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State regulation of the Roma in Finland

The international dimension and the minority perspective

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This article, on the one hand, is an investigation of the Finnish regulation policy against its Roma minority in the 1930s and 1940s. By doing so, it takes a supranational perspective and compares the Finnish state policy with other European measurements directed against the Roma around that time. Although Finnish authorities officially rejected racial paradigms, they were nevertheless able to practise a harsh policy against Roma people. On the other hand, the article examines the minority's post war narratives. Participation in the military service during WWII has provided the Finnish Roma with a deep sense of equality as Finnish citizens. Sustaining this positive narrative has meant silencing experiences of inequity. In recent years, a number of modifications to this narrative have emerged. With such perspectives, the article sheds light on majority strategies of discrimination that have targeted Roma, while also asking questions about Roma issues of belonging, citizenship and security.

In this paper I argue a) that Finnish acts on the regulation of vagrancy and labour service in the 1930s and 1940s put no other group under so much pressure and under greater state control than the Finnish Roma, an ethnic minority consisting of an estimated number of 4,000¹ at that time. Even if the *Finnish Act on the Regulation of Vagrancy* from 1936 did not mention the Roma as a target group, compa-

rable laws with similar labels before and after the war in Europe were in fact directed against Sinti, Roma and Yenische people². From such a perspective I argue b) that Roma policies cannot be national in scope. In effect, Roma policies tend to be supranational by nature. So far, vagrancy legislation in Finland has been only studied within a Finnish and Scandinavian historical view, and not yet with a broader European perspective. Finally, I am c) convinced that if we want to understand the strategies used by minorities to gain a sense of societal security, we still need to look at the policies of the authorities which are made by the majority. My concrete thesis is that the major narrative of WWII within the Finnish Roma had suppressed negative experiences in order to highlight positive memories, such as the sense of belonging and solidarity with the mainstream society after experiences of fighting on the frontlines during the war. This narrative has for many years provided Finnish Roma groups with an increased sense of equality and security within the mainstream of Finnish society. In recent years, however, other historical views from younger Roma who were born after WWII have also been circulated.

The *Finnish Act on the Regulation of Vagrancy* from 1936, which became effective at the beginning of 1937, was internationally discussed at the annual meeting of the *Interna-*

tional Criminal Police Commission in Vienna in January 1939. The organisation was founded in Vienna in 1923 with the aim of developing international cooperation among criminal police.³ Finland became a member in 1928. According to the Dutch historian Leo Lucassen, between 1931 and 1934, on the initiative of Austria, the efforts to combat against the *Gypsy nuisance* became a mission of the organisation too.⁴ At least since the eleventh meeting of the *International Criminal Police Commission* in Copenhagen in June 1935, the international delegates were also cognisant of the harsh measures the German authorities planned to approve against the *Gypsies*. In his presentation, the German delegate Karl Siegfried Bader suggested that certain intransigent *Gypsies* should be sterilised. At the end of his speech, Bader stated that the *Gypsies*, as a foreign element, would never become full-fledged members of their respective hosting people's communities.⁵ In the following year, the central office for the control of the *Gypsy plague* with the aim to set up an international *Gypsy database* was established within the *International Criminal Police Commission*,⁶ even though there was no clear and inclusive definition of the people who could be identified and registered as *Gypsies*.

Although the Chief of the Finnish police Martti Koskimies presented the *Finnish Act on the Regulation of Vagrancy*, he did not do so within an explicit discussion on this subtheme. Koskimies introduced the act to his international colleagues as a result of an investigation by the commission if member countries inaugurated legal acts against persons who had yet to commit any crime but whose appearance and activities posed a security risk for public safety. Koskimies explained to his colleagues that Finland, like many other countries, had identified the criminal element as mostly consisting of itinerant individuals either with no fixed address or as individuals who had permanent residences but showed an unwillingness to work. To allow for stricter control, explained Koskimies, the Finnish government enacted the new *Finnish Act on the Regulation of Vagrancy*.⁷

In Finland only one larger itinerant group was easily identifiable, and that was the Finnish Roma. As a result of the new law, the *Gipsy Mission* in Finland stated that the daily life of the Roma had become increasingly more difficult.⁸ However, the *Finnish Act on the Regulation of Vagrancy* did not mention the Roma at all. But this was not a uniquely Finnish practise, and instances of it can be found even after WWII. The *Bavarian Vagrant Act* from the 1950s, for instance, showed the same semantic policy. The Bavarian vagrant regulation from 1955

re-enacted discriminatory legislation against *Gypsies*, building on an earlier law from 1926. The Bavarian authorities now avoided the term *Gypsies* but did not make any "substantial change to the [previous] law or its spirit", stated the Israeli historian Gilad Margalit.⁹ Traditionally speaking, there has also been an association between vagrancy and criminality in the opinion of the authorities and the public.¹⁰ The same goes for the perception that the itinerant lifestyle is connected with work-shyness. The abovementioned Bavarian law for combating *Gypsies*, vagrants and the workshy, *Arbeitscheue*, from 1926 imposed the obligation of permanent work on every *Gypsy* between sixteen and sixty-five years of age. Also, local authorities or heads of municipalities were authorized to imprison *Gypsies* in workhouses, "without any prior legal procedure" as Margalit underlined. It was thought that those workhouses would be able to educate the *Gypsies* through hard work and correct assumed weaknesses as "idleness, lack of self-discipline, and lack of perseverance".¹¹ Similar actions suggested the *Finnish Act on the Regulation of Vagrancy* from 1937. Local authorities were obliged to round up all itinerant persons. Those picked up the first time were supposed to receive instructions and support to live a well-ordered life. If all the guidance given failed to achieve the desired result, however, the authorities had to bring the itinerant persons under the supervision of the state and control their way of life for up to one year. If such supervision would still be shown to be ineffective, the authorities could decide to commit such individuals to life in a workhouse for less than a year or up to three years to prison (The German documentation of Koskimies' speech here uses the word *Zwangsarbeiterhaus*).¹²

The outbreak of the Second World War also marked the beginning of harsher times for the Finnish Roma. After the Finnish-Russian Winter War 1939–1940, between 1,500 and 2,000 Finnish Roma had to leave their homes in Karelia. This traumatic experience¹³ was accompanied by the loss of former social networks with the majority population, which had been fundamental to the livelihoods for the Roma. After the summer 1941 when the Finnish army reconquered Finnish territory in Karelia Finnish Roma families were not allowed to return their homes.¹⁴ At the same time, it turned out to be extremely difficult for the authorities to provide this refugee group with housing. During the summer and autumn of 1942, not only various Finnish authorities but also ordinary Finnish civilians repeatedly demanded that the authorities clamp down on travelling Roma groups and to put them to work.¹⁵ Among those who required a tougher course of action was Urho Kekkonen,

who later became the longest-serving president of Finland (1956–1982).¹⁶ Already since 1939, the Finnish government had issued an act on the obligation to work. This law became even more stringent in 1942. From this time on, every Finnish citizen between 15 and 65 had to accept the work that was offered by the Finnish authorities.¹⁷ In the following months, several labour camps came into being in Finland. Three groups, however, were considered unfit for work: alcoholics, prostitutes and Roma. In 1943 the Finnish government passed a law that allowed putting these three groups to be put into special labour camps, *erikoisleirit*. According to the Finnish historian Panu Pulma, the Finnish authorities wanted to close loopholes between the acts on the obligation to work and on the control of vagrancy. In the government's bill to the Diet, the naming of an ethnic group as a legal objective was motivated with the reference that the Roma due to their physical condition, their way of life and their behaviour, could not mix with ordinary workers. The law, explicitly mentioning the Roma as one of the target groups, came into force on December 1st, 1943. However, Finland was not the only country to tighten measures against Roma around that time. In 1941, the Slovakian Tiso Regime, for instance, began to establish a stricter policy against both nomadic and sedentary Roma groups in Slovakia. In June 1943, two decrees by the Slovakian Interior Ministry led to a major restriction of Roma mobility and the placement of Roma groups from all over the country in internment camps.¹⁸

However, even if a number of Finnish Roma had to work in enclosed camps during WWII, the goal of putting the Roma in Finland systematically, comprehensively and continuously to work failed.¹⁹ Already the report about the labour camp in Lappajärvi, which was opened as a site only for Roma in February 1943, showed just how difficult it was to carry out such an objective. The camp was supposed to consist of 39 Roma men between 14 and 65 years of age from all over the country. Finally, the Finnish police brought in 24 Roma men of whom 7 ran away again. Additionally, the working results were unsatisfactory and the camp was closed down with only 12 Roma men left at the end of June 1943.²⁰ After the new legislation came into effect in December 1943, the Finnish authorities wanted to set up a special labour camp for Roma in Kihniö. This project was also unsuccessful; the plan failed due to the inability to fulfil the necessary quota of 15 Roma men for such a camp. This was also related to the fact that Finnish police forces and other authorities were understaffed at that time, and therefore unable to enforce the new legislation in a more comprehensive way.²¹

At the same time, at least 300 Finnish Roma men were enrolled in the Finnish army during WWII.²² Participation in the Finnish military service has provided the ethnic minority with a heightened sense of equality and security within the majority society.²³ It is still very important for the Finnish Roma community but also for the Finnish authorities to communicate this brotherhood in arms to the mainstream society. Electronical teaching material provided by the *Finnish Ministry for Interior* in co-operation with *The National Advisory Board on Romani Affairs* emphasizes that the Finnish Roma had participated in defending Finland as any other Finnish citizen during WWII.²⁴ What is questionable here, however, is the claim in this online material that over 1,000 Finnish Roma men who served at the frontlines. This inflated figure can only be understood against the background of the minority's profound desire to get acknowledgement and respect for their war efforts from the majority society.

Sustaining this positive war narrative – both on the part of the minority and of the representatives of the majority – has required experiences of injustice to be silenced for many decades. However, this compelling narrative that has served to foster a sense of national belonging for the Finnish Roma has been modified by younger Roma who a) have a more nuanced view of history and who emphasize that military service did not improve the social position of this minority after the war and that discrimination continued for war veterans too.²⁵ Another observation concerns b) the willingness to speak up about Roma victimization during the Holocaust, for instance on public occasions, in the community's journal *Romano Boodos*, and in artistic works.²⁶ This identification with the Holocaust is not simply an attempt to be recognized as a victim group in history. It has to be understood as a minority's strategy to gain security within the majority society and the international political agenda setting which aims to ensure that "future generations" also "understand the causes of the Holocaust and reflect upon its consequences".²⁷ Nonetheless, the historical narratives told by the Finnish Roma of different generations appear to coalesce rather than to contest each other.

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Endnotes

- 1 One must be careful with this estimation. There is no existing statistical information on the exact number of Roma that have lived in Finland. Compare with Pulma 2016: 208.
- 2 The Yenische, also called white Gypsies, differ culturally and ethnically from the Sinti and Roma peoples, but could also fall under the category Gypsy due to their traditionally itinerant life style. It is supposed that the Ye-

- nische were descendants of members of the poor classes of the 18th and 19th century.
- 3 Deflem 2002: 23.
 - 4 Lucassen 1996: 186–187.
 - 5 Bader 1935: 268. – Bader was the German delegate in the Gypsy Committee of the International Criminal Police Commission at the organization's meeting in Vienna 1934. *Kriminalistische Monatshefte* 1935: 5.
 - 6 Fraser 2000: 258; Lucassen: 186–187.
 - 7 *Internationale Kriminalpolizei* 1939: 10.
 - 8 Viito 1967: 122.
 - 9 Margalid 2002: 72.
 - 10 See for instance: Bogdal 2013: 337–346; Bernecker 2007: 282; Peschanski 2007: 269–270.
 - 11 Margalit 2002: 32.
 - 12 *Internationale Kriminalpolizei* 1939: 10–11.
 - 13 Teräs 2014: 48–52.
 - 14 Pulma 2012: 154, 159.
 - 15 Ihari 2012: 20–21.
 - 16 Peitsi (alias Urho Kekkonen) 1942: 1224–1225.
 - 17 Lähteenmäki 2002: 163–164.
 - 18 Vodića 2008: 56–60.
 - 19 Pulma 2012: 159–160.
 - 20 Ahtee 1943: 664–666; Pulma 2011: 175.
 - 21 Jenni Ihari pointed out that also the Roma custom of living together in a larger family collective distracted the daily routine at the Lappajärvi camp. Roma families had followed their male family members to Lappajärvi and were camping outside the fence. Authorities had to drive the Roma families away. Ihari 2012: 19, 24, 26, 67, 69, 96, 98–101.
 - 22 Pulma 2012: 162.
 - 23 Roman 2012: 59.
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 - 25 Hedman H. 2014: 9.
 - 26 <http://www.drom.fi/yleinen-miranda-sivusto> (last call 18.8.2016); Hedman S. 2015: 3; Kylmä 2013: 3.
 - 27 Declaration of the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust from January 2000, <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/about-us/stockholm-declaration> (last call 29.8.2016)

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