

Ernő Kállai, György Majtényi, Zsuzsanna Mikó,
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Book review by

Burak Akin

burkakin@gmail.com

PhD candidate, Department of History, University of Szeged, Hungary

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0240-8096>

Burak Akin is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Szeged's History Department, where he is doing a dissertation on the identity transformations of Ottoman subjects in regard to their conversion to Christianity. He has a master's degree in Central European Studies from the University of Miskolc, Hungary, and completed a BA in History at the University of Kırklareli, Türkiye.



Unlike many other nations, Roma lack their own written historical records. Our understanding of their history is derived exclusively from documents from the communities and societal settings they were part of. This rarely has yielded substantial documentary evidence about Roma. When records did emerge, they were often in the context of criminality, employment and more often embedded in the policies of those rulers who regulated their settlement and everyday life throughout various historical periods. As a result, analysing these records alone can lead to a skewed perception, failing to provide a comprehensive understanding of Romani history. The book under review, *A magyarországcigányok/romák I-II*, offers an extensive collection of sources, contributing significantly to the understanding of the Romani past within Hungarian historiography. This work is part of the series *Minorities in Hungary: National, Ethnic, and Religious Communities*. (*Magyarországi kisebbségek: nemzeti, nemzetiségi és vallási közösségek*). The selection of sources, editing and preparation were done by Ernő Kállai, György Majtényi, Zsuzsanna Mikó and Péter Tóth, and organized by the National Archives of Hungary.

The source edition is comprised of two volumes, arranged in chronological order. The first volume opens with the earliest known manuscript mentioning Roma in Hungarian historiography. This document, dating back to 1416, is found in a book of accounts from Braşov detailing the distribution of alms to a man named Emaus and his companions. The first volume, starting from this period until the mid-nineteenth century, helps demonstrate the image of the Roma through different eras. The second volume spans from the mid-nineteenth century until the end of socialism in Hungary, concluding in 1989/1990. The initial chapter of the first volume offers not only a detailed introduction but also elucidates the methodology behind the selection of sources. The compilation of manuscripts is influenced particularly by a critical historical marker: a 1724 decree by King Charles III of Hungary regarding the settlement of Roma. This decree serves as a pivotal point in the documentation; manuscripts prior to 1724 are scarce, leading the authors to include nearly every available document from this earlier period in the book. Following this date, an increasing number of manuscripts mentioning the Roma allowed for a more selective approach. As a result, the greater availability of manuscripts after 1724 enabled the editors to methodically choose from a diverse range of topics, presenting a multifaceted view of Romani history and their various synergies.

The introduction is based on a rich contextual foundation, informing the reader of the significant aspects of Romani history in Hungary. Sections and headings are consistently aligned with those in the introduction across both volumes. By focusing on source criticism, particularly in linguistic terms, such as the use of “Gypsy” (*cigány*), the introduction gives a clear understanding of the book’s core purpose. Highlighting these details guides the reader, preventing them from being side-tracked by subjective interpretation.

The first volume is neatly divided into three chronological chapters, each focusing on a distinct era of Romani presence and experience in Hungary. These are as follows: “The Emergence of Gypsies in Hungary” (*A cigányok megjelenése Magyarországon*), “Gypsies in Tripartite Hungary” (*Cigányok a három részre szakadt Magyarországon*), and “Gypsies in the Enlightenment and Romantic Era” (*Cigányok a felvilágosodás és a romantika korában*). In the following sections, I will briefly outline the key themes and historical contexts of each chapter, offering a clearer view of the structure of the first volume.

In the first chapter, “The Emergence of Gypsies in Hungary,” the sparse collection of manuscripts from 1416 to 1550 reveals the limited documentation available from this period. Of the significant records noted in this chapter, the most prevalent are letters of protection granted to certain Romani groups, documentation of Roma being bestowed to feudal lords as serfs by Hungarian kings and the clergy, and entries in account registers.

As a consequence of the capture of Buda in 1541 by Sultan Süleyman I, the kingdom was divided into three political parts. The second chapter, the most substantial in this first volume, is organized around this historical event, covering the period up to 1724. The reason for greater documentation from this period is down to financial affairs, mostly tax regulations. Additionally, the chapter presents decrees from counties pertaining to the expulsion of unsettled Roma from their territories, often citing illegal actions, and including relevant judicial records.

Lastly, the chapter “Gypsies in the Enlightenment and Romantic Era” begins with the 1724 decree of King Charles III of Hungary and contains documents up until 1846. The decrees and manuscripts from this era primarily focus on regulations that led to crucial changes in Roma's socio-economic routines and family structures. Building on the earlier discussion about the role of counties, it's noteworthy that these regulations, issued at multiple levels of governance, illustrate a comprehensive approach to the “Roma question,” involving not only the Hungarian kings and the Council of Royal Governors but also reflecting the responsibilities and actions at the local administrative level. These decrees at first aimed to restrain and direct the lives of Roma, but under the rule of Maria Theresa, Queen of Hungary, a more solution-oriented Roma policy emerged.

The second volume of three chapters, includes “Sources from the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century to the Second World War” (*Források a 19. század második felétől a másodikkvilágháborúig*), “Documents on the Persecution during the Second World War and the Roma Holocaust/Pharrajimos” (*Források a II. világháború alatti üldöztetésről és a romaholokausztról/pharrajimosról*), and “Sources from 1945 to the Transition” (*Források 1945-től a rendszerváltásig*), respectively.

In the first chapter, the book introduces the earliest scientific attempt to address the Roma question in Hungary, which occurred in 1893. This, which came about from a census of Hungarian Roma, shed light on several key aspects: their population size, general characteristics, national consciousness, language proficiency, literacy, and means of livelihood. Overall, the chapter illustrates that the state's efforts to control the wandering Romani population were primarily driven by concerns over various public order crimes and the threat of disease. Among these measures, it is important to note the prohibition to practice artisan crafts for Roma individuals without a fixed address; those with an address were only allowed to work within their county's borders. Furthermore, the policies aimed to suppress the spread of infectious diseases such as smallpox. The nomadic lifestyle of Roma made vaccination efforts more difficult.

While the second chapter covering the Second World War and the Roma Holocaust/Pharrajimos has a smaller number of documents compared to other chapters, each one clarifies this troubled period of history. The main archival sources are centred around the mass murder of Roma, based on court records and witness statements.

The last chapter of the second volume covers the time period until 1989 and is the richest in terms of content. In this chapter, the notable documents primarily detail efforts to find solutions and improve the living conditions of Roma, focusing on aspects such as employment opportunities and housing.

These two volumes make significant contributions to the field by offering a wide range of documents about Roma's past in Hungarian historiography. Additionally, the introductory section presents a detailed history of Roma's place during key periods in Hungarian history, aiding scholars and readers to understand and use the materials.

In terms of structure, apart from the first chapter of the first volume and the second chapter of the second volume, the rest are organized into sections based on thematic content rather than chronological order; this means that if researchers or readers wish to review all the documents in historical sequence, they will need additional time, perhaps making the study of the material more challenging.