

GYPSIES

Criminalised from birth

It is easier to find a Gypsy in prison than on the street. The Gypsies (Romanies) of eastern Europe, like most ethnic minorities in industrial societies, are over-represented in the prison system.

So despite being only 5% (or at the most 10%) of Hungary's population, they account for 55% of the prison population and 65% of the population of youth custody centres. In Poland, 10% of all Gypsies are registered with the police as having committed crimes. In Czechoslovakia, Gypsies make only about 6% of the whole population but represent about 15% of all offenders convicted for crimes. Similar statistics could be produced for other eastern European countries.

Such discrimination is well known to those who are concerned about criminal justice in Britain. But what are the reasons for such widespread discrimination in eastern Europe?

First, the high unemployment rate which is linked to the lack of educational qualifications and discrimination by employing bodies have a major part to play. Only 60% of Gypsy children finish their basic education in Bulgaria and many school-age Gypsy children never even attend school. Also custody is one of the very few means of controlling young people. For example in Bulgaria, if a young person commits a minor crime he and/or his parents could be called to be reprimanded at a meeting of residents of the block of flats or to the trade union branch in the factory where they work. This is not likely to be available as a form

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of discipline in the case of a young Gypsy.

Thirdly, a high proportion of young Gypsies are taken away from their parents and sent to special boarding schools as educationally subnormal (which often just means they are not fluent in the majority language), because of behavioural problems or simply as a matter of policy. It is generally agreed that taking children away from their parents and putting them in a boarding school where the cultural norms are different is likely to lead to the development of a criminal sub-culture. There is also the factor of 'giving a dog a bad name'; if people are continually being told that they are crimi-

nal, they may well turn to crime. In Budapest a bus conductor announced that a Gypsy had just got on and warned people to watch their pockets.

There is discrimination by the police force. There have been accusations in Romania that police have forced confessions out of Gypsies. *'The militia and securitate came to the houses at dawn, beat up women and children and took the men to the police station and forced them to confess to crimes they had not committed'*. This was probably in order



Gypsy women selling flowers in Bratislava

to impose fines and part of a campaign to confiscate Gypsies' gold and jewellery. Let's not forget that during the German occupation of eastern Europe, Gypsies suffered the same fate as Jews and were murdered in their thousands, often with the help of local police.

Lastly, Gypsies may be criminalised for actions which are not universally recognised as crimes or be driven into crime by being deprived of a legitimate way of earning their living. In Poland, in 1952, free enterprise was banned. Around the same time nomadism was prohibited and Gypsies have since been punished for not having a fixed address. In this category of crimes which hurt no-one, there is black market dealing including illegal currency exchange and organising street gambling. Such activities are obvious outlets for those with poor education such as Gypsies. Buying something for one price and selling it for more than you paid is a normal business transaction. However, in certain circumstances, it is classified as smuggling, black market trading or

trading without a licence.

Some examples will illustrate the reasons for the higher rates of crime and custody which I have given.

An old man in Lugosch (Romania) who sold second hand clothes in the market was arrested for having a 'parasitic' lifestyle. He was imprisoned for four months. When he came out, he found that his house had been knocked down by the authorities together with those of his neighbours in order to build a new street; they had all been rehoused in flats. All his property had disappeared except his horse. This he had to sell in order to buy a new cottage. Left without money in a country with no social security system, what were his alternatives? Illegal trading was one.

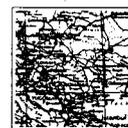
The destruction of their housing must have driven some Gypsies to crime. This was particularly bad in Romania. In Bulgaria and Hungary too, Gypsy quarters were destroyed and the Gypsies dispersed through the towns, whereas non-Gypsies were rehoused as a community in the old locations.

In Czechoslovakia, the resettlement programme was even more dramatic. Gypsies were sent from Slovakia to the west to towns in Bohemia and Moravia. This left young people without the restraining force of parents and grandparents who remained in the home village.

In Bulgaria, Gypsies who couldn't read music were not allowed to become members of the trade union and so couldn't work. If they then played at weddings, they were committing a crime for which they could be fined. The government then banned the *zurna*, a type of clarinet which was played almost exclusively by Gypsies, as well as the popular *kyuchek* dance. This was part of the programme for cleansing Bulgaria of Turkish cultural influences.

There was a demonstration in Tirgu Mures (Romania) in March 1990 which led to fighting between Hungarians and Romanians. Gypsies were drawn in on both sides. Three days after the event, police, (the same police as before the revolution) came to the quarter where Hungarian-speaking Gypsies lived with a list of seventy names. They arrested seven Gypsies who were held in prison for months. None of the arrested Hungarians or Romanians were kept in jail.

In Tarnow, Poland, a group of drunken policemen attacked one young Gypsy apparently without provocation. He still



bears the scars on his body.

The situation in the USSR is not comparable. In the first place, communism was established soon after 1917 and Gypsies have been adapting to its requirements for over seventy years. The apparatus of state control has not changed much under perestroika and glasnost. Examples of anti-Gypsy attitudes are easy to find. In the Moscow suburb of Babushkin, a warning notice put up by the council in municipal flats read: 'Pay particular attention to strangers, especially people from Caucasian¹ or Gypsy origin who loiter in the entrance' and 'If people of Gypsy origin ring your doorbell, no matter under what pretext, do not invite them into your home because in all probability they will try to rob or con you.'

However, that people of Gypsy origin will 'in all probability' rob you seems less likely in the USSR than elsewhere in eastern Europe; a fairly extensive programme of universal education since the 1920s which has encouraged Gypsy participation, has produced a large number of Gypsy writers, librarians, actors, army officers and other professionals such as welfare workers who may well come uninvited to ring on your doorbell.

Resisting racist attacks may end up with the victim being arrested rather than the attacker. A Gypsy in Romania who protested after a police car had run over his daughter was arrested and accused of throwing her under the wheels.

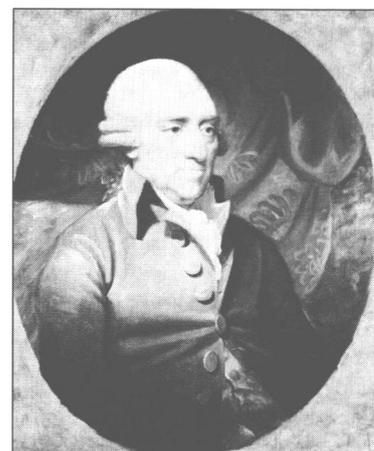
And what of the future? With the move to a market economy, Gypsies will be able to return to their traditional trades as craftsmen and market traders working for themselves (as opposed to municipal and state enterprises) which they seem to favour; with the growth of Gypsy cultural organisations and political parties, the educational and social position of Gypsies will gradually improve - though prejudice will remain for many years. Activities which are not in themselves harmful will be decriminalised and the level of crime will fall to that of the majority population.

¹ *Caucasian here has the meaning of 'from the Caucasus' and not its usual English meaning.*

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DID YOU KNOW?

1. On September 27, 1990, the USSR became the 151st member of Interpol.
2. Number of crimes reported to police in the USSR, in 1989, was 2,461,692 for 286,700,000 inhabitants: 862 crimes per 100,000 population. Number of crimes reported to police in England and Wales, in 1989, was 3,706,000 for 49,155,000 inhabitants: 7,681 crimes per 100,000 population.
3. In 1990, the price of medicine taken by drug abusers in eastern Europe was more than 800 times higher on the black market than on the state market.
4. Between 1986-1989, the police confiscated more than 13,000 kg of narcotics in the USSR.
5. In 1989, the number of violent crimes in the USSR was the highest in the last 20 years. In comparison with 1988:
 - murders increased by more than 28.5%,
 - rapes by more than 38.4%,
 - robberies by more than 23.9%,
 - thefts by more than 66.3%.
6. Violence and property related crimes have increased enormously in 1990, in Czechoslovakia. When compared to 1989 figures, crime rates have increased:
 - by 35% for murder,
 - by 100% for robbery,
 - by 40% for rape.
7. The salary of the 15,000 judges in the USSR is lower than the average salary in the country.
8. The death penalty was abolished de jure and de facto for all crimes, in Czechoslovakia, on July 1, 1990.
9. The amnesty of January 1 1990, by Vaclav Havel released 15,000 prisoners in the Czech Republic. The Ministry of Justice of the Czech Republic said that, by the end of 1990, nearly 30 percent of the prison and detention population in the Republic were those who had been released in January.
10. Pinkerton's, an American detective agency, has been hired by the Czechoslovak authorities who are alarmed at the 200% increase in crime since the fall of communism in 1989.
11. Crime in Romania is more than 190% higher in 1990 than it was in the previous year. (*Verejnost*, February 15, 1991)
12. In January 1991 the Albanian President Ramiz Alia released 393 prisoners of conscience kept in the Albanian prisons. In March 14, 1991 he pardoned all remaining prisoners of conscience. (*Verejnost*, March 18, 1991)
13. The first free elections were held in Albania in March 31, 1991 under the control of international observers.
14. John Howard, after whom the Howard League is named, is considered to be the founder of penal reform. He travelled the world investigating international prison systems, searching for better systems from which lessons could be learnt. It was on one of these journeys that he died in Kherson in the Ukraine in 1790.



Compiled by Robert Fico.