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REVIEWS

BERNARD LORY, *LES Tsiganes des Balkans (1280–1914)*.

[*The Gypsies of the Balkans (1280–1914)*].

Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2024, 688 p.

Reviewed by Mirjana Mirić*

Bernard Lory's book *Les Tsiganes des Balkans (1280–1914)*, written in French, is an ambitious documentary collection offering important insights into the history of the Roma in the Balkans. Comprising 157 documents, the volume spans from the first mentions of Roma in Byzantine sources of the late 13th century to the beginning of the First World War, focusing on the centuries under Ottoman rule and the 19th century, when documentation becomes increasingly abundant. Lory, a distinguished historian of the Balkans, has gathered, translated, and commented on sources originally written in numerous languages, including Byzantine Greek, Ottoman Turkish, Latin, Serbian, Croatian, Bulgarian, Macedonian, German, English, and others. His motivation stems from the fact that the Roma have been largely neglected in Balkan historiography: while sources on the Roma in Western Europe are abundant, documentation on the Roma in the Balkans is scarce and

still awaits thorough analysis. Lory's aim is twofold: to make accessible the dispersed and fragmentary records of Roma in Southeastern Europe, and to correct the long-standing problem of uncritical repetition of unverifiable claims in Romanian historiography.

In terms of geography, the volume covers all Balkan lands except for present-day Romania, which Lory deliberately excluded due to the complex situation and the existing specialized historiography on slavery and the Roma in that region. Yet he occasionally includes important Romanian sources when they relate to Roma in Wallachia and Moldavia and to the communities dispersed across the Balkans. The author consistently uses the term "Tsiganes" ('Gypsies') throughout the book, following the common

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historical practice of employing the terminology found in the sources. This term is prevalent in Ottoman-period documents and is also among the oldest ethnonyms attested in the Balkans.

Chronologically structured, the book includes four large parts: 1) 1280–1481, 2) *La grande époque ottomane (1481–1699)* (“The Great Ottoman Era (1481–1699)”), 3) *Un curieux XVIII^e siècle* (“A Curious 18th Century”), and 4) *Le XIX^e siècle, « âge classique » de l’histoire balkanique* (“The 19th Century, the “Classical Age” of Balkan History”), preceded by a concise introduction and followed by a conclusion, the annex titled *Les Tsiganes des Balkans : combien?* (“The Roma of the Balkans: How many?”), glossary, bibliography, and detailed geographical and thematic indexes. This structure reflects the logic of the sources: sparse in the medieval centuries, abundant under Ottoman rule, then shaped by the rise of nation-states and modern categories of ethnicity in the 19th century. Each source is introduced with its historical context and information about the author (when known), followed by a reference and an extended commentary on the document’s content, terminology and interpretations, and is also situated within a broader social, political, and historical framework.

The first part of the volume (1280–1481) presents 22 sources in Romani historiography, including hagiographies, Byzantine canons, charters, and early travelogues. These diverse late medieval sources trace some of the earliest mentions of Roma in the Balkans, though their reliability varies widely, according to the author. Lory critiques the tendency among researchers to accept the earliest mentions of Roma as attestations of their presence in the Balkans as early as

possible. For instance, discussing *The Life of George the Hagiorite* (1047–1055), the reference to “Athinganes” is interpreted as referring to a Byzantine sect attested in the 8th–9th century rather than the Roma, challenging earlier assumptions. Similarly, the term “athingganoi”, first introduced around 1200 by Theodore Balsamon in his commentary on Canon 61 of the Council in Trullo (692), did not, according to Lory, have an ethnic connotation. The author also questions the interpretations of the charter (chrysobull) of Stefan Dušan (1348), arguing that although Roma may have been present at the time in Serbia, they were neither numerous nor recognized as a distinct people. While some of Lory’s arguments lack robust evidence and remain speculative, his critical assessments highlight the fragility of existing historiography and the need for a more careful approach to Roma identity and status during this period.

The 14th- and 15th-century records portray Roma as sedentary, socially integrated, and largely working as craftsmen, musicians, or ironworkers, while other accounts, such as those of Western pilgrims, often depict them as nomadic, impoverished, or even threatening. Monastic charters from Wallachia and Moldavia attest to Roma families tied to estates, while Ottoman registers from the Sofia region and Nikopol show them as taxable communities. The last document analyzed in this part of the book is an excerpt from the *Kanunname*, a legal code concerning the Yörüks and Roma in Rumelia during the reign of Mehmed II (1451–1481), which regulated their taxation and obligations in the Ottoman Empire. Classified separately from other populations, Roma were subject to special taxes, strict registration, and close supervision due to their

mobility and economic activities. The conflicting depictions presented in the medieval sources reflect not only the diversity of Roma livelihoods, ranging from craftwork to executioners, but also the shifting symbolic and social roles assigned to them.

The second part of the volume, *La grande époque ottomane (1481–1699)*, presents 41 documents, covering two centuries for which archives provide important data on Roma communities. With the consolidation of Ottoman administration in the Balkans, the number and quality of sources increased dramatically. Ottoman administrative and tax registers (*defters*) from the late 15th and 16th centuries offer demographic precision unparalleled in Western Europe at the time. Beginning with the consolidation of Ottoman authority after Mehmed II died in 1481 and ending with the Treaty of Karlowitz in 1699, the sources include fiscal registers, censuses, and legal codes that document both Muslim and non-Muslim Roma in the Balkans. These documents, ranging from capitation tax records in 1490–1491 and the Balkan census of 1523 (encompassing 13,000 Roma families) to laws under Suleyman the Magnificent and various tax registers, offer precise data on the Roma population size, family structures, occupations, settlement patterns, and religious conversions. These sources reveal the duality of Roma status: on the one hand, fiscal burdens and stigmatization (special taxes, restrictions on intermingling between Muslims and Christians, association with marginal trades); on the other hand, recognition of their economic usefulness, whether as ironworkers in Belgrade (privileged in terms of taxes, as seen in records from 1536–1560), miners in Bosnia (1574), musicians in imperial

ceremonies (Budapest, 1584), or butchers in Bitola (1634). The evidence Lory assembles reveals that by the 16th century, most Roma were sedentary, concentrated in urban centers such as Belgrade, Sofia, and Bitola and their suburbs, or in specialized rural enclaves, though some remained nomadic. The Ottoman documents also register the religious dynamics of Roma communities, including conversion to Islam. Administrative measures, including the creation of the *Gypsy Sanjak*, an Ottoman administrative unit in Rumelia entirely devoted to Roma, point both to the demographic significance of Roma and the Ottoman state's efforts to monitor mobility and regulate social behavior. In this part, Lory challenges the stereotype of Roma as mainly nomadic and socially marginal.

The third part, *Un curieux XVIII^e siècle*, presents 24 documents reflecting a transitional era. While the 17th century ended with the decline of Ottoman power, the 18th century brought about important administrative reforms. Documentation is less abundant than in the preceding centuries, yet it remains significant. Lory presents materials that show both continuity and change: Roma appear in taxation records, censuses, accounts of local conflicts, and descriptions by Western travelers. Their occupations diversified, and the balance between sedentary and mobile groups remained an object of administrative concern. Particularly interesting is the persistence of stereotypes about Roma as thieves, spies, or irregular soldiers, even though the actual administrative sources show them more commonly as artisans or musicians. The 18th century also marked a growing interest of European observers in Roma, reflecting Enlightenment attempts to classify

people but also to exoticize them. In addition, this section looks at some of the pioneering scientific works that include Roma. For instance, Lory discusses the work of the German scholar and historian Grellmann in the 1780s. Although criticized for its stereotypical view, Grellmann sought to understand Roma, historically and geographically, and was one of the first to emphasize their Indian origin (following Rüdiger). Overall, the author stresses that this century cannot be overlooked in the history of Roma, as it shaped the categories that would later influence 19th-century national administrations.

The fourth part of the volume, *Le XIX^e siècle, âge classique de l'histoire balkanique*, comprises as many as 70 documents, showing that the 19th century marked a turning point in the historical knowledge of Roma in the Balkans. The author relies on a variety of sources, including Ottoman fiscal registers and administrative correspondence, Austro-Hungarian and Serbian municipal records, legal petitions, as well as ethnographic and linguistic studies (e.g., by Paspatis, Kanitz, Miklosich, Colocci), autobiographies, local chronicles and memoirs (e.g., by Prota Mateja Nenadović in Serbia), letters, travelers' reports (e.g., Knight on the Roma in Shkodra, Barbanti-Brodano on "White Gypsies" in the Serbian town of Šabac), and even newspapers (*Radničke novine*). This combination allows for both a reconstruction of official policies affecting Roma and the identification of less stereotyped social realities.

The period of conflicts, particularly the Russo-Turkish War (1877–1878), the Balkan Wars (1912–1913), and numerous localized uprisings, shaped the Roma experience. Testimonies and administrative reports reveal that Roma were often

caught between warring groups, experiencing both victimization and opportunistic involvement. In the Bulgarian Uprising of 1876, for instance, Muslim Roma in Koprivštica were massacred, while in other villages they managed to survive. Accounts from Skopje and other towns during the Balkan Wars show that Roma frequently migrated in response to changing taxation and wartime instability. In addition, bureaucratic modernization under the late Ottoman Empire and emerging Balkan states introduced new forms of control over Roma communities. More strict census policies, identity cards, and military service registration marked a shift from flexible social arrangements to codified legal status. Finally, urbanization influenced Roma settlement and economic patterns. In cities such as Sofia or Thessaloniki, municipal authorities concentrated Roma into specific quarters, reshaping traditional spatial arrangements and economic roles. While some adapted successfully, maintaining crafts, music, and trade, others faced marginalization and poverty, as witnessed in accounts of beggary and informal labor. Ethnographic observations also note the persistence of cultural practices, such as fortune-telling, festival observances and rituals (e.g. *kurban*), which remained markers of identity even in the context of rapid social change. As for specific Roma groups, Lory particularly discusses the migrations of Kalderash, which are, according to him, neglected in historiography. Together, the presented sources provide a nuanced picture of Roma communities in a period of transformation across the Balkans.

In addition to analyzing the available documents from a historical perspective, Lory devotes some sections of the volume to discussing linguistic sources and their

place in Romani studies (see, among others, pp. 134–135). Linguistic evidence allowed for the reconstruction of origins and identification of the Indian origin of the Romani language and the subsequent dialectological work mapped the dispersion of Roma groups across Europe. According to the author, since the 18th century, the linguistic approach, pioneered by Franz Miklosich and followed by generations of scholars, has dominated attempts to trace Roma migrations and history. Lory, however, notes the limitations of this approach. He stresses that linguistic data are essentially synchronic (pp. 12, 252, 425), unable, on their own, to provide a historical narrative. The “Great Divide” theory (Lory cites Matras 2014), which posits a split between Romani dialects around the 15th and 16th centuries, is also examined critically (p. 134). Nevertheless, the author’s criticism of linguistic accounts appears unfounded, as he largely overlooks numerous contemporary studies in Romani linguistics (see Matras & Tenser (eds.), 2020). This oversight remains the main critical point of the book. Contemporary Romani linguistics bases its conclusions not only on the Indian origin of Romani, but also on the presence of Roma in particular regions and the timeline of their migrations, on a scientific comparative method. This approach allows linguists to compare Romani dialects with each other and with other languages to identify both inherited Indian vocabulary and loanwords borrowed from various contact languages. The quantity and persistence of these loanwords in the common lexicon across Romani dialects provide crucial evidence of the duration of contact between Roma and the speakers of those languages. The example of Turkish and Armenian loanwords serves

as an illustration, since Lory mentions the Turkish borrowings in Romani dialects (p. 135). According to Scala, the common Romani lexicon contains no definitive Arabic or Turkic loanwords, indicating that contact with these languages was either nonexistent or insignificant, due to geographical, sociolinguistic, or chronological factors. The lack of Turkic borrowings in the lexicon shared by all Romani dialects, together with the dating of Armenian loanwords to before the 11th century, implies that the Romani migrations through Asia took place before Turkic groups had settled in Iran and Armenia (Scala 2020, 91). The influence of Turkish on particular Romani dialects is unquestionable (Friedman 2020), but determining diachronic paths relies on shared, common vocabulary across Romani dialects. Furthermore, recent linguistic studies allow us to establish the presence of Roma in Armenia before the 11th century, based on “some phonetic evidence (notably the reflexes in Romani of the Arm. lateral / and of the occlusives and affricates) [which] suggests that contact between Romani and Armenian took place before the eleventh century and that Armenian loanwords were acquired from a variety of Armenian that is fully compatible with Old Armenian and with the modern eastern dialects of the Armenian continuum, but not with the western ones, spoken till the beginning of the twentieth century, in Eastern Anatolia” (Scala 2020, 100–101).

Overall, *Les Tsiganes des Balkans* (1280–1914) represents an important contribution to both Romani studies and Balkan historiography. Its value lies in the wide range of sources, drawn from multiple languages and translated into French, and in the author’s careful contextualization of each document. Lory positions

his work slightly outside the conventional academic framework, as he acknowledged in one of his interviews (available at: <https://regard-est.com/thinking-of-the-balkans-as-a-whole-interview-with-bernard-lory-historian-of-margins-and-mediation>). For students and scholars, the book underscores the importance of engaging directly with historical sources and re-examining long-standing assumptions. Moving away from common stereotypes, the book presents Roma as active participants in the economic, social, and cultural life of the Balkans over six centuries, offering a foundation for what may eventually become a comprehensive history of Roma in the Balkans.

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MIHAİLO VOJVODIĆ, *BALKANSKI RASPLET: OTPOR SRBIJE STRANIM INTERESIMA NA BALKANU (OD ANEKSIONE KRIZE DO VELIKOG RATA)*

[The Balkan Unraveling: Serbia's Resistance to Foreign Interests in the Balkans (from the Annexation Crisis to the Great War)].

Belgrade: Institute for Balkan Studies SASA, IP Clio, 2024, 238 p.

Reviewed by Đorđe M. Đurić*

In his book *Balkanski Rasplet* [The Balkan Unraveling], Mihailo Vojvodić, a member of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, examines Serbia's foreign policy during the turbulent period from the Annexation Crisis to the beginning of World War I. While working on publishing documents on Serbia's foreign policy from 1903 to 1914 within a multi-volume collection, the author drew on materials from domestic archives related to this period, which form the basis of this monograph. The book includes a preface,

introduction, nine chapters divided into subsections, and a conclusion.

In the introduction, the author briefly outlines the changes in Serbian foreign policy that occurred after the Congress of Berlin. In pursuing its national aspirations, Serbia no longer relied on Russia, as it had done before the Congress of Berlin, but on Austria-Hungary, a foreign policy shift confirmed by the signing of the Secret Convention in 1881.

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