

ELENA MARUSHIAKOVA, VESSELIN POPOV:  
*Stalin vs Gypsies: Roma and Political Repressions in the USSR*  
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At first glance, the title *Stalin vs Gypsies* appears to promise a confrontation between a dictator and a persecuted minority. However, as Elena Marushiakova and Vesselin Popov make clear from the outset, this is neither a book about Stalin nor a sensationalist account of ethnic victimhood. It is rather a meticulously documented historical study of Roma as integral participants in Soviet society (cf. Martin, 2001; Demeter et al., 2000) who became victims of mass political repression as part of that society, not outside it. This conceptual repositioning is among the book's most significant contributions.

The authors explicitly distance themselves from what they term “Roma-centrism”, which they identify as a persistent problem in Romani Studies. As they argue, the tendency to treat Roma as a fundamentally separate historical phenomenon risks reproducing the very marginalisation scholars seek to overcome. Instead, in the Introduction they insist that “Roma are not an outcast social phenomenon, a hermetically isolated and self-sufficient social and cultural system” but have always existed simultaneously as a community and as part of wider society (Marushiakova & Popov, 2024, p. x). This dual positioning, which is one of the most fundamental theoretical contributions of the authors (Marushiakova & Popov, 2016, 2021) in their decades-long work in Romani Studies, underpins the entire volume.

From a historiographical perspective, *Stalin vs Gypsies* intervenes in a long-standing imbalance between national histories, minority histories, and the study of state violence. While Stalinist repression has generated an immense body of scholarship (a bibliographic enumeration alone would span several volumes; here I mention only some of the most influential recent works – Applebaum, 2003; Slezkine, 2017), and Soviet Roma history has developed into a distinct interdisciplinary field (Crowe, 2007; Lemon, 2000; O’Keefe, 2013; Demeter et al., 2000), the two have rarely been examined together in a manner that avoids both marginalisation and exceptionalism. Marushiakova and Popov challenge this separation by treating Roma history neither as an appendix to Soviet history nor as an autonomous narrative insulated from general historical processes. In doing so, they implicitly question a broader historiographical habit to acknowledge minority histories primarily through difference, rather than through their structural embeddedness in the societies they inhabit.

One of the book's most important interventions lies in its refusal to frame Roma repression in the USSR as an exceptional or uniquely ethnic project. Marushiakova and Popov argue convincingly that Stalinist repression functioned through generalised mechanisms of control and terror, within which Roma were caught not because they were Roma per se, but because they were Soviet citizens subject to the same administrative and judicial machinery as others. As the authors state explicitly: “Even though Stalin's name appears in its title, this is not a book

## Stalin vs Gypsies

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about Stalin but about Roma as victims of political repression in the USSR” (Marushiakova & Popov, 2024, p. xiii).

This stance is methodologically significant. It allows the authors to integrate Roma history into the broader historiography of Stalinism rather than relegating it to a specialised niche. At the same time, it avoids minimising Roma suffering by embedding individual and collective experiences within a rigorously contextualised analysis of Soviet repression.

The book is organised around a clear analytical distinction derived from the classification used by the Memorial Society: victims of administrative acts and victims of judicial (or quasi-judicial) decisions (Memorial, 2002–2022). Chapters 2 and 3 develop this distinction in great empirical depth, while Chapter 4 examines specific “Gypsy lawsuits”, combining legal analysis with family memory and community narratives.

What distinguishes this study from earlier works on Roma in Eastern Europe and the USSR, as well as from general studies of Stalinist repression, is not only the breadth of archival material but also the authors’ sustained reflection on methodological responsibility. They repeatedly warn against the speculative inflation of victim numbers and insist that historical truth cannot be subordinated to political or moral agendas (cf. discussion of the issue of victim numbers in another context in Weiss-Wendt, 2025). As they note, rejecting exaggerated figures “should not be interpreted as an effort to belittle or even deny the victims’ suffering” (Marushiakova & Popov, 2024, p. xv). This insistence on proportionality and evidentiary discipline is particularly valuable in a field where numbers are often mobilised symbolically.

The extensive annexes (especially the “Book of Memory”) transform the volume from a conventional monograph into a hybrid between scholarly analysis and commemorative archive. By listing individual victims with names, dates, sentences, and sources, the authors construct what is effectively a documentary monument. This approach reinforces their argument that repression must be understood not only statistically but also biographically. Equally important is the authors’ nuanced engagement with oral history and community memory. While acknowledging their value, they remain attentive to retrospective reinterpretations shaped by post-Stalinist and post-Soviet discourses (Lemon, 2000; Solzhenitsyn, 1989).

Theoretically, the book advances a sober but consequential proposition: that the integration of Roma history into general historiography requires not moral amplification but methodological discipline. By resisting inflated figures, symbolic exceptionalism, and teleological readings of repression, the authors argue for a form of historical writing grounded in proportionality, archival accountability, and comparative logic. This position may appear restrained, but it carries significant implications for ethnology and historical anthropology, where ethical commitment is sometimes conflated with interpretative excess. *Stalin vs Gypsies* demonstrates that acknowledging suffering and restoring historical visibility need not rely on rhetorical intensification but can emerge more convincingly from careful contextualisation.

The very strengths of the book may also challenge some readers. Its scale and density demand sustained engagement, and the absence of more granular sub-sections may complicate

selective reading. The deliberate avoidance of overt moral rhetoric may feel restrained to readers expecting a more explicitly accusatory narrative. However these choices are consistent with the authors' stated aim: to produce a historically grounded, analytically sober account rather than a polemical one.

*Stalin vs Gypsies* is a landmark contribution to Romani studies and Soviet history alike, not only because it addresses an issue largely absent from existing scholarship. Its greatest achievement lies in demonstrating that the history of Roma repression in the USSR is not a marginal footnote but a constitutive part of the history of Stalinist terror itself. By resisting both exceptionalism and simplification, Marushiakova and Popov offer a model for how minority histories can and should be written: integrated, evidence-based, and intellectually uncompromising. For scholars of Soviet repression, minority histories, and the ethics of historical knowledge production, this book will remain a key reference for years to come.

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