

GOVERNMENT POLICY TOWARDS THE ROMA COMMUNITIES OF BULGARIA FROM THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE TO THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC¹

Martyn Weeds²

Abstract

This article examines the policies of successive regimes towards the Roma communities of Bulgaria, encompassing the Ottoman period, the independent Kingdom of Bulgaria from 1878 to 1944 and the period of Communist rule from 1944 to 1989.

Throughout, an attempt is made to identify and understand the themes and motivations behind various policies, arguing that while successive regimes frequently implemented similar policies, the underlying intentions were often significantly different.

This article also attempts to evaluate the effectiveness of government policies, and to identify and explain the brief periods where oppression was relaxed and Roma culture and identity was actively promoted.

Key words: history of the Roma, Ottoman Empire, Third Bulgarian Kingdom, the People's Republic, Roma policies.

ROMA IN BULGARIA UNDER THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

Roma or Gypsy³ communities have been living in the area of present-day Bulgaria since at least the 14th century. While most scholars agree that there was some contact and settlement prior to the Ottoman conquest, perhaps going back centuries, 'a great number of Gypsies came to the Balkans together with the Ottomans...either as participants (serving in the army) or as accompanying population.'⁴

While many Roma settled in and around Bulgarian towns, others were nomadic, and it was this second group in particular that caused difficulties for the Ottoman

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² **Martyn Weeds** is an expert in the field of social policies and fundraising; he works for the British Council and the non-government organisations United Response and Inspired By People. E-mail: martynweeds@gmail.com

³ Whilst 'Roma' is generally accepted throughout most of the European Union as being the preferred term, 'çingari' or 'Gypsy' is found most frequently in the literature. In this paper, I shall adopt the term 'Roma', except when directly following the terminology of the sources under discussion.

⁴ Marushiakova, E. and Popov, V. 'A History of the Roma of Bulgaria' *Patrin Web Journal* (2008) p. 1

administration, whose main priority was to ensure the smooth collection of tax. According to Ginio, this was compounded by the Ottoman administration's 'general disapproval of the nomadic way of life.'⁵ As Crowe relates: 'Throughout Bulgaria, the Turks relegated the Gypsies to the lowest rung of the Ottoman social ladder because they "had no visible permanent professional affiliation". Ottoman officials pressured Gypsies and others who fell into this category to "move away or settle into 'useful' occupations.'⁶ Çelik agrees that the Roma were 'legally and socially marginalised' from Ottoman society, suggesting that this was 'due to their distinct culture.'⁷ Kenrick challenges this assertion, claiming that 'the Gypsies were treated generally as other ethnic minorities by the Ottomans, provided they paid their taxes.'⁸ However, as we shall see, the Ottoman regime issued a range of decrees, and even established a separate taxation system and tariff, specifically for the Roma. As Marushiakova and Popov relate, 'Gypsies had a special place in the overall social and administrative organisation of the Empire.'⁹

In general, the population of the Ottoman Empire was divided into two main categories: Muslims and non-Muslims. An important manifestation of this division was taxation, particularly whether or not a person had to pay the *cizye*, a tax exclusively imposed on non-Muslims 'to demonstrate their inferiority vis-à-vis the Muslims.'¹⁰ Uniquely, Roma communities fell outside of these categories, with Muslim and Christian Roma alike obligated to pay the *cizye*, indicating their 'separateness' from the Ottoman Muslim community and the fact that as far as the Ottomans were concerned, for tax and social status purposes there was 'no sharp distinction between Muslim and Christian Gypsies.'¹¹ While both Muslim and non-Muslim Roma were obligated to pay the *cizye*, they did not pay at the same rates. A 1530 decree of Suleiman I set the rate for Muslim Roma at 22 *akçes* and that for non-Muslim Roma at 25 *akçes*.¹² Likewise, an imperial decree of 1610 relating to the Bulgarian capital of Sofia states that Christian Roma were to pay 250 *akçes* and Muslim Roma 180 *akçes*, while other non-Muslims had to pay 200.¹³ Whilst most scholars acknowledge the unique nature of this separate system for the taxation of Roma, varying degrees of importance are placed on the differences between rates for Muslims and non-Muslims: Marushiakova and Popov downplay these differences ('There was (sic.) a great variety of taxes, which were almost the same for Christian and Muslim Gypsies.')14 while Sugar stresses the fact that 'while the Gypsies were considered such low people that even Muslims could be taxed illegally, their

⁵ Ginio, E. 'Neither Muslims nor Zimmis: The Gypsies (Roma) in the Ottoman State' *Romani Studies* 5:14:2 (2004) p. 117

⁶ Crowe, D. M. *A History of the Gypsies of Eastern Europe and Russia* 2nd Ed. (New York, 2007) p. 2, quoting: Sugar, P. F. *Southeastern Europe under Ottoman Rule, 1354-1804* (Seattle, 1977) pp. 77-86

⁷ Çelik, F. 'Exploring Marginality in the Ottoman Empire: Gypsies or People of Malice (Ehl-i Fesad) as Viewed by the Ottomans' *European University Institute Working Papers* 2004:39 (Florence, 2004) pp. 1-2

⁸ Kenrick, D. *The Romani World: A Historical Dictionary of the Gypsies* (Hatfield, 2004) p. 42

⁹ Marushiakova and Popov, 'A History of the Roma of Bulgaria', p. 2

¹⁰ Ginio, 'Neither Muslims nor Zimmis', p. 118

¹¹ Marushiakova and Popov 'A History of the Roma of Bulgaria', pp. 2-3

¹² Marushiakova, E. and Popov, V. *Gypsies in the Ottoman Empire* (Hatfield, 2001) p. 32

¹³ Crowe, *A History of the Gypsies of Eastern Europe and Russia*, p. 3

¹⁴ Marushiakova and Popov, 'A History of the Roma of Bulgaria', p. 1