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Why the Roma National District Was Not Founded in the RSFSR and What it Could Have Been Like

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Abstract: The author analyzes the activities of Soviet policy towards the Roma population with a focus on state involvement in agricultural cooperation and the creation of Roma collective farms in the Volga region in the 1930s. During that period, even small national groups gained autonomy in the form of republics, districts, and even regions. Therefore, the question of why territorial autonomy for Roma was not founded in the USSR seems quite currently relevant. Meanwhile, in 1936–1937 in the RSFSR, as part of the policy of settling the Roma, the project for creating the Roma national district in the Kuibyshev region was seriously discussed and considered. The circumstances and reasons for the failure to implement the project of creating the Roma national district in the Volga region are clarified across the article. The basis for the research is the archival materials of the fund of the All-Union Resettlement Committee of the Russian State Academy of Economics (fund 5675) introduced by the author into scientific use for the first time. The sources allow revealing the circumstances of the discussion and preparatory work on the creation of the Roma national district. The funds contain significant information and reports with a detailed description of the Roma collective farms, including those containing ethnographic material. The author concludes that the project of creating the Roma national district was of strategic importance for the Soviet leadership and the authorities made great efforts to implement it. By early 1937, all the necessary conditions for the establishment of the district had been created. However, the reluctance of the lower power structures to host the Roma population, the outbreak of large repressions, the abolition of the All-Union Resettlement Committee, and the change of trends in the national policy prevented the implementation of the project.

Keywords: national policy, nation-building, collectivization, national outskirts, federalization

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Каким мог быть и почему не был создан цыганский национальный район в Поволжье в 1930-е гг.

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Аннотация: Рассматривается политика в отношении цыганского населения, направленная на его вовлечение в сельскохозяйственную кооперацию и создание цыганских колхозов на территории Поволжья в 1930-е гг. В этот период даже небольшие по численности народы полу-



чали свои автономии в виде республик, округов и даже районов. Поэтому вопрос, почему в СССР не было создано территориальной автономии для цыган, выглядит довольно актуальным. Между тем в 1936–1937 гг. в РСФСР в рамках политики оседания цыган проект по созданию цыганского национального района в Куйбышевском крае всерьез обсуждался и рассматривался. Автор исследует обстоятельства и устанавливает причины неудачи реализации проекта по созданию цыганского национального района в Поволжье. Источниковой базой для исследования стали впервые вводимые автором в научный оборот архивные материалы из фонда Всесоюзного переселенческого комитета Российского государственного архива экономики. В фондах содержится немало сведений и докладных записок с подробным описанием цыганских колхозов, включая этнографический материал. Автор приходит к выводу, что проект по созданию цыганского национального района был стратегически важным для советского руководства и власти прикладывали большие усилия для его реализации. К началу 1937 г. все необходимые условия для создания района были созданы. Однако нежелание низовых властных структур иметь цыганское население, начавшиеся репрессии, ликвидация Всесоюзного переселенческого комитета и изменение трендов в национальной политике не позволили проекту реализоваться.

Ключевые слова: национальная политика, нацистроительство, коллективизация, национальные окраины, федерализация

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Introduction

Relevance. One of the main features of modern Russian federalism is the system of multi-level national-territorial autonomous bodies, where the rights of ethnic communities to study their native language and culture are protected.

The origin of Russian federalism dates back to the 1920s, when the USSR was first established. As is well known, in the ideology of Bolshevism, the solution to the national issue implied the existence of territories for all ethnic groups. For this purpose, a complex network of national-territorial autonomies was created across the country. In the 1920s and 1930s, dozens of different peoples of the USSR gained their own autonomous bodies – from national republics to regions, districts and even village councils. In total, over 240 national districts and 5,300 national village councils were created in the country; their number was constantly growing across the period¹.

In addition to the recognition of the right to its development, each nationality received “its own” territory (republics, regions, districts, village councils). Such administrative-territorial entities for small ethnic groups concentrated in some areas were considered as part of the Leninist-Stalinist policy aimed at the cultural upliftment of once were considered “backward” peoples.

Nowadays, the phenomenon of Soviet federalization remains one of the pressing issues of Russian history.

It is revealed not only in the examples of the creation of autonomies, but also in the discussion of projects to create separate administrative-territorial units for different peoples. The discussions about the Roma autonomy in the USSR can be considered a striking example. According to the All-Union census of 1939, in the USSR there lived over 88 thousand Roma. In terms of numbers, they took the 43rd place among the peoples of the USSR. There were more of them than, for example, the Nenets, Karachays, Khakass

¹ *Administrativno-territorial'noe delenie Soiuza SSR na 15 iulia 1934 goda* [Administrative-Territorial Division of the USSR as of July 15, 1934] (Moscow: Vlast' Sovetov Publ., 1934), 350.

and many other peoples which already had autonomous rights². During the entire period of the USSR existence, no territorial autonomy was created for this people, but there were discussions about the Roma national district and even republic during the first two decades of Soviet power. In the second half of the 1930s, the authorities were the closest to implementing this idea in the context of discussing autonomy for the Roma in the Kuibyshev region. The discussion about the Roma autonomy in the 1930s largely reveals the peculiarities of the Soviet approach to federalism.

Elaboration of the problem. In historiography there are several approaches to understanding the Soviet model of federalism. Several historians tend to regard it in line with the imperial approach and see the USSR as the direct successor of the Russian Empire³. Another approach considers the Soviet model as an attempt to create a multicultural state by transferring resources from the metropole. In 2001, historian T. Martin formulated the now classic concept of an “Affirmative Action Empire” by applying his analysis to this model⁴. Its point is that the central authorities invested significant resources in supporting culture and economy of the national outskirts to the detriment of the central regions with a predominantly Russian population. V.Yu. Zorin partially agrees with this position; in his latest work he noted the influence of the policy of “artificial transfer of funds and resources from the center to the national outskirts,” which formed a “dependent position in the republics, and did not contribute to their economic independence.”⁵ A similar point of view is expressed in the works of A. Vdovin and J. Hosking⁶.

In recent years, among historians there has become popular the idea of Soviet federalism as a policy of concessions and compromises⁷.

Thus, in her monograph American researcher F. Hirsch revealed the modern view of the Soviet national policy as a forced policy of compromise. Developing the thesis of Y. Slezkine, she comes to the conclusion that at the state level the Bolsheviks supported local nationalism (“state sponsored nationalism”) in order to preserve and centralize power⁸. The issue of the policy of compromise between the center and local elites is partially raised in the book by J.M. Easter “Soviet State Building,” where the author emphasizes the role of

² *Chislennost' naseleniia SSSR na 17 ianvaria 1939 g.: po raionam, raionnym tsestram, gorodam, rabochim poselkam i krupnym selskim naselennym punktam* [Population of the USSR as of January 17, 1939: by districts, district centers, cities, working settlements, and major rural populated areas] (Moscow: Gosplanizdat Publ., 1941).

³ R. Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union: Communism and Nationalism, 1917–1923* (Harvard University Press, 1954); T. Mastiugina, L.S. Perepelkin, and V.G. Stel'makh, *Natsional'naiia politika v Rossii: XVI – nachalo XXI veka: uchebnoe posobie* [National Policy in Russia: XVI – the Beginning of the XXI Century] (Moscow: Forum Publ., 2013); Zh. Kadio, *Laboratoriia imperii: Rossiia / SSSR, 1860–1940* [Empire Laboratory: Russia/USSR, 1860–1940] (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie Publ., 2010).

⁴ T. Martin, *Imperiia “polozhitel'noi deiatel'nosti. Natsii i natsionalizm v SSSR, 1923–1939* [The Empire of ‘Affirmative action.’ Nations and nationalism in the USSR, 1923–1939] (Moscow: ROSSPEN Publ., 2011).

⁵ V.Iu. Zorin, *Natsional'naiia politika rossiiskogo gosudarstva v XX – nachale XXI veka: uchebnoe posobie dlia bakalavriata i magistratury* [National Policy of the Russian State in the XX – Early XXI Century: A Study Guide for Undergraduate and Graduate Students] (Moscow: Iurait Publ., 2018), 179.

⁶ A.I. Vdovin, *Russkie v XX veke. Tragedii i triumf velikogo naroda* [The Tragedy and Triumph of a Great People] (Moscow: Veche Publ., 2013); D. Hosking, *Praviteli i zhertvy. Russkie v Sovetskomo Soiuzu* [Rulers and Victims: Russians in the Soviet Union] (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie Publ., 2012).

⁷ S.V. Cheshko, *Raspad SSSR: etnopoliticheskii analiz* [The Collapse of the USSR: An Ethnopolitical Analysis], 2nd ed. (Moscow: IEA RAN Publ., 2000), 129–138; V.A. Tishkov, *Rekviev po etnosu* [Requiem for an Ethnicity] (Moscow: Nauka Publ., 2003); V.G. Chebotareva, *Narkomnats RSFSR: svet i teni natsional'noi politiki 1917–1924 gg* [Narkomnats of the RSFSR: The Light and Shadows of National Policy 1917–1924] (Moscow: Obshchestvennaia akademiia nauk rossiiskikh nemtsev Publ., 2003).

⁸ F. Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 2005), 5.

the regions in the Bolshevik policy⁹. In his research, he shows that “in the relations between the center and the regions informal cooperation and intrastate conflicts were the norm, rather than exception.”¹⁰ As D.A. Amanzholova rightly notes, “the novelty and scale of the Soviet project as a whole already predetermined the contradictory nature of these transformations, and the cultural complexity of the community of peoples as an inhomogeneous entity in all historical eras required: a strong state, a flexible management system, a balance of centralized vertical and horizontal measures, institutions, and human resources.”¹¹

In general, it can be noted that to this date the process of creating autonomous bodies in the first two years of the USSR has already been studied in detail, but there are still discussions about the essence of federalism. The introduction of new sources into scientific use, the analysis of individual cases and discussions for the autonomous bodies of individual peoples will contribute to understanding the essence of Soviet federalism.

Despite different interpretations of the system of republican and federal relations, Russian and foreign authors agree that territorial autonomies built on ethnic grounds were one of the foundations of the Soviet system and were of national importance¹².

Speaking about the Roma, it is worth noting that the scientific works on the history of the Roma do not contain information about the attempts to create the Roma district or autonomy for this people. In a detailed article by N.F. Bugay¹³, specially devoted to the Roma collective farms, there is no information about the plans to create a district for the Roma. Soviet researcher N.F. Platunov¹⁴, who analyzed the resettlement policy towards the Roma made no mention of this. The collective monograph of the Institute of Anthropology and Ethnography of the Russian Academy of Sciences “The Roma” of the series “Peoples and Cultures” (2018) does not consider the Roma as subjects of national policy. In historiography there have been examined quite fully the features of the creation and activities of the Roma collective farms in the Urals¹⁵. Several works reflect the features of the collective farm construction in the southern regions of Russia¹⁶. V.N. Shaidurov and some of his co-authors use in their works only the examples of Siberia and the North-West of the country¹⁷.

⁹ John Ister, *Sovetskoe gosudarstvennoe stroitel'stvo. Sistema lichnykh svyazi i samoidentifikatsiia elity v Sovetskoi Rossii* [Soviet State Building. The System of Personal Connections and Self-Identification of the Elite in Soviet Russia] (Moscow: ROSSPEN Publ.; Prezidentskii tsentr B.N. Yeltsina Publ., 2010), 25–26.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹¹ D.A. Amanzholova, “State nation-building. some problems of the soviet model of federalization,” *Rossiiskie regiony: vzglad v budushchee*, no. 3–4 (2023): 2.

¹² F. Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*, 5.

¹³ N.F. Bugai, *Tsygane Rossii: obshchestvo, adaptatsiia, konsensus (1900–2010)* [Roma of Russia: Society, Adaptation, Consensus (1900–2010)] (Moscow: Kuchkovo pole Publ., 2012).

¹⁴ N.I. Platunov, *Pereselencheskaia politika Sovetskogo gosudarstva i ee osushchestvlenie v SSSR (1917 – iyun' 1941 gg.)* [Resettlement Policy of the Soviet State and Its Implementation in the USSR (1917 – June 1941)] (Tomsk: Izdatel'stvo Tomskogo un-ta Publ., 1976).

¹⁵ A.P. Kilin, “Sozdanie tsyganskikh kolkhozov na Urale: Interesy storon [Creating new kolkhozes in the Ural: sides interests],” in *Materialy konferentsii: Chetvertye Tatishchevskie chteniia. Priroda, byt i kul'tura Urala* (Yekaterinburg: Bank kulturnoi informatsii Publ., 2002), 261–264; M.S. Kamenskikh, “The involvement of the Gypsy population in collectivization process in the Urals in 1920s–1930s.” *Perm Federal Research Centre Journal*, no. 4 (2017): 10–17, <https://doi.org/10.7242/1998-2097/2017.4.13> 10–17; A.V. Chernykh, and M.S. Kamenskikh, “Gypsies of the Urals in the National Economic Policy of the Soviet State of the 1920–1930s,” *RUDN Journal of Russian History* 16, no. 4 (2017): 851–868 (in Russian), <https://doi.org/10.22363/2312-8674-2020-19-4-851-868>

¹⁶ V.R. Istyagin, “Realization of state resettlement policy in the north Caucasian region at the initial stage of collectivization: resettlement of gipsy, Koreans and Assyrians,” *Humanities and law research*, no. 4 (2015): 60–66; V.I. Ivashchenko, *Tsyganskii sud'by. Istoriia, trud, etnografiia* [Gypsy Fates. History, Labor, Ethnography] (Rostov on Don: Donizdat Publ., 2011), 196.

¹⁷ V.N. Shaidurov, “Tsygane SSSR i zemleustroistvo vo vtoroi polovine 1920-kh godov [Roma of the USSR and Land Settlement in the Second Half of the 1920s],” in *Vyzov v povsednevnoi zhizni naseleniia Rossii: istoriia i sovremennost'.* *Materialy mezhdunarodnoi nauchnoi konferentsii* [The Challenge in the Everyday

Thus, despite the large number of works on the Roma theme, in historiography the implementation of the Roma autonomy project in the RSFSR remains largely unexplored.

The purpose of the study is to establish the circumstances and reasons for the failure to implement the project of creating the Roma national district in the Volga region.

The source base of the study. The main source of the work is a set of record management documentation on the Volga Roma from the Russian State Archive of Economics (RSAE), introduced into scientific use by the author. The documents of the fund “Institutions for the Management of Resettlement in the USSR. 1925–1942, 1949–1954” (F. 6575)¹⁸ contain correspondence between the central government bodies and regional executive committees on the current work among the Roma; draft regulatory documents on the Roma collective farm creation (draft resolutions, acts of land allocation, extracts from the minutes of the meetings of regional and district executive committees); reports of the inspectors of the All-Union Resettlement Committee and the Resettlement Department of the NKVD, who went to the Roma collective farms in the second half of the 1930s to clarify the current situation. Most of the documents are introduced into scientific use for the first time. Moreover, there were used the published discussions and program documents of the Bolsheviks on the solution to the national issue and policy towards the Roma. Of great importance were also the materials of the censuses of 1926 and 1939 in the USSR.

A number of documents related to the discussion of the Roma autonomy were published in 2021 in the collection “Roma Voices in History” by a team of Russian and foreign authors¹⁹, as well as in the collection “Roma Communities in Society: Adaptation, Integration, Interactions.”²⁰

Roma in the USSR national policy

The work on creating “own” territories for each level of autonomy was carried out in several stages. After the completion of the national-territorial division at the level of republics and autonomous districts, which was actively implemented in the 1920s²¹, in the 1930s the USSR began to form national districts and village councils. The scale of autonomy and the size of the territories received often depended on the number of people administered by these bodies. Characterizing the Bolshevik approach to understanding federalism, in the theses “On the immediate tasks of the party in the national issue” J.V. Stalin proposed “to cover all the diversity of life, culture and economic situation of various nations and nationalities at different stages of development, and in accordance with this to apply a particular type of federation,” and in order to catch up with “Central Russia which was far ahead,” each nation should “establish court, administration, economic bodies, authorities operating in their native language, composed of local people who know the life and psychology of the local population.”²²

Life of the Population of Russia: History and Modernity. Proceedings of the International Scientific Conference] (St. Petersburg: Leningradskii gosudarstvennyi universitet imeni A.S. Pushkina Publ., 2021), 289–293; V.N. Shaidurov, et al., “Tsygane v Sibiri (konets XVIII v. – XX v.) [Roma on Soberia (At the end of the XIX to XX Century)],” *Zhurnal Belorusskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta. Istorii*, no. 2 (2022): 60–72.

¹⁸ The collection includes information on the activities of the All-Union Resettlement Committee (VPK) under the Central Executive Committee of the USSR (1925–1930), the Resettlement Administration of the People's Commissariat of Agriculture of the USSR (1930–1933), the All-Union Resettlement Committee under the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR (1933–1936), and the Resettlement Department of the NKVD of the USSR (1936–1939).

¹⁹ E. Marushiakova, and V. Popov, eds. *Roma Voices in History: A Sourcebook; Roma Civic Emancipation in Central, South-Eastern and Eastern Europe from the 19th Century until World War II* (Leiden: Brill: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2021), 1068.

²⁰ A.V. Chernykh, ed. *Tsyganskii soobshchestva v sotsiome: adaptatsiia, integratsiia, vzaimodeistviia [Roma Communities in Society: Adaptation, Integration, Interactions]* (St. Petersburg: Mamatov Publ., 2022), 240.

²¹ S.V. Cheshko, *Raspad SSSR: etnopoliticheskii analiz*, 129–138.

²² I.V. Stalin, *Ob ocherednykh zadachakh partii v natsional'nom voprose: Tezisy k X s'ezdu RKP(b), utverzhdennye TsK partii* [On the Immediate Tasks of the Party in the National Question: Theses for the X Con-

Against this background, a discussion arose about the need for territorial autonomy for all peoples of the USSR which historically were not concentrated in certain areas. For example, in 1934, the autonomy was created for the Jewish population²³. Around the same time, discussions began with renewed vigor about the possibility of creating autonomy for the Roma, which was also a large community in the USSR. In addition, the Roma were dispersed throughout different countries without any statehood, and the creation of the Roma autonomy in the USSR could not but become a powerful ideological trump card for the Soviet leadership to demonstrate the advantages of its system²⁴.

In the 1920–1930s, the Soviet government took unprecedented measures aimed at involving the Roma in the processes of Soviet modernization through the creation of separate work collectives, agricultural artels, and collective farms. It was assumed that such a policy would allow “pulling the Roma out of the pit of the past in order to introduce them to the working cultural life along with other nationalities.”²⁵ The Soviet government planned to rely on the Roma work collectives when creating compact residential areas in the future. A collective farm as a form of organizing life was the most convenient policy for the Soviet government regarding the Roma. The report of the People's Commissariat of Agriculture of the RSFSR on the employment of the Roma population for 1936 states:

The location of the collective farms, their compact location makes it possible to make them a solid support and active guides among the Roma in the implementation of the directives of the party and the government on involving nomads in productive labor²⁶.

The conditions for establishing autonomy for the Roma were created back in the late 1920s²⁷, but their mass joining collective farms began in 1931–1932. Judging by the sources, the initiative came from the Roma themselves. In a letter from the National Bureau of the Kolkhoz Center to the People's Commissariat of Agriculture in 1931, it was written that there was a “large influx of the Roma with petitions for the allocation of land plots to them for organizing collective farms.”

However, in the RSFSR the Roma did not have their territorial entity. The ideologists of the Roma social movement repeatedly spoke about the need to create their own autonomous republic or district. In 1934, I.Ya. Gerasimov, a member of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of Roma origin, officially addressed M.I. Kalinin, the Chairman of the USSR Central Executive Committee:

gress of the RCP(b), Approved by the Central Committee of the Party], in vol. 5 of I.V. Stalin, *Sochineniia* (Moscow: OGIZ Publ.; Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury Publ., 1947), 23–34.

²³ S.M. Dimanshtein, *Evreiskaia avtonomnaia oblast' – detische Oktiabr'skoi revoliutsii* [The Jewish Autonomous Region – A Child of the October Revolution] (Moscow: Der Emes Publ., 1936), 42.

²⁴ N.G. Demeter, and A.V. Chernykh, eds. *Tsygane* [Roma] (Moscow: Nauka Publ., 2018).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.

²⁶ Russian State Archive of the Economy (thereafter – RGAE), f. 7446, op. 13, d. 83, l. 112; f. 5446, op. 13, d. 83, l. 112.

²⁷ Postanovlenie TsIK SSSR, SNK SSSR ot 01.10.1926 “O merakh sodeistviia perekhodu kochuiushchikh tsygan k trudovomu osedlomu obrazu zhizni [Decree of the Central Executive Committee of the USSR, Council of People's Commissars of the USSR dated October 1, 1926 “On Measures to Assist the Transition of Nomadic Gypsies to a Labor-Based Settled Lifestyle,” in *Konsul'tant plus*, accessed October 20, 2023, <http://www.consultant.ru/cons/cgi/online.cgi?req=doc;base=ESU;n=26850#0>; “Postanovlenie Prezidiuma VTsIK i SNK RSFSR, ‘O nadelenii zemlei tsygan, perekhodiashchikh k trudovomu osedlomu obrazu zhizni,’ ot 20 fevralia 1928 g. [Decree of the Presidium of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee and the Council of People's Commissars of the RSFSR ‘On the Allocation of Land to Gypsies Transitioning to a Labor-Based Settled Lifestyle,’ February 20, 1928],” in Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Sverdlovskoi oblasti [Sverdlovsk Oblast State Archive] (thereafter – GASO), f. R-88, op. 5, d. 55, l. 2 ob.; “Postanovlenie Prezidiuma VTsIK ‘O sostoianii raboty po obsluzhivaniiu trudiashchikhsia tsygan’ ot 1 aprelia 1932 g. [Decree of the Presidium of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee ‘On the State of Work on Serving Working Gypsies,’ April 1, 1932],” in GASO, f. R-88, op. 18, d. 640, l. 10.

...I ask you to raise the issue of the settlement of nomadic Roma in the context of the establishment of a special Roma territory in the form of a district and creation of the newspaper in the Roma language²⁸.

The main problem in the matter of establishing autonomy for the Roma was the nature of their settlement. The Roma led a nomadic way of life and had no permanent compact places of residence, which was due to the imperial past and the unfair policy of the tsarist government towards the Roma, the narrative of which is recorded in the sources. Thus, S.A. Takoyev, a representative of the Department of Nationalities of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee wrote:

The horrific history of the Roma affected the mentality and everyday life of this nationality. These remnants of the past currently pose one of the difficulties in the work among the Roma²⁹.

In 1936 A. I. Khatskevich, one of the ideologists of Soviet national policy, a member of the Council of Nationalities of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of the USSR and “curator” of the Roma issue said as follows:

The nomadic life of the Roma was caused by their homelessness, poverty, persecution, etc., which certainly led to their way of life with various perversions... Therefore, our task is to help the working Roma in every possible way to eliminate the remnants of their difficult past and start a working cultural life³⁰.

At the first stage, the Soviet government supported the Roma by creating separate collective farms. According to the data of the Department of Nationalities of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee, by the mid-1930s, in the country there had been created with varying degrees of success about 30 Roma collective farms with a total of 797 families³¹. Not all Roma joined the collective farms. According to S.A. Takoyev, a representative of the Department of Nationalities of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee, in 1936 there were “approximately 10% of employed Roma” at the farm³², however even this number was considered a serious achievement and an important step in resolving the Roma issue. The creation of several compactly located Roma collective farms would have made it possible in the future to create village councils and a national district as grassroots forms of autonomy.

Roma in the Volga region in the 1920–1930s

In 1926, in the Volga region there lived 3,354 Roma³³, which was slightly more than 8% of all Roma in the RSFSR; according to the All-Union Census of 1926 there were 40,943 Roma³⁴. According to the All-Union Census of 1939, in the territories under consideration there were already over 5,300 Roma, or 10% of the RSFSR’s Roma popula-

²⁸ 12.3.3 Predsedateliu Tsentral'nogo Ispolnitel'nogo Komiteta Soiuzu SSR M.I. Kalininu ot kursanta VKSS imeni t. Kiseleva A.S. – t. Gerasimova I.Ia. Chlena VKP(b) [To the Chairman of the Central Executive Committee of the USSR M. I. Kalinin from Cadet of the VKSS named after Comrade Kiselev A.S. – Comrade Gerasimov I.Ya. Member of the VKP(b)],” in *Roma Voices in History*, 843.

²⁹ “Soveshchanie po trudoustroistvu i kul'turno-bytovomu obsluzhivaniuu tsygan [Meeting on the Employment and Cultural-Household Service of the Roma],” *Revoliutsiia i natsional'nosti*, no. 2 (1936): 68.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 61–62.

³¹ Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv ekonomiki [Russian State Archive of the Economy] (thereafter – RGAE), f. 5675, op. 1, d. 145, l. 98.

³² *Soveshchanie po trudoustroistvu*, 64.

³³ Data provided for Samara (759), Ulyanovsk (134), Saratov (616), Stalingrad (931), Nizhny Novgorod (679) provinces, Mari ASSR (42), ASSR of Volga Germans (193).

³⁴ See: *Vsesoiuznaia perepis' naseleniia 17 dekabria 1926* [All-Union Census of the Population, December 17, 1926], issue 4 (Moscow: TsSU Soiuzu SSSR Publ., 1928), 6.

tion³⁵. Despite the conventionality of the census as a source of information on the ethnic composition of the region, it can be noted that in the 1930s 8–10% of the Roma lived in the Volga region, which was much more than in other territories of the country. Therefore, the policy of collectivization of the Roma affected this region the most. According to the correspondence stored in the funds of the All-Union Resettlement Committee, in the Volga region during the wave of collectivization in the late 1920s 8 collective farms were created: the agricultural artel named after Kalinin in the Kirov region, the collective farm named after Kalinin of the Vyselsky village council, the collective farm of the Bekovsky district of the Saratov region, the collective farms “Natsmen tsygan” of the Kotelnikovskiy district, “Tsyganskaya Zarya” of the Krasnoslobodskiy district of the Stalingrad region, “Nevo Drom” of the Pektubaevskiy district of the Mari Autonomous Region, and “Novo Dzhuyumo” in the Gorky region. The largest was the “Nevi Bakht” collective farm in the Kuibyshev region.

The profitability of the Roma collective farms which were being created was supported by loans. In 1932, to support the Roma collective farms, the People's Commissariat of Agriculture allocated 300 thousand rubles, in 1933 – 105 thousand rubles, and in 1934 – 103 thousand rubles. After 1934, the funding ceased. The dynamics of the creation of collective farms directly depended on subsidies: 1932 – 2, 1933 – 5, 1934 – 8, 1935 – only 1. It is obvious that the ideas of collectivization became less popular among the Roma after the funding ceased. In 1935, the Roma began to withdraw from the collective farms³⁶. It was the local authorities that were held responsible for the failure of the Roma collectivization. The report of the Department of Nationalities states as follows:

At the local level, one often pays insufficient attention to this matter, without taking into account the characteristics of this people... the economic and national-everyday characteristics of the working Roma (nomadic lifestyle, lack of housing, etc.)³⁷.

By the mid-1930s, the problem of creating autonomy for the Roma remained unresolved.

Roma Autonomy and the “Kuibyshev Project”

In 1935, the central authorities changed their strategy towards the Roma. It was decided to replace the creation of new collective farms with the enlargement of the existing farms through additional resettlement³⁸. Thus, there emerged the idea of creating a separate administrative unit for the RSFSR's Roma population. On January 4–5, 1936, there was held the Conference on the further employment of nomadic Roma, organized by the Council of Nationalities of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee. Following its results, it was decided to create a commission that was entrusted with drafting a project to improve the life of the Roma and submit it for consideration by the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee. The decisions were recorded in the resolution of the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee of April 7, 1936, “On measures to employ nomads and improve the economic, cultural and everyday services of working Roma.” In this document, the Central Executive Committees of the Union Republics were obliged to check the situation with the development of the Roma collective farms on the ground and

³⁵ *Chislennost' naseleniia SSSR na 17 ianvaria 1939: po raionam, raionnym tsentram, gorodam, rabochim poselkam i krupnym selskim naselennym punktam* [Population of the USSR as of January 17, 1939: by districts, district centers, cities, working settlements, and major rural settlements] (Moscow: Gosplanizdat Publ., 1941), 5.

³⁶ *Soveshchanie po trudoustroistvu*, 69.

³⁷ Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii [State Archive of the Russian Federation] (thereafter – GARF), f. 7446, op. 1, d. 42, l. 11.

³⁸ This refers to the additional settlement of Roma families in already existing populated areas.

take measures to support the existing farms with the prospect of creating national Roma village councils or districts³⁹.

To this end, the inspectors of the All-Union Resettlement Committee responsible for the resettlement of the Roma were sent to the collective farms of: the Chelyabinsk Region, Kuibyshev, Saratov, Azov-Black Sea, and North Caucasian Territories⁴⁰.

According to the reports received, it became obvious that the possibility of creating a Roma village council was only on the territory of the Kuibyshev region, which was also discussed at the meeting⁴¹. “The issue of creating the national district can be positively resolved only on the condition of allocating land in the Kuibyshev region,” the letter from the Department of Nationalities of the All-Union Central Executive Committee noted⁴². Subsequently, work began on creating the Roma administrative unit based on the collective farms of the Kuibyshev region.

The Kuibyshev region was chosen not only because of the large number of the Roma living there, but also because the local authorities already paid a lot attention to the idea of settling the Roma population. In February 1936, the Kuibyshev District Executive Committee planned to merge the Roma collective farms since their population exceeded 300 people⁴³. Taking into account the beginning of the Roma migration from the Gorky region, the Kuibyshev District Executive Committee even adopted a separate resolution “On the merger of the collective farms ‘Nevi Bakht’ of the Kuibyshev district with the ‘Novo Dzhumo’ of the Gorky region.”⁴⁴

The implementation of the project to create the Roma district fell at the end of 1936–1937. The plan of the Secretariat of the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee implied the resettlement of 1,000 Roma families to collective farms, 400 of them by additional resettlement, 600 – by creating new collective farms. It was planned to resettle 200 people in the Kuibyshev region⁴⁵.

In the second half of 1936, in the Kuibyshev regional executive committee on the initiative of the regional land administration and the Department of national minorities several meetings were held on the issue of allocating land for the creation of the Roma collective farms to unite them into an independent national Roma village council or even into a national Roma district⁴⁶. Such a district was chosen on the territory of the Kuibyshev district, 80 km from the city of Kuibyshev, in the area of the Krotovka station⁴⁷. In the resolution of the Kuibyshev Regional Executive Committee № 55/34 of May 5, 1936, “On the allocation of land funds for the organization of new Roma collective farms,” it was planned to implement:

the organization of 3–4 Roma collective farms involving up to 200 families and the resettlement of 50 families to the existing Roma collective farm “Nevi Bakht,” so that in the future these collective farms can be united into an independent village council.⁴⁸

³⁹ “O meropriiatiakh po trudoustroistvu kochuiushchikh i uluchsheniui khoziaistvennogo i kul'turnogo byta obsluzhivaniia trudiashchikhsia tsygan [On Measures for the Employment of Nomadic Gypsies and Improvement of the Economic and Cultural Conditions for Serving Working Gypsies],” *Revoliutsiia i natsional'nosti*, no. 6 (1936): 87.

⁴⁰ RGAE, f. 5675, op. 1, d. 146, l. 21.

⁴¹ *Soveshchanie po trudoustroistvu*, 63.

⁴² RGAE, f. 5675, op. 1, d. 145, l. 99.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, d. 143, l. 15.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, l. 16.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, d. 145, l. 88.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, d. 146, l. 2.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, l. 4.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, l. 50.

For this purpose, it was decided to confiscate part of the land fund of 4,575 hectares from the nearby collective farms, as well as 3,800 hectares from the neighboring Terengulsky district⁴⁹. Thus, by the end of 1936, the first stage of the work related to choosing the territory was completed.

At the next stage, it was planned to create several Roma collective farms at once with up to 200 nomadic families with: a club, a maternity hospital, a school, a bathhouse, a veterinary station, and other economic institutions⁵⁰. The regional executive committee planned to create three new collective farms and, in the future, to include in them a land plot of 9 thousand hectares from the nearby state Voroshilov state farm. Thus, the creation of the district seemed to be a solvable task, but the project was never implemented.

Reasons for the failure of implementing the project of Roma autonomy in the Volga region

At the stage of implementing the project of the Roma autonomy in 1937, there arose several difficulties. The first one was interdepartmental changes. Whereas earlier the All-Union Resettlement Committee functioned under the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR, then at the end of 1936, this duty was transferred to the NKVD: by the order of the NKVD of December 15, 1936, under the Department of detention facilities a Resettlement Department was created. In November 1936, S.A. Takoyev, the head of the Department of Nationalities of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee pointed out in a report that the issue of creating the district “is delayed due to the reorganization of the resettlement case.”⁵¹

The functions of the Resettlement Department of the NKVD included, among other things, “registration of Roma collective farms and nomadic Roma,”⁵² and the Roma district establishment was entrusted to the resettlement group specially created for this purpose⁵³. The Roma issue was entrusted to Israel Pliner, one of the founders of the Gulag and the organizer of the first Soviet deportations⁵⁴.

According to the sources, after the reform, the issue of the Roma autonomy slowed down significantly. At first, the NKVD instructed its department in the Kuibyshev region to create its own resettlement group, without giving financial and staff resources for this. “Servicing the resettlement group is not the responsibility of the Department of detention facilities, and the instructions of Comrade Daube, the Deputy Head of the Resettlement Department of the NKVD of the USSR are not grounds for it,” wrote the head of the Department of detention facilities of the Kuibyshev NKVD in 1937⁵⁵.

In August 1937 D.M. Yarkov, one of the inspectors of the Resettlement Department of the NKVD wrote that the local authorities “just issued decrees,” and “since this work has allegedly been assigned by the Government to the Resettlement Department of the NKVD of the USSR, then let it do it.”⁵⁶

As a result, the preparatory work began only after the NKVD had given a direct order to begin it and was decided to postpone the plan for resettling the Roma and creating the district until 1938–1939⁵⁷.

⁴⁹ RGAE, f. 5675, op. 1. d. 146, l. 19.

⁵⁰ Ibid., l. 8.

⁵¹ Ibid., d. 145, l. 88.

⁵² Ibid., d. 165, l. 1–2.

⁵³ Ibid., d. 147, l. 54.

⁵⁴ N.V. Petrov, and K.V. Skorkin, “Kto rukovodil NKVD, 1934–1941: spravochnik [Who Led the NKVD, 1934–1941: A Directory] (Moscow: Zvenia Publ., 1999), accessed January 23, 2023, <http://old.memo.ru/history/nkvd/kto/biogr/gb392.htm>

⁵⁵ RGAE, f. 5675, op. 1, d. 157, l. 87.

⁵⁶ Ibid., l. 91.

⁵⁷ Ibid., l. 88–90.

The second difficulty was related to the allocation of land. The collective farms decided not to give the land that had been previously planned for confiscation, since according to Soviet law they had already received the state acts “for perpetual use,” and the issue of confiscation was not discussed with the heads of the collective farms. In November 1936, the regional land administration sent a document to the regional executive committee to inform them that there were no free land funds for the creation of new collective farms for the Roma⁵⁸.

Only in December 1936, there were found lands of 8,760 hectares, which belonged to the Voroshilov state grain farm, which was directly subordinate to the People's Commissariat of Food Industry. The resolution “On the agricultural settlement of nomadic Roma families in the Kuibyshev region in accordance with the plan for 1937” was adopted only on December 28, 1936. The document again included the task of creating a Roma collective farm⁵⁹.

In July 1937, the commission consisting of the Kuibyshev NKVD Office, the “Stalin drom” collective farm and the district authorities decided to build a settlement with 100 residential buildings for the Roma in the Sarbaisky village council of the Kuibyshevsky district.

Further work was never started due to the subsequent period of repressions. On September 1, 1937, R.K. Nelke, the curator of the “Roma issue” at the Kuibyshev regional executive committee was arrested, and the head of the NKVD resettlement group V. Daube was transferred to the NKVD Office of the Voronezh region⁶⁰. I. Pliner was arrested and shot in 1938⁶¹. The last documents on the preparation of work on the creation of the district for Roma and the difficulties that arose date back to October 1937. Obviously, the work was just stopped due to the repressions. The Roma issue in the region remained unresolved also due to the changes in the priorities of the national policy aimed at unifying the lives of the peoples of the USSR. Thus, on December 17, 1937, the Central Executive Committee approved the resolution “On elimination of national districts and village councils,”⁶² after which all work on the creation of national districts throughout the country was ceased.

Thus, it can be stated that the idea of creating the first Roma national district within the framework of the Soviet national policy could well have been implemented: the territory was chosen, funds were allocated for the construction of infrastructure, and there were Roma households ready to begin a settled way of life. However, the interdepartmental changes, the inaction of the local authorities, as well as political repressions prevented the implementation of this plan.

Conclusion

The analysis of the situation with collective farm construction in the Volga region gives a fairly complete picture of the features of Soviet modernization of period and the degree of involvement of the Roma themselves in its processes.

In the 1920s, in the Volga region there were several stable nomadic routes along which at least five thousand Roma moved. They were engaged in traditional activities (horse trading, theft, begging, fortune telling, etc.). Collectivization, the exclusion of goods-money relations from rural life, and increased control over villages significantly complicated the life of the Roma, forcing the poorest strata to search for new business

⁵⁸ RGAE, f. 5675, op. 1, d. 147a, l. 44.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, l. 38:

⁶⁰ Daube, Val'demar Petrovich [Electronic Resource]: Tsentrazia, accessed January 23, 2023, <https://centrasia.org/person2.php?st=1546709116>.

⁶¹ “Pliner, Izrail' Izrailevich,” in Bibliotekar' Ru, January 23, 2023, <https://www.bibliotekar.ru/gulag/62.htm>

⁶² RGASPI, f. 17, op. 114, d. 637, l. 7.

patterns. In this situation, the policy of promoting the settlement of nomads and assistance in organizing collective farms became a significant and more attractive alternative. By deciding to join a collective farm, the Roma received material benefits and could count on general improvement in their living conditions. The scale of collectivization was small; even in the best years the government collectivized about 10% of the Roma. However, in 1935, the targeted support for the Roma collective farms ceased. As a result, the Roma no longer saw the advantages of settling down compared to the nomadic way of life, and the Roma began to withdraw from collective farms in large numbers. It prompted the authorities to return to solving the Roma issue by creating a separate administrative unit where collectivized households could also be settled. In the future, it was planned to create village councils or national districts on this basis.

However, the bureaucratization of the process against the background of the inter-departmental reform, as well as the unresolved land issue prevented the implementation of this idea as it had been scheduled. In 1937, with the termination of the policy of creating national districts, all activities by the Kuibyshev region authorities toward this plan became meaningless, since they could yield neither further political nor economic profit. As a result, the idea of territorial autonomy for the Roma could no longer be implemented in any practical sense. Afterwards, most of the Roma returned to their usual lifestyles, but already in the 1950s in the Volga region and the territory of the Kuibyshev region saw the emergence of new Roma collective farms due to the revised policy of promoting the settlement of the Roma which unfolded during the second half of the 1950s.

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