

Article

‘The Books to the Illiterate?’: Romani Publishing Activities in the Soviet Union, 1927–1938

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Abstract

As one of the projects of the Soviet cultural revolution, the Gypsy project was notable for its unusual success in creating a new literary language and active book publishing. Among its achievements are both original fiction, textbooks and manuals in various fields of knowledge and technics. For instance, the elementary school was almost fully provided with necessary books in Romani. It is noteworthy that Roma women played an active role in the creation of new literature and proved to be not only translators, but also authors of original works in several genres. As the most hardworking author, N. Pankovo, who was distinguished by incredible productivity, should be noted. This project was regularly supported by the state, which allowed the distribution of books at reasonable prices. This project was stopped in 1938, which overwhelmed the narrow group of writers and activists, though it did not lead to fatal personal repressions against them.

Keywords

book publishing; cultural revolution; Gypsy project; Roma women; language

Issue

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1. Introduction

The 1917 October Revolution in Russia proclaimed a series of slogans, such as ‘The land to the peasants’ and ‘The factories to the workers,’ for example. One more slogan, ‘The Books to the illiterate,’ could be added there as a short formula of the cultural revolution. One of the many ethnic/nationalities-oriented projects the Soviet cultural revolution comprised was a Gypsy one (Pankovo, 1930, pp. 3–4) and many aspects and results of this project have been successfully described and analyzed during the last decades. The main events and persons of the Soviet project (N. Dudarova, A. Germano, N. Pankov, I. Rom-Lebedev, N. Satkievich, etc.) are listed in the Historical Dictionary (Kenrick, 2007). A new approach based on treating Roma as an actor and not as an object of ethnic and cultural constructing appeared too: B. O’Keefe (2013) shows how Soviet Roma used ‘Gypsiness’ as means of advancing themselves in new social and political contexts, playing actively their own roles; an earlier fundamental research by A. Lemon in

particular focused on Moscow Theater Romani actors, showing how Roma themselves have negotiated their images in various situations (Lemon, 2000). As for Roma, an idea of imaginary invention or artificial construction of a united ethnic entity (Bogdal, 2018; Malvinni, 2004) is, to some extent, very useful in the interpretation and assessment of some splitting opinions and statements. These approaches are shared in the present article as an instrument for the interpretation of controversial parcels of original documentation concerning editorial and publishing processes of 1927–1938. Sometimes Romani books published in the prewar USSR, before 1938, were first of all accessed as a simple, but hardly effective tool of communist propaganda (Demeter, Bessonov, & Kutenkov, 2000, pp. 206–207). A multidimensional analysis by V. Kalinin and A. Rusakov (2013) shows the Soviet Romani literature as a successful sample of a new national literature. The last author also focused on the Soviet version of the Standard Romani language of 1920–1930s as a unique phenomenon in a socio-cultural context (Rusakov, 2013). Thus, several important aspects of the history and

results of the Soviet Roma cultural project have already been carefully observed and thoroughly studied. This saves us from repeating the well-known provisions and allows us to move on to the details of the organization of the publishing process.

2. Soviet Books in Romani as a Part of the Big Cultural Project

2.1. Peculiarities of the Romani Book Printing Project

2.1.1. When Did the Romani Publication Activities Finish?

Our approach is not a common one, as we start from the very end. This helps to see the final result of the project dealing with the details illustrating the steps of its development. In the USSR, book publishing in the Romani language was stopped in 1938. This decision is poorly documented; for instance, there is a small piece of paper torn from an organizer. This provisional document was found among papers of the late 1930s. An official person, Alexandra P. Ryabinina (1897–1977), the editor-in-chief of the national section of GIKhL/Goslitizdat (a big unified state publishing house), unofficially informed her

secretary about the end of the Romani project: “Valya, write him, Goslitizdat will not publish anything in Romani in 1939” (Rom-Lebedev, 1938, p. 59, author’s translation; see Figure 1). This note instructs the secretary about what answer should be sent to a Roma person asking about the possibilities to publish his works in the future. This was A. N. Balaban, a student who was studying medicine in the city of Rostov-on-Don (Balaban, 1938, p. 3). The note mentioned above had been written about 18 March 1938, the day when the answer following the chief’s note was sent to A. Balaban: “In the Goslitizdat, publications in Gypsy language are terminated” (Rom-Lebedev, 1938, p. 58, author’s translation). Unfortunately, no more serious official documents concerning this decision about the end of Romani book printing have been found yet. Is it reasonable to say that such an end was unusual? At that time, some other nationalities’ literatures in the USSR were almost fully destroyed; the Romani literature was just stopped: It was a relatively good finish under those conditions.

Romani writers and other artistic and academic workers linked with the Romani culture development were overwhelmed when the project stopped: “Pankov took it as a personal tragedy” (Kozhanov, 2019, p. 4). His colleagues felt shocked too, and some fell ill. It looked unbelievable. They started to fight for the project continuation very soon. On 19 December 1939, Prof. Maxim Sergievskiy finished a fundamental article where the newly born Romani literature was shown to be a very product of the Soviet government’s national and cultural policy and the project was worth to be saved and developed:

Gypsy fiction literature is, in the true sense of the word, the brainchild of the Great October socialist revolution: it exists only in the USSR, where Gypsies in 1926 got their own alphabet for writing, for the first time in the world, whereas they are remaining to this day without it in all other countries of the world. (Sergievskiy, 1941, p. 1, author’s translation)

Many official letters were sent to the highest authorities, e.g., to the Presidium of the Union of Soviet writers (Sergievskiy, 1941, pp. 32–38), though in vain. The plans for 1940 and onwards were obviously not known at that moment, so future decisions could be various. But, as it is known now, the next Romani book appeared in the USSR not earlier than in 1970 (Kantya, 1970); the folklore tales’ publication by prof. P. A. Ariste (1904–1990) has resumed only in 1958 (see Smirnova-Seslavinskaya, 2012, p. 194).

2.1.2. Romani Books and Unprecedented Interest in Romani Culture at That Time

The essential difference between a literature created for an ethnic minority and created by an ethnic minority is quite visible. The latter cannot be made at once and by external sources and actors. At the very begin-

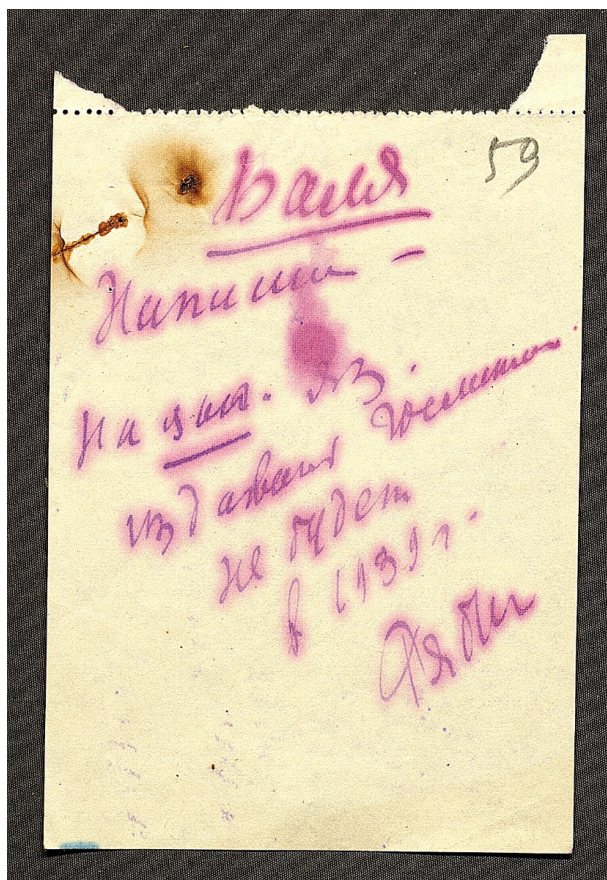


Figure 1. Note signed by A. Ryabinina: No Gypsy language books are planned for 1939 in Goslitizdat publishing house. Source: Rom-Lebedev (1938, p. 59).

ning, the Soviet Gypsy cultural project was not a purely immanent ethnic initiative, as well as it was not an artificial construction at all. It was developed as an enthusiastic breakthrough undertaken by the Roma and non-Roma activists and sympathizers in order to reach many cultural aims at one moment. These aims were partly idealistic and controversial, but sincere. The balance between the original and translated books shows that external and especially communist ideological and esthetic values were dominating, but the language itself saved some internal peculiar values. After 1938, the project did not continue further and many plans were left without ending, though the national theater *Romen* was saved and became the new center of the cultural growing. Nevertheless, a dozen years of predominantly elementary schooling could create a very thin but strong layer of relatively educated people in/for the small nation. Seemingly a Potemkin village for propaganda purposes, the project could luckily unite very talented Roma and their sympathizers. This narrow circle successfully created a numerous and diverse literature and many other cultural projects. Though this interesting experiment was very fruitful, not very expensive for the state and very fast developed, it was abruptly stopped. The Roma were not the only ones suffering from this decision, as many people were involved in the project.

There are some striking peculiarities of this project which could not be ignored. It is interesting that only 0.04% of the Soviet population were getting such a big cultural assistance for about a decade. Many non-Roma people were involved in it. There were two bibliographies that compiled information about the printed sources in Russia/USSR, containing mentions of Gypsies for the period of 1780–1930 (Germano, 1930) and a more amplified manuscript for the period of 1624–1966 (Satkevich, 1966). They show, for instance, that in the 19th century the most remarkable year was 1899 (10 and 15 items in Germano’s and Satkevich’s sources respectively) and that in the next year, 1900, Gypsy issues were touched only in two and three publications. The period of our special interest is outstanding in this aspect. Figure 2

shows a very high level of activity concerning Gypsies in published sources. One should remember that every published item of that time was attentively controlled by special censorship institutions, like Glavlit for books and periodicals, and Glavrepertkom for any text performed on stage. In this context, such an exceptional attention of the media toward Gypsies should be officially approved and ruled. Something undesirable was just invisible for the media of that time. Why, in particular, did the totally controlled media pay a very special attention toward Gypsy issues in about 1927–1938? There is no answer yet.

Had we no other evidences of the Gypsy project in the USSR, the only picture with the crown of three apices between 1927 and 1937, as seen in Figure 2, makes us think about the reasons for such a noticeable unevenness. Fortunately, we have much more. One can conclude that this particular interest of periodicals is fully coincident with other activities in Roma cultural development in 1925–1938. However, it is difficult to imagine that a very similar peak in the usage frequency of the word *tsygan*, ‘Gypsy,’ is also discovered in a wider corpus of Russian texts (see Figure 3). Russian National Corpus contains more than 600 million word forms. The graph in Figure 3 shows that during the whole documented period of 1800–2010, the Russian term for Gypsies reached the highest frequency at the beginning of the decade in 1927 (Point 1 in Figure 3). This popularity cannot be explained as the only effect of the total control by the Soviet authorities. Such an interest toward Gypsies was unprecedentedly high at this time for some objective reasons. The highest level of interest is visible in the entire mass of printed sources, including media of the decade 1927–1938. This decade is unique: For two centuries since the 1800s, there hadn’t been such a high number of articles and mentions on Roma, as it is shown in data documented and automatically counted in the Russian Corpus (Russian National Corpus, 2019). It means that there were many sympathizers ready to support the Gypsy project everywhere, as well as people with opposing attitudes.

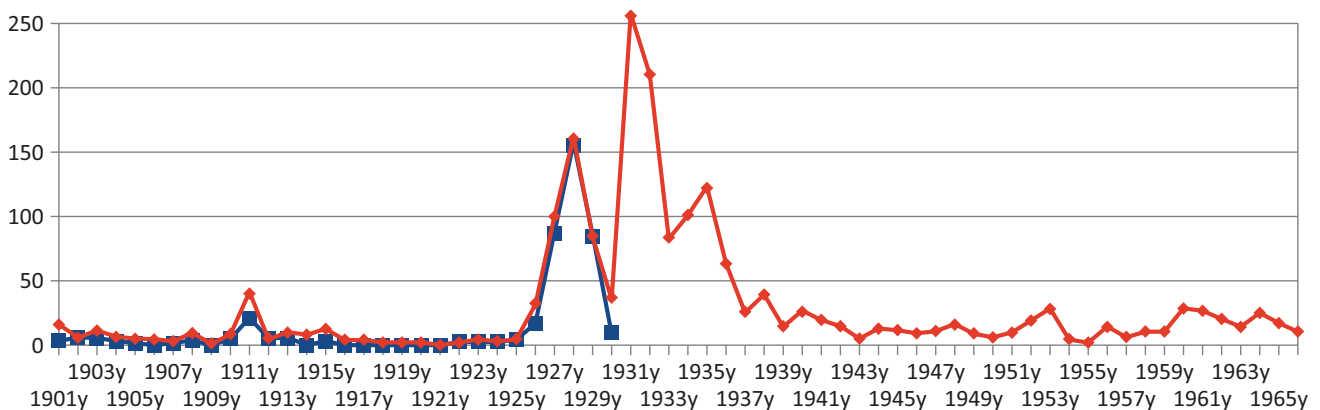


Figure 2. Number of published sources concerning Gypsies in Russia/USSR (1901–1966). Note: The blue line refers to data by A. Germano (1930) and the red line to the data added by N. Satkevich (1966).

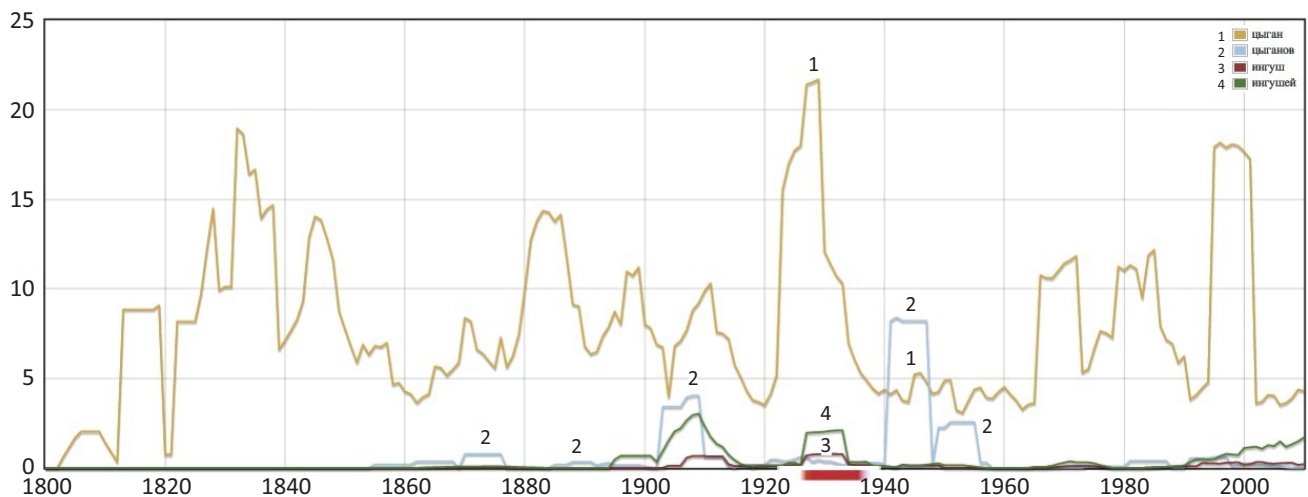


Figure 3. The number of usage per year of *tsygan* ‘Gypsy,’ *tsygan’ey* ‘Gypsies, a rare form of gen. pl.’, *ingush* ‘Ingush,’ *ingushey* ‘Ingush, a form of gen. pl.’ in the Russian National Corpus (1800–2010). Notes: The period of 1925–1937 is marked bold red. Brown line (1) represents the usage of the form *tsygan* ‘a Gypsy’; the blue line (2) the usage of *tsygan’ey* ‘Gypsies, a rare form of gen. pl.’; the cherry line (3) the usage of *ingush* ‘an Ingush’; and the green line (4) the *ingushey* ‘Ingush, a form of gen. pl.’

These two ethnic groups are compared on the graph because their numbers, according to the 1926 census, were approximately equal: about 61,000 Gypsies and about 75,000 Ingush (Kerzhentsev, 1926). The term ‘Gypsies’ is at least ten times more usable than ‘Ingush’ in printed sources of the searched decade.

Romani and Ingush printed production can be compared too. Comparing Ingush and Romani literature, based on the data of the bibliographic reference (Mal’sagov, 1933) and our calculations for Romani literature, we can find a significant difference. The Ingush have no more than 25% of translations; Romani publications were mostly translated from Russian. In Ingush, 97 items are described (including articles and poems counted separately, not only books and brochures), and more than half of the total recorded items were printed during the period 1923–1933. In the second case (Gypsies), book publishing only began in 1927, nevertheless at least 110 books (more than 5800 pages) have already been published in Romani in 1927–1933. It is worth underlining that 21 of the items were fiction and books for children. This demonstrates special attention to the development of Romani book publishing and literature. This particular comparison shows a very high level of affirmative action (Martin, 2001) toward Gypsies in this aspect.

3. Soviet Romani Books as Main Evidences

3.1. Quality of the Sources

3.1.1. Why the Books are More Important than Other Evidences of the Gypsy Project

There were Gypsy schools in Moscow and in other places from the end of 1925 (Dudarova, 1927, p. 15).

Unfortunately, those schools were closed in 1938, and papers of their activities are hardly saved in archives. There were Romani organizations in many places, and most of their documents have not been fully saved and are hardly accessible now. On the contrary, the Romani books of that time have been saved better. There are two collections of Romani books in the Russian State Library (Moscow, Khimki) and in the National Library of Russia (Saint Petersburg). The latter is digitalized and accessible on the website Fenno-Ugrica Etusivu (2017).

Thus, printed Romani books are material witnesses and touchable results of that project. By studying them, we can judge their repertoire, language development, quality of paper, print and book bindings, etc. Nevertheless, our data are not absolutely full and accurate. There are some books known from catalogues and announcements which have not been found in libraries yet. There are no traces of Romani posters also printed at that time. Thus, any of our conclusions are relatively reliable, though we still hope for some additional findings.

A few additional words about the insufficiency of sources will not be useless. Russian authors involved in some Romani publishing and cultural projects sometimes gave no information about them. In the biography of Zinaida Kokorina (Smelkova, 2016), the first Soviet woman graduating from a military aircraft school, there is no mention about the book by Z. Kokorina about women’s military schooling translated into Romani by M. N. Lebedeva (Kokorina, 1932). Zosima Pavlovich Zlobin, a teacher of so-called biomechanics (invented by V. Meyerhold) in the theater studio Romeni (Rom-Lebedev, 1990, pp. 169–172), did not mention anything in his autobiography but the “many theater schools in Moscow” where he taught (Zlobin, 1935, pp. 1–2, author’s translation). The painter Vasiliy Vatagin

(1883/84–1969) did not give any information about a Romani version (Vatagin, 1936) of his book for children *Big and Small Animals* (Vatagin, 2017, p. 337). Many other people involved in the Romani project have not left any notes about it.

3.1.2. Archive Sources

More serious problems are detected in archives. The history of Romani publications has generally very poor documentation for the more productive time of the first five-year plan period (1928–1932). From the second five-year plan period, the papers in the archive RGALi have been saved relatively better. The next problem is a result of wrong recognition of languages. A Georgian song about the sobbing Varvara quite accurately written in Russian Cyrillic is described as a Gypsy song (Stikhotvoreniye, n.d., p. 2). Another type of mistakes occurs more often: Manuscripts in other languages are discovered between Romani ones. It does not look like an ordinary confusion; somebody hid some texts of temporarily ‘undesirable’ authors among Romani materials. There are two translations described identically: for the novel *The Stationmaster*, by A. Pushkin and translated into Romani by N. Pankov (Pushkin, 1937a); the second text is not in Romani, it is a translation of the same novel into a Turkic language using the unified Latin alphabet of 1930s (Pushkin, 1936). The next problem are the gaps in files, e.g., no Romani texts found among poems translated by Arkadiy Yakovlevich Kots (1872–1943), the famous author of the Russian version of the proletarian anthem *International*, and other translators, although Romani poems by A. Germano in Russian translation are specified in the description of this archive item (Kots, 1938). These losses are extremely discouraging.

3.2. Language and Writers

3.2.1. Choice of the Basic Dialect as a Political Decision

From 1927 onwards, new literature started to be published in the North Russian dialect of Romani. Only one dialect was considered to be a base of the standard language. The Soviet linguists dealing with the Romani were keen on accepting a very simple dialectal structure including only two groups of dialects, Northern and Southern (Demeter & Chernykh, 2018, pp. 19, 161). And finally, as a result of exhausting efforts of a very small group, around 260 books were published in a very homogeneous standard language during about a decade. The strategy of editing either regional materials sent to the Moscow Romani journals or original fiction texts before publication was not researched yet. The general principle was officially declared: “There are dialects and varieties” but there must be “a unified printed language for a given nationality” (Gasilov, 1928, p. 14, author’s translation). For example, the Ukrainian and Belarusian standard languages are hardly understandable to many

school children in Russia, but following the instructive letter Number 18, December 30, 1927, the Ukrainian and Belarusian population should be taught in the languages of the respective republics (Gasilov, 1928, pp. 249–251). Soviet nationalities’ policy used to generally focus on “constructing ethnicity” (Shadt, 2002, p. 226). Roma were not an exception in this aspect. It is very significant that published Soviet Romani texts have totally ignored genuine ethnonyms at the indication of various Romani subgroups like Kelderarya, Lovarya, Servurya, Ursarya, etc., as one can conclude by analyzing data of Romani corpus (Kozhanov, 2015). The problem of dialectal split, ignored by educators and creators of this standard language, even between very similar idioms, happened to be crucial for successful schooling under the conditions of total illiteracy. Thus, a school for Gypsy children near Smolensk (in the village of Serebryanka) received Romani textbooks from Moscow, but there was no one to organize educational work with them on a regular basis; there were no specialists with the appropriate qualification and experience. The expert concluded: “The educational and methodical level is unsatisfactory. If there are Romani textbooks for the first, second, third and second years of study, the teaching is in Russian” (Gerasimov, 1932, p. 17, author’s translation). The reasons for this are understandable: In this case, inter-dialect gap is quite serious for almost illiterate people and demand special preparation of a teaching person.

3.2.2. Why is the Border between Original and Translated Books not Fully Clear?

About ten books were either rewritten, shortened, or supplemented by translators. There were various reasons for it. Some special technical and scientific terms did not exist yet, and the translator made a shortened version, e.g., an instructive book on tin works (Leontovich, 1930) was reduced by translator N. Pankovo from 110 pages to 32 pages (Leontovich, 1932). On the contrary, a book for children about book printing technology (Zhytkovo, 1932) has the translator’s addition useful for teaching Romani workers-correspondents (*rabkory*—non-professional correspondents) who should inform media about success or criticize poor management and technology at their workplaces. Criticism was very popular everywhere as a means to get to a better level in work and life.

Romani writers and poets worked extremely hard, and it is worth to remember that there were a lot of creative young Roma who enthusiastically wanted to join artistic ranks in order to take part in the national culture building and development. That was a very unusual time, full of new opportunities for young Roma. Some of them became authors of books later (Demeter-Charskaya, 1998), but their desire to be writers had already got support at that time. In an unsigned review for the translation of *The Song about Stalin* (by Maksym Ryl’sky) made by Olga Demeter-Charskaya (1915–2016)

into Soviet standard Romani, dated 23 February 1938, the unknown person (probably A. Germano) underlined that the translator was a talented person, and it was necessary to translate not from the intermediate Russian translation, but from the Ukrainian original (Rom-Lebedev, 1938, p. 2). The process of teaching new writers and poets was very popular and it was the aim of many amateurs' circles in industrial plants, farms, army units, etc. On the other hand, intermediate Russian translations could serve as a model for national versions of the most popular anthems. The *International* translated by A. Germano and M. Bezl'udsko (Germano & Bezl'udsko, 1932, p. 1), as well as the anthem of the *Comintern* was translated into many languages of the peoples of the USSR, including Romani, from the Russian translation by Ilya Frenkel, not from the German original (Pankova, 1932, p. 21).

3.2.3. The Collective Authorship as a Socialist Ideal

The new Romani literature was developing under the same conditions as other national literatures in the USSR. The slogan of collectivism found its application in the artistic work and creativity. Thus, the resolution on the Report of the Nationalities Sector ONTI (Unified State Scientific and Technical Books Publishers) by comrade Shapiro declared on December 19, 1931: "5. The Sector's orientation to the compilation of the original book by brigades of the authors...is right" (Protokoly, 1938, p. 1, author's translation). Collective literary works in Romani compiled and edited by A. Germano illustrate this trend (Germano, 1931, 1934). This sometimes led to neglecting individual authorship. The names of translators in journals and even books are often missing, as well as the names of designers and illustrators. The editors regularly appeared in Romani books from 1932.

In principle, an individual authorship as a concept contradicts, to some extent, the highest degree of collectivism. Though the reasons are not fully clear, it must be significant. A review of the new poems collection by A. Germano was written by A. Svetlovo (he had a very specific handwriting) and signed by A. Taranov (Rom-Lebedev, 1938, p. 9). The way of editing similar to co-authorship was usually practiced by A. Germano, who inserted several politically correct 2–4 lines long amendments in the manuscript by Mikhail Il'insky (Rom-Lebedev, 1936, p. 82). All the editor's addenda were accepted by M. Il'insky, as seen in the printed book (Il'insko & Rom-Lebedev, 1938).

3.2.4. The Path to Romani Literature

The new literature was created by people from various backgrounds. Writing was a profession that did not previously exist for Romani. They started to work professionally for different reasons and entered into the literature in various ways. For instance, Michail Bezl'udskiy had planned a military career as a frontier officer, but

for reasons of weak health he had retired. Later, he published a curious article about his path to literature work. This was a popular topic in fiction of that time. For example, Isaak Babel published his short novel *My First Fee* in 1928. In the same year, M. Bezl'udskiy was in the (famous in prison folklore) Moscow Taganka prison under investigation and later served his sentenced term in the experimental colony of Lianozovo, near Moscow. He had the opportunity and strong intention of attending a literary circle there. This form of cultural development of workers was very popular then. There, he was taught to write poetry and prose fiction (Bezl'udsko, 1932, pp. 22–23). It is quite natural to suspect this story to be just fiction. Two popular motives of that time were combined in one article: someone's path to the literature and the so-called 'reforgement' (re-education of criminal persons). In the Romani journal, this article might have been ordered by the editorial board to the author in connection with the theme of reforging prisoners into builders of a new society. The next year, 1933, 36 Soviet writers visited the White Sea-Baltic Canal, a great gulag construction. Nevertheless, M. Bezl'udskiy's story occurred to be true. From August 28, 1928 to November 7, 1929, at least 10 articles signed by M. Bezl'udskiy or M. Bez-L'udskiy appeared in the newspaper of the Taganka prisoners symbolically titled as *Heading the working community* (Bezl'udskiy, 1928, p. 6, 1929, p. 2). Some of very productive Romani authors were not Roma by origin, and others developed their native language ability relatively late.

3.3. Quantity of Romani Books and the State Plan

3.3.1. Publication of Romani Books by Year

Why is it reasonable to conclude that the Romani culture renaissance was carefully planned by the authorities? Analyzing a chronological distribution of published books, we can notice an essential contrast between two 5-year periods. Figure 4 reflects the process in total numbers of published pages per year. The first five-year plan period (1928–1932) was the time when the quantity of Romani books dynamically increased, whereas the second five-year period (1933–1937) for the publishing Romani book was a time of accelerating decrease.

The first five years, the progress in Romani books' printing is a very remarkable and unusual phenomenon. In the USSR, the early 1930s were the time of the so-called 'paper hunger.' Shortage of everyday bread was followed by a shortage of paper, so for writers this was equally painful and crucial for a normal work process. Under these conditions, Romani literature developed very fast; for instance, the number of books published in 1932 reached the top (57 items), as seen in Figure 4. 1932 was a very remarkable year for national book printing in the USSR. In 1931, Tsentrizdat (Central publishing house of the peoples of the USSR) closed, and so the other state publishers were obliged to publish books in the languages of the people of the USSR, including Romani.

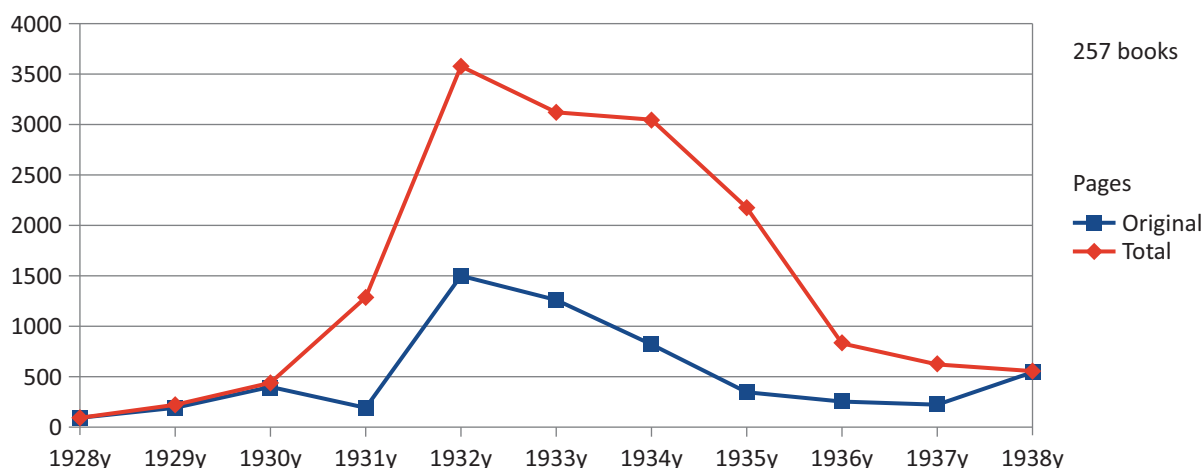


Figure 4. Total number of translated and original Romani books.

In 1938, the last books in Romani were ordered to be printed at the beginning of June, among them the Gypsy–Russian dictionary compiled by A. Barannikov and M. Sergievskiy, the edition which symbolically closed this more than 10-year cultural project (Barannikov & Sergievskiy, 1938). The last items published in Romani in 1938 were obviously planned for the previous (2nd) five-year period. In 1938, when the third five-year period began, 4 fiction books in Romani as being late had already had no special financial support established for ethnic minorities editions more. That is why the prices indicated in the last Romani books are unusually high in our collection, from one to two rubles.

3.3.2. The State Support of Romani Books

By the beginning of 1929, a growing lack of paper provoked closure of some popular journals (Golitsyn, 1990, p. 412); in the meantime, the first Romani books were still distributed for free. This project was standing far from any financial gain planned in advance: For instance, contract Number 1739 (June 20, 1936) between N. Pankovo and the state publishing house GIKhL showed that the translator of the famous poem written by A. Pushkin *Gypsies* had to get 490 rubles for the manuscript presented until December 15 (Rom-Lebedev, 1938, p. 23). The book had 1000 copies made (Pushkin, 1937b), and when they were sold the profit could only be 250 rubles (one copy costs 0.25 rubles). The next example is more significant: N. Pankovo had to get for the story by A. Pushkin *The Stationmaster*, translated into Romani (about 110–120 pages), 875 rubles according to the contract Number 1568 signed on April 13, 1936 (Rom-Lebedev, 1938, p. 28). In this case, the profit could only be 50 rubles (500 copies by 0.10 rubles each). It is obvious, then, that book production costs were significantly higher. Unfortunately, we have no information about other books. Often contracts specify a twice higher number of planned copies than was finally shown in the issued book. This was a consequence of the severe lack

of paper. How this decrease in circulation affected the fee for the translator and the author is unknown.

The state support for ethnic minorities culture was regular and clearly seen in their literatures’ development. In 1934, when Maxim Gorky addressed the All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers, he especially declared official position: “I find it necessary to point out that the Soviet literature is not only the literature of the Russian language; this is an all-Union literature” (Gorky, 1953, p. 324, author’s translation). Thus, every national minority had opportunity to take part in this very important cultural movement, developing the language and literature. This aspect of internationally-oriented cultural work has a specific name: “The name of the work was language building” (Alpatov, 2000, p. 222). Gypsies could be assessed as a tabula rasa and an ideal object for such a social experimenting. They were almost all illiterate. There was no alphabet for Romani, neither a formal schooling tradition. They were considered to be nomad by the authorities, though in reality the picture comprising the whole scale of Romani ethnic subgroups was more complex and full of contrasts.

3.3.3. The Gender Balance in the Romani Literature and the Language Building Project

As it is broadly known, the Romani traditions and rules were sometimes very restrictive as for the rights and freedoms of Romani women. Nevertheless, it is worth to underline that women were also active in the Romani cultural project, as well as in the new Romani literature in particular. For instance, in 1932, they gave five original and nine translated book in Romani. This means that their activeness and efficiency were comparable to the feminine participation in Russian literature of that time. For example, five books translated into Romani in 1932 were written by Russian women (see Figure 5).

As for the whole period, 1928–1938, the number of books translated into Romani by women (red line) is visibly higher than the number of Romani original books

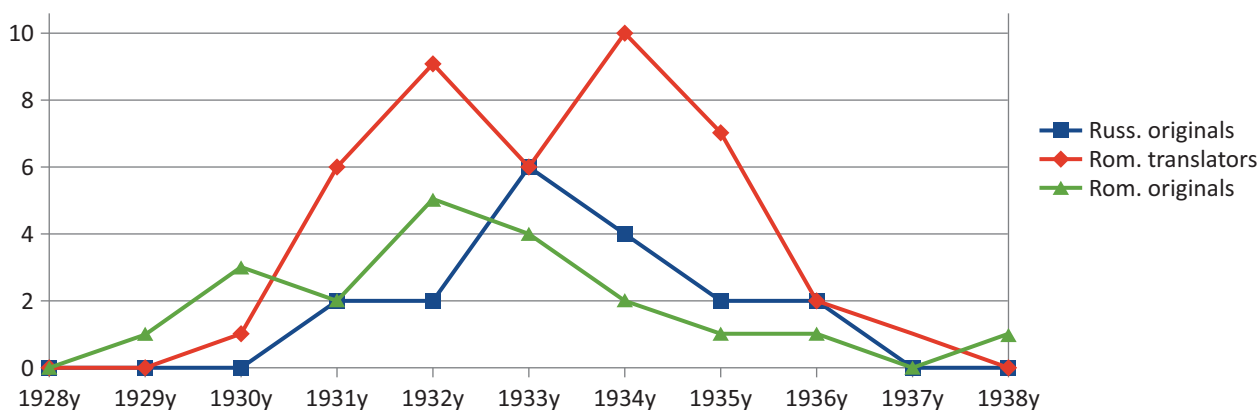


Figure 5. Romani women as translators and authors in 1928–1938.

written by women (green line), and the last number is commensurable to the number of Russian originals written by women and translated into Romani (the blue line). That means that in literature, Romani women were at least as active as the Russian.

Olga Pankova was a Romani woman, who might have been one of the most productive translators (32 books), following Nikolayo Pankovo (at least 42 translated books). Table 1 shows the number of translated pages by year.

The other woman who translated at least 6 published books was M. N. Lebedeva. Information about her is very insufficient, even in comparison with the incomplete biographical data of many other Romani authors. As one can guess, this was Maria Nikolaevna, died in 1936 (Rom-Lebedev, 1990, p. 158), a very famous singer in the Strel’na Choir and the wife of the choir’s head Ivan Grigoryevich. So, it is hardly understandable why her son, the guitar player and Soviet play-writer I. I. Rom-Lebedev, did not leave any mention about the unusual fact that his mother has translated several books. If this is true, she was a unique person who sang romances to the highest society: either to the famous millionaire Ryabushinskiy, or to Grigoriy Rasputin, and after the 1917 revolution she translated the biography of Lenin and many other books, including handbooks on agriculture.

Evdokiya Orlova was a very talented person too. Starting as a singer in a Gypsy choir before the 1917

revolution and only having elementary home schooling, by the early 1930s she had already been the head of a mobile Romani theater and a genuine Romani poet (Orlova, 1933). Many other Romani women of that time and their contributions to the cultural project deserve further studies.

4. Unceasing Struggle for the Project

4.1. Everyday Life and Troubles of Romani Activists

4.1.1. Sources of Frustration

The 1917 Russian revolutions have seriously changed the lives of millions of people. There were many good and bad consequences, though new free national activities were beyond limits from 1917 on. Many national organizations arose everywhere, in cities and towns, in culture and politics. From the very beginning, Roma in Moscow stood far from these initiatives. They felt shocked, because their choirs had lost most of their audience, as well as the people around were getting poorer, and, as a consequence, Romani horse trading businesses were collapsing too. Everything changed simultaneously: new money and prices, new state structures and terminology, new borders, new metrical measures, new town and street names, etc. The new calendar (with latter additions like

Table 1. Two of the most productive translators.

Year	N. Pankovo (pages)	O. Pankova (pages)
1931	161	131
1932	461	411
1933	409	411
1934	475	609
1935	447	515
1936	364	142
1937	17	0
1938	16	0

Note: In some years, Olga Pankova was the most efficient translator into Romani, as the total number of pages translated by her was higher than male translators.

the five-day week established in 1929–1930, then the six-day week till 1940) was a measure aimed against religions, and in the meantime it destroyed leisure services and reduced Roma choirs' incomes too). The famine of 1932–1934 (Eaton, 2004, p. 16) was a very heavy period for Roma, who “were mainly city dwellers” (Eaton, 2004, p. 42). There were a lot of reasons to feel frustrated at that time. Young Roma started to look for new opportunities, and many of them were successful.

4.1.2. The First Steps and Challenges

Only in 1925 did a narrow group of mostly young Romani activists start to organize the All-Russian Union. Its dissolution at the beginning of 1928 did not substantially change the state policy toward Gypsy issues (Marushiakova & Popov, 2008, p. 2). It is worth to add that this was not an exceptional measure against this Romani organization. All public organizations in the USSR were temporarily suspended and inspected in February 1928 (Il'ina, 2000, p. 80). The activists started to look for new organizational formats to gain the state support and were acting further, being interested in many things: political organizations and vocational education for Roma, clubs, collective farms, etc.: “As a result, a few Romani activists worked with pure enthusiasm to develop literary tradition in Romani, to create Romani schools and a new Romani intelligentsia” (Kozhanov, 2019, p. 4).

On the other hand, the period of 1925–1938 was not the Golden Age for Romani activism, as well as for the young Romani literature in particular. Every year and every day they had to demonstrate their social usefulness and political reliability: For instance, on 20 October 1931, A. Germano, as secretary of the Romani Writers' Section of the Moscow Association of Proletarian Writers, officially asked the Tsentrizdat about Gypsy books planned for 1932 (Rom-Lebedev, 1938, p. 66). The answer is unknown, as the Tsentrizdat was reorganized in a few months, and a number of fully prepared manuscripts of Romani translations have never been published and got lost later. At best, the number of printed copies until 1935 went from 5000 planned in contracts to 1000 issued in the reality (Bezl'udskiy, 1932, p. 2; Germano, 1935, pp. 1, 3) and from 1000 to 500 in 1936 and onwards (Rom-Lebedev, 1938).

4.2. The Afterlife of the Closed Project

Romani writers worked extremely hard for years. More than 140 books were translated into Romani by only seven persons. Their letters to A. Ryabinina are full of reasons why they were late delivering manuscripts, and she was often ready to accept their reasons for breaking the terms of contracts (Rom-Lebedev, 1938). The process of their exhausting and long lasting work was stopped, but it did not happen due to political reasons. In comparison with some other groups of writers, Gypsy writers were still living relatively safe and sound and had opportuni-

ties to create new works. For comparison, six members of the Union of Soviet writers (the whole regional organization in Novosibirsk) were arrested during the Great Purge time (Papkov, 1997, p. 133). The section of Romani writers in Moscow luckily survived that time and were still active later, after the 1938 mass repression. They had been gathering their regular meetings at least until 25 May 1941, discussing new plans and tasks (Sergievskiy, 1941, pp. 80, 89), inviting new Romani authors and reading their works, for instance, a Communist party member Crimean Rom Yu. B. Dzhaltyrov (Sergievskiy, 1941, p. 70), a Russian Romani girl Shura Merkholenko (Sergievskiy, 1941, p. 72). Previously printed Romani books were still distributed via state mail service by International Book company (Sergievskiy, 1941, p. 109). N. Pankov became a member of the Union of Soviet writers in 1944. Nevertheless, after 1938, no Romani book appeared in the USSR for decades.

5. Conclusion

This cultural project must be considered as a part of the Soviet Cultural Revolution, aimed especially at the development of one so-called ‘culturally backward’ small nation. During the two first five-year plan periods (1928–1932 and 1933–1937), there were unprecedented achievements reached by a very narrow group of enthusiasts, especially in book publication in Romani. That cultural renaissance has left about 260 Romani books, two journals, and the first Roma national theater which still exists. The project, as it is believed, was thoroughly planned and stopped or rather suspended in 1938. A new educated generation was its natural product. That very fruitful time for Romani culture was a very hard time as for everyday life conditions. The Romani renaissance paradoxically started in the period of food shortage increasing, and reached the highest success at the time of 1932–1934 famine, provoked by the forced collectivization in the agriculture; finally, its closure was chronologically coincident with the Great Purge of 1937–1938. Fortunately, the Romani activists have survived (they were not arrested and shot), although their cultural and social activities were mostly stopped or at least essentially reduced before World War II. The reasons for the stoppage of publications in Romani are not entirely clear. It is important to keep in mind that new Romani books were not planned in 1939. Further plans of the Soviet government concerning the Romani cultural project are not clear due to the lack of official documents. Nevertheless, the statement “Government bans Romani language and culture” from 1938 (Kenrick, 2007, p. XXVI) looks like exaggerated. There was no ban on Romani books and the remains of previous editions were available to buyers anywhere in the USSR. Thus, it would be more correct to talk about a suspension of publications. The outbreak of the war in June 1941 has crucially changed all plans, but it does not mean that the continuation of Romani book publishing was not possible under

better conditions. Otherwise, the fact that the Romani writers section kept looking for young writers even in 1941, despite the third year lasting pause in Romani publications, cannot be understandable. Their contacts with the authorities were positive, and their hopes were reasonably optimistic. No one expected such a long period of coming disasters, which severely affected the whole Roma population. Those Gypsy books which appeared between 1927 and 1938 were little known to the next generations and hardly understandable to them because of now odd topics, ideas and intentions. In general, this is a sad story of success and failure.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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