In the 15th century, they traveled as far as Britain, the Nordic countries and Russia. This geographical dispersion partly explains the cultural diversity of the Roma people.

This same period was also marked by the enslavement of the Roma people, especially in the territories of Moldavia and Wallachia (south of modern Romania). The exploitation of Roma slaves in these countries became central to the economy of Moldavia and Wallachia. Romanian author Gabriel Troc writes that the value of Roma slaves “increased when they were ‘imported’ from the neighboring regions. This could be an explanation for the large number of

Roma in present Romania. As Isabel Fonseca has shown, from the moment they were imported en masse, the prejudice against them was sealed. “The term Gypsy no longer signified a broad ethnic group or race... For the first time it referred collectively to a social class: the slave cast.” This study also indicates that the term “Gypsies” may have grouped together other people who were also enslaved.” This situation pushed Roma families to flee to less hostile regions. Many groups went to Transylvania, while others went even further west.

In Transylvania, although the Roma occupied the most marginalized positions in society, they were not formally slaves. However, they did not own land and were completely dependent on local aristocrats who hired them temporarily and treated them as if they were slaves. The rest of the time, they had to stay on the move to work as migrant agricultural laborers, to trade artisanal goods they manufactured and to sell a few specialized services. All of this enabled them to survive. The “nomadism” of the Roma first resulted from conditions of escaping slavery and second, became the means of survival for a landless and excluded people. In this sense, we can characterize the Roma as being in forced nomadism.

Between Precarious Proletarianization and Forced Assimilation

The Roma were a marginalized group who at every turn were discriminated against and persecuted. Many were reduced to slavery or serfdom. However, in some areas and at specific times, the Roma groups managed to obtain relative social recognition. This was the case of those living in Hungary between the 15th and 17th centuries.

As the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs states,

“During the wars fought against the Turkish conquerors, Gypsies played a considerable role in Hungarian society. Constant military preparation and the lack of craftsmen provided opportunity to work. Offering cheaper rates than the craftsmen in guilds ensured them jobs in fortification and construction work, metalwork, weapons production and maintenance, horse trading, postal services, wood carving and blacksmithing. This enabled them to make a living and engage in important activities for the country. Some Gypsy groups were even granted privileges, first under King Sigismund (1387-1437) and King Matthias (1458-1490) (...) However, at the end of the 17th century when the Turks were driven out of Hungary, most activities carried out by the Gypsy population were rendered unnecessary by farmers, animal breeders, craftsmen and traders, who had begun to settle in Hungary.”

This integration into the country's economic structure was accompanied by a policy that forced Roma people to assimilate into Hungarian society. The term “Gypsy” was forbidden and replaced with the term, “new Hungarian.” It was forbidden to speak the language of the Gypsies. Roma marriages were very limited and Romani children were taken from their parents to be raised in Hungarian families. In the second half of the 19th century, the arrival of new Roma groups from neighboring countries not only fueled prejudices held by the majority Magyar population, but also among Hungarian Roma who had been “assimilated.”

There was a high level of diversity within the Romani population, even if one solely considered Hungary. According to Troc, “The divisions in Hungary's Gypsy population developed in the early 20th century. The largest group, who arrived earlier and lost their language and culture, are known as the ‘Romungro’ or Hungarian (Gypsy) people. They themselves form the rest of the Gypsy population today. The vast majority of the second group arrived from Romanian land in the second half of the 19th century. They speak the Gypsy language, and are called ‘Vlach Gypsies’ by virtue of their origin. There is also a third, smaller group, the ‘Beas’ Gypsies, who mainly settled in South-West Hungary and speak archaic Romanian-language dialects.”

With the development of capitalism in Central and Eastern Europe in the late 19th and early 20th century, the Roma people began to form part of the proletariat in some countries. The opening of new industries, construction of new infrastructure (roads, railways) and the expansion of agriculture allowed a part of the Roma people to become integrated into the economic process.

However, this "integration" was done at the lowest levels of the economy. Analyzing the example of a village in Transylvania, Gabriel Troc writes, "â€œOpportunities' should be read here only as â€œopportunities for survival' (...). The Roma were considered cheap labor that did not have the right to wages, like a gadzo worker did. Accordingly, before WWII, a significant number of Roma were â€œemployed' by Hungarians in return for food and clothes (...). Some of them, especially women, were â€œhired' for domestic work in Hungarian households. Because the Gypsy had no land, they were constrained to do whatever labor was offered to them by the majority population (...). When employed in agricultural or domestic work the great majority of Roms had a de-facto serf status."

A "Forgotten" Genocide?

In the 1930s, the worldwide capitalist economic crisis and the rise of fascism had terrible consequences for the Roma population. The stigma against them grew and racist acts perpetrated by far-right gangs and the state increased.

The Roma were the first to lose their jobs. They were often run off the land or homes they occupied to make room for the nationals. Furthermore, the Roma were increasingly perceived as a burden to the State. Gabriel Troc states, "In Romania the taxonomy was aimed to separate the â€œuseful' Roma (a small group of metalworkers in the countryside craftsmen in the cities and some musicians) from the â€œbeggars,' â€œvagrants,' and â€œprimitive' Roma who, by their high rate of reproduction, would alter the â€œpure' composition of the Romanian population. The consequence of this classification was the massive deportation of Roma populations in Transnistria (eastern Basarabia, now part of Republic of Moldova) during the war."

Indeed, in 1942, Ion Antonescu's pro-Nazi regime in Romania sent 25,000 Roma people (12 percent of the total 210,000 living in the country) into concentration camps, 11,000 of whom never returned. An estimated 230,000 to 500,000 Roma people died in concentration camps during World War II. They not only came from Eastern Europe, but also Western European countries (over 30,000 Roma people were kept in concentration camps in France).

The silence about the genocide of Roma people (Germanyâ€œthe former FRGâ€œdid not formally recognize this historical fact until 1979) cannot be understood without recognizing the continuity of discrimination and racism against the Roma in Europe today. This racism is expressed through discriminatory policies in various countries. In *The Forgotten Holocaust (L'Holocauste Oublié, 1979)*, Christian Bernadac states that "prejudice, maintained by constant 'state sanctioned' repression, led to this disturbing paradox: to be against Gypsies is to be with the law. The breeding ground for the 'Final Solution' was perfectly clear when National Socialism seized power in 1933. All the imaginable abuses— with the exception of gas chambers—were anticipated, described and implemented by other governments: mass deportation (France, 1802), removal of Roma children from their parents (Germany 1830), armed evictions (Britain, 1912), the prohibition of gypsy language and clothes (several regions of France, Spain, Portugal), the prohibition of marriage between Gypsies and of nomadism; serfdom (Romania), the dissolution of marriages between Gypsies and non-Gypsies (Hungary), the confiscation of property, the prohibition of owning a horse trailer, the prohibition of exercising certain professions, the prohibition of buying a house (Portugal). (...) Branding projects (Hungary, 1909) or sterilization (Norway, 1930)" (pages 33-34). To complete the picture of widespread anti-Roma racism, Bernadac provides the testimony of Jewish Holocaust survivors on the Gypsies:

"Professor Hagenmuller: 'Gypsies appeared to us having basically two characteristics: the passion for stealing and

the music.' Professor Charles Richet: 'concerning Gypsies, their total disappearance would have affected in the camp only a small number of committed philanthropists...'If we can find such judgments in testimonials meant to denounce Nazi barbarism in the concentration camps, it is not surprising that these genocidal acts against the Roma continue to be obscured and misunderstood.

Stalinist Regimes: Between Reform and Repression

At the end of World War II, the western march of the Red Army established deformed and bureaucratized workers' states in a number of Central and Eastern European countries. The policies of the Stalinist regimes toward the Roma people were those that sought settlement and assimilation, thus denying cultural or national specificity. Policies of industrialization, however, did allow the Roma to gain employment in national enterprises and collective farms.

In Hungary, the employment rate among working Roma men in 1971 was 85 percent—perhaps the highest in the Roma people's entire history in Hungary. Nevertheless, they continued to occupy the "unskilled" positions with the most menial tasks, as was the case throughout the region. Regardless, the newfound ability to earn relatively stable incomes enabled the Roma to access social benefits, education for children and vocational training. However, as the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs explained, "Gypsy children were often taught in separate classes, or subjected to special education due to their 'handicap.'"

The Roma children attended schools in which classes were taught in the majority language; no subjects were taught in their native language, which was not the case for other national minorities, such as the Hungarians and Germans in Romania).

When it comes to housing, the policies of various governments helped build homes and buildings where the Roma families could live. Within a few years, Roma slums disappeared. However, these homes were rudimentary and remained segregated from the rest of the population. In some cases, as in Romania, the Roma were housed in "the newly-built socialist group of apartment districts, which were full of police and army personnel, in an attempt to control and 'civilize' them" (Gabriel Troc).

During the Stalinist period, the living conditions of the Roma population of Eastern Europe generally improved, despite the bureaucratic and reactionary political regimes of the communist parties. These experiments gave a glimpse of the potential of a real workers' state, and what could be achieved. However the Stalinist bureaucracies failed to end the rampant anti-Roma prejudice. On the contrary, these prejudices were often stoked by state institutions themselves.

The Restoration of Capitalism: A Major Setback

In the late 1980s the process of capitalist restoration began in the former "Soviet bloc" and millions of workers found themselves unemployed.

The decline for Roma workers was even worse. The jobs held by the Roma were the first to disappear, especially for Roma women. In Hungary for example, the government study we cited earlier stated that "this progress... collapsed during the social and political changes of 1990. The construction industry and mining, which provided employment for

most of the Gypsies, fell into crisis. Gypsies, who were largely employed as unskilled workers and carried out tasks requiring the lowest level of expertise were the first to be made redundant at privatized companies. Within a short period of time the majority of Gypsy families had fallen back to the level of previous decades”.

In Romania, the industrial situation is virtually the same as the one described in Hungary. There during the re-privatization, or the “redistribution process” of land in 1995, the Roma were excluded. Thus, a survey conducted in early 1990 showed that “[About Eighty-seven percent] of [Roma] women and 58% of men had no diplomas; only 1.8% of all Roma achieved a medium or high level of qualification. 27% of young people were illiterate and 40% of 8 year old children never attended school or stopped going... The rising poverty was especially catastrophic for the Roma : 87.5% did not have enough to survive (40.6%) or had barely enough (46.9%).”

Landless and jobless in a context of mass unemployment and increasing discrimination, the Roma population of Central and Eastern Europe were reduced to extreme poverty. For many (about 70 percent), the only stable income was the meager family allowance, retirement, and disability pensions granted by the state. Others had to struggle to survive by collecting scrap metal and recyclable materials. Many were forced to beg or engage in illegal activities.

Forced evictions, spawned by rapid gentrification , has left a lot of Roma homeless. Here, some of the results of this violent dispossession process; Roma houses demolished after the forced eviction (Bucharest 2015)

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The widespread economic crisis and the already precarious conditions of the Roma set the stage for a surge in anti-Roma discourse and racist attacks. The same study on the Romanian case after the fall of the former regime states, “Between 1990 and 1991 houses were burned and people were beaten and expelled from their villages. The most violent incident occurred in Hadareni in September 1993, which ended with the death of four men, three Gypsies. In total, there were about thirty local clashes the cause of which are disputed but which always lead to the eviction of Gypsies.”

Economic Crisis and Racism

In times of crisis, the ruling classes seek scapegoats to divert the attention of the masses from the true cause of their suffering. The scapegoats are the most exploited and oppressed sectors of society—often those seen as “foreign” or “other.” The racism and nationalism are a logical consequence of bourgeois politics.

In Europe, where an economic crisis of historic proportions has been brewing for the past several years, there has also been a rise in the populist political tendencies of the extreme right. Some obvious examples include the French National Front and the Greek Golden Dawn, but there are other lesser-known far-right groups, like the Bulgarian Ataka and the Hungarian Jobbik. These two parties have grown on a platform of violent anti-Roma discourse.

It is clear that this discourse serves the capitalists—contributing to the divisions within the working class and the oppressed in general. In this sense, it is not surprising that governments and politicians are introducing blatantly discriminatory policies targeting Roma people, such as compulsory work for the Roma in Hungary. In France, the “Roma problem” is discussed with no mention of the mass expulsions of Roma from their homes by city and state governments.

But the workers should not be misled. The measures that governments take today against the Roma are linked to

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and may soon broaden into attacks against the whole of the proletariat and the masses. Passivity and inaction in the face of anti-Roma speech and laws will only make it easier for capitalists to attack all the exploited.

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