



3.15

# Russian Roma

Ras'éjcy  
Central European  
part of Russia

Sibir'áki  
Siberia

Bóbry  
Southern regions  
of European  
Russia

III. 1  
Subgroups of  
Russian Roma

Kirill Kozhanov

Russian Roma are the largest and one of the oldest Romani ethnic groups in Russia. Since the arrival of their ancestors to the Russian Empire at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, they spread all over the vast territory of this country, splitting into two subdivisions: urban population working as musicians and singers, and nomadic population specializing in horse dealing and fortune telling. After the 1956 decree banning nomadism, Russian Roma settled down and started adapting to the new circumstances. Nowadays they are one of the most integrated Romani ethnic groups in Russia.

## INTRODUCTION

Russian Roma (also known as Xaladytka Roma in English-language literature) live on all the vast territory of Russia, both in the European part of the country and in Siberia. Nowadays members of this ethnic group also inhabit many former Soviet republics (primarily Ukraine and Kazakhstan). According to the 2010 census, the Romani population of Russia is estimated to approximately 205,000 people. One can speculate that Russian Roma must make up at least 50% of the entire Romani population in Russia, i.e. around 100,000 people.

The common endonym is *rúska romá* (lit. 'Russian Roma'). The term "Xaladytka Roma" is an exonym used by other Romani groups (e.g. Lithuanian or Latvian Roma) and not used by the Russian Roma themselves. The word *xaladó* means 'soldier' and it is used to describe Russians; it also has parallels in other languages of the region, cf. Pol. *moskal*; Ukr. *moskál'* (old meaning 'soldier') etc. Russian Roma speak a language closely related to Polish, Lithuanian, Latvian and Belarusian varieties of Romani, belonging to the Northeastern group of Romani dialects. However, all Russian Roma are at least bilingual, with Russian as their second language. Children under school age can sometimes show a relatively weak command of Russian. However, many Russian Roma families (especially living in large cities or coming from mixed marriages) are starting to use Russian at home more and more widely. There are families where children who speak Romani poorly or not at all.

## HISTORY

Judging by the language of Russian Roma, their ancestors spent some time in Germany and Poland before coming to the East Slavic territories. The existing sources start mentioning Roma

population on the territory of Russia since the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. For instance, the Scottish traveler John Bell writes about Roma people coming from Poland, sent away from the Tobolsk region in 1721.

Soon after their arrival in Russia, ancestors of Russian Roma became involved in entertainment, playing and singing at large celebrations. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Russian Roma living in large cities such as Moscow and Saint Petersburg started creating Romani choirs, which soon became very popular among the Russian urban population. Nomadic Russian Roma were engaged in horse dealing and fortune telling.

A drastic change in the life of nomadic Russian Roma took place in 1956 when a special decree issued by the Soviet government banned Roma from leading a nomadic life. Russian Roma had to start living in houses permanently, although they are still more mobile than non-Roma population and can easily change their place of residence. Nowadays Russian Roma often live dispersed, but they do tend to look for a house or flat in the area where other Roma are also present. Russian Roma prefer to live in private houses, but it is not uncommon for a Russian Romani family to live in a flat.

Russian Roma are also one of the most educated Romani groups in Russia. Many Russian Roma work as lawyers, doctors and teachers. The number of Russian Roma receiving university-level education is constantly growing.

Although Russian Roma still prefer to marry within the Romani community, cases of mixed marriages with non-Romani partners are quite numerous.

## SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Russian Roma, similarly to other Romani groups, split into several subgroups. The notion of kin or clans (*ródo*, *róda*, *privóda*, *privod'*), family or territorial subdivisions, plays a key role in

III. 2

A Russian Romni telling fortunes. Perm Oblast.

Photo by A. Chernykh (2004)



III. 3

A Russian Romani house. Leningrad Oblast.

Photo by K. Kozhanov (2011)



III. 4

Icon corner in a Russian Romani house. Perm Oblast.

Photo by D. Vaiman (2017)



the self-identification of Russian Roma. Certain subdivision names, such as *Ras'ejcy*, *Sibir'aki*, *Bóbry*, are well-known and affiliated with geographical areas: historically, *Ras'ejcy* lived in the central European part of Russia, *Bóbry* — in the southern regions of European Russia and *Sibir'aki* — in Siberia. At least some speakers tend to associate the ethnonym *ruska roma* with *Ras'ejcy*, thus opposing it to *Sibir'aki* or *Bóbry*. Most clans are spread throughout particular regions: *Muráški* (commonly in the Smolensk region), *Kantanisty* (the Novgorod region), *Fil'čónki* (the Leningrad region) etc.

Intra-community links are quite strong, but separate families live fairly independently from each other. Serious intra-community conflicts can be solved by calling for a community court (*séndo*). If a conflict involves members of other Romani groups, representatives of those groups can also participate in the court meeting. Traditionally, the decisions of the court were followed strictly, but in recent years some Roma avoid the rulings of the court, sometimes even appealing to the non-Romani court to solve their problem.

### PROFESSIONS

Russian Roma living in cities have traditionally been involved in entertainment. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Romani choirs consisting of male musicians and female singers and dancers grew in popularity in large Russian cities. Nomadic male Russian Roma have primarily been horse dealers. Female Russian Roma were fortune-tellers. Usually, the traveling group of Russian Roma (now referred to as *tábaro*, from Rus. *мáðop*) would stop and camp near villages. In the morning, the women would go to the village to tell fortune and beg for money and food. Men would wait for them to come back in the evening to cook the collected food and have the main meal of the day. Russian Romani men would buy and sell horses to the non-Romani population. The main place for dealing was a market (*tárgo*). A man who was able to sell horses with a good profit (such a person was called *kofári*) was highly respected.

Nowadays Russian Roma living in the countryside are often engaged in keeping and selling cattle. Traditional horse keeping has lost its demand, and now less and less Russian Roma deal with horses, sometimes having just one or two horses as a matter of habit or tradition.

The tradition of Romani musical groups is still alive. Many Russian Roma work as professional musicians, some participate in concerts in their free time. Many Russian Roma are involved with different types of commerce, for instance, buying and reselling used cars. Some women still tell fortunes, but usually privately and not on the street anymore.

### CLOTHES

Male Russian Roma wear clothes common among the non-Romani population. The more traditional male clothing included boots (*tyraxá*) and wide pants (*buhlé xolová*). In wintertime, men would wear fur-coats (*postýn*) tied over with a girdle (*kustýk*). An important part of a man's appearance would be a whip (*čupný* or *čukný*) placed behind the girdle or in the boots.

Traditionally, married women always covered their hair with a headscarf (*dykhló*). Young brides would sometimes tie the ends of the scarf right over the forehead (*zavojósa*). Nowadays hair covering among Russian Romani women is not strictly adhered to, usually only older women cover their hair in everyday life. Romani women always wore skirts (*indaráka*). This tradition is still adhered to, with Russian Romani women most commonly wearing long black skirts.

### DWELLINGS

As most Russian Roma were nomadic during the summer, traveling from one place to another in a carriage pulled by horses, they lived in tents. A tent (*šátra*) was constructed on four poles (*šóška*). Two front poles were crossed in the upper part, and another lower pole was placed in the back of the construction. The front and back poles were connected by another pole placed

III. 5

A traditional carriage used by Russian Roma. Smolensk Oblast.

Photo by K. Kozhanov (2016)



III. 6

A Russian Rom holding a horse's bridle. Novgorod Oblast.

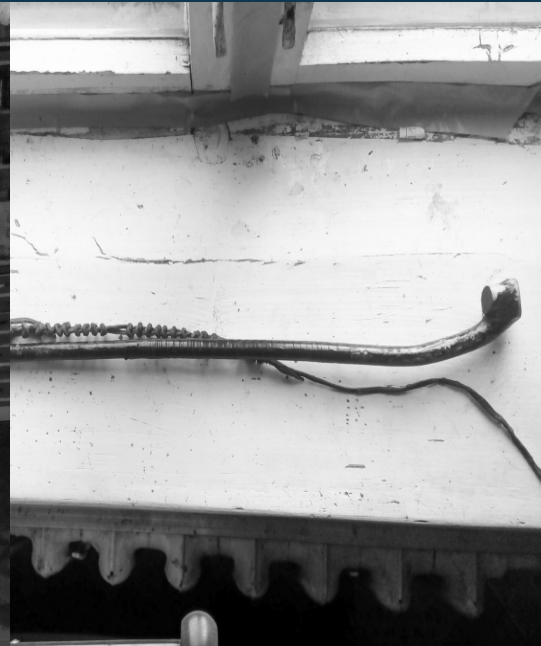
Photo by K. Kozhanov (2015)



III. 7

A traditional whip used by Russian Roma. Smolensk Oblast.

Photo by K. Kozhanov (2016)



horizontally on the top of the construction. A piece of cloth (in post-WWII years usually tarpaulin) was put on the construction, and tied with rope (*kros'á*) to the tent pegs (*kilé*). In order to protect the tent from the wind, additional pieces of cloth were attached to the sides of the tent (*krýly*) and the back of the tent (*palatumý*).

Inside the tent, *pológo*, a piece of thin fabric sewn as a cube, was made in order to protect people from insects, primarily mosquitoes. People would sleep on feather-beds (*pernýca*) with pillows (*šaranduný*).

The carriage was placed inside the tent in its back part. Clothes, utensils and food were usually kept on the carriage. Icons were tied to the back pole. The back part of the tent was considered "the cleanest". In wintertime, Russian Roma would hire houses in the villages from non-Roma. Usually, they did not pay for renting the houses but helped with various house related works: bringing wood in the winter or ploughing the gardens in the spring.

## FOOD

Russian Romani cuisine is the combination of long nomadic life and settled life in Russian cities and villages. East Slavic cuisine played a key role in this development.

When Russian Roma were still nomads, food was being cooked on fire. The main meal was usually served in the evening, when women would come back after fortune telling in the villages. The main ingredients used in the Russian Romani cuisine were the products women were able to collect while fortune telling, i.e. potatoes, eggs, bread, more rarely meat (chicken) etc.

In wintertime, when the Russian Roma lived in Russian houses, the food was cooked in Russian ovens.

A typical Russian Romani dish is *bársó*, soup with beet-root, potatoes and meat. In summertime, another type of soup cooked with sorrel (*šutlága*) was also popular. Russian Roma would often eat their meals with flatbread (*mariklý*).

As a specialty of Russian Romani cuisine, *fárba*, cooked pig or sheep blood with onions and sometimes potatoes, is often mentioned. The most important drink in the Russian Romani tradition is tea (*čájo*). Tea from the samovar used to be the first thing a guest would be offered. Even now, samovar tea is very much appreciated by Russian Roma.

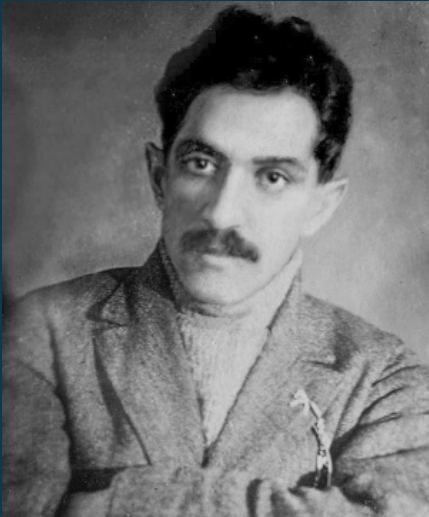
Some dishes were mostly related to certain celebrations. For instance, an important part of a festive Christmas meal is aspic (*šylaló*), a gelatin made from a meat stock. On Easter, Russian Roma cook large cakes (*patradí*) and dye eggs (traditionally with onion peels). Any celebration includes alcohol, the most popular kinds being vodka (*bravínta*) and beer (*béra, pívo*).

## HOLIDAYS

The main Orthodox holidays such as Christmas and Easter are the basis of Russian Romani festivities during the year. Both these celebrations required certain preparation: fasting, cleaning the house, cooking a festive meal. Russian Roma would also usually visit the church on these days.

Christmas, celebrated on January 7<sup>th</sup>, would open a cycle of winter celebrations, ending on the day of the Baptism of Jesus (January 19<sup>th</sup>). During this time (*svénta dyvesá*, lit. 'holy days') fortune-telling was especially popular. Girls would try to predict their future husband, for instance, by calling for him in front of a mirror with lit candles. Winter celebrations of Russian Roma have a lot in common with Eastern Slavic traditions.

There was an even longer period of preparation for the Easter celebration. An important day, preceding Easter itself, was Palm Sunday, when branches of pussy willow were brought to the church and blessed. These branches would later be kept in the icon corner of Russian Romani houses till the end of the year. The most important part of the week before Easter was Maundy Thursday when everything was washed in the house. Easter itself is the central celebration in the Russian Romani tradition. The entire family gathers at the festive table, an integral part of which are an Easter cake and dyed eggs.



III. 8  
Nikolay Pankov, 1934  
Photo from the Pankov family archive.

### III. 9 BIOGRAPHY OF NIKOLAY PANKOV

During 1920s and 1930s, the newly created state, the Soviet Union, showed unprecedented attempts to promote cultures of ethnic minorities. As a result, a few Romani activists worked with pure enthusiasm to develop literary tradition in Romani, to create Romani schools and a new Romani intelligentsia. Unfortunately, these attempts did not bring much results, as the Soviet policy changed in late 1930s. Life and career of the Romani activists often took a sad turn.

Nikolay Pankov was born into a Russian Romani family in 1895 in Saint Petersburg. His mother's relatives were highly respected members of St Petersburg musicians' circle, and his paternal side dealt with horses. After graduating his second year at school, he started working as an errand boy in the St Petersburg telegraph service, eventually moving to Moscow in 1920s. There he soon became a leading figure in the movement of Romani activists creating literary

Romani tradition in the Soviet Union and calling for a new life for the Roma people.

During 1920 and 1930s Pankov edited, translated and wrote original works in Standard Romani based on the language of Russian Roma. He was also a teacher in a Romani pedagogical college in Moscow. When the official Soviet policy regarding cultures of ethnic minorities drastically changed towards Russification in late 1930s, Pankov took it as a personal tragedy. He even expressed his worries in a letter addressed to Joseph Stalin, head of the Soviet government, but received no answer. During the WWII, Pankov worked as a guard in a warehouse in Moscow. Having little money to survive and working in harsh conditions, he became sick with tuberculosis.

Some years after the war, Pankov returned to his work on the Romani culture. In 1950s he worked on a new edition of Romani-Russian dictionary trying to bring together different specialists on Romani. Unfortunately, his death in 1959 stopped him from fulfilling his plans.

Commemoration of dead relatives is an integral part of Russian Romani festivities. *Rádunica*, second Tuesday after Easter, is an especially important day, when Russian Roma, as well as the non-Romani population, visit their relatives' tombs and bring dyed eggs.

### FOLKLORE AND DOCUMENTATION OF RUSSIAN ROMANI CULTURE

Russian Roma have a rich tradition of oral folklore. An essential part of it is traditional songs, popular not only with Russian Roma, but also other Romani groups in Russia. Fairy-tales are an important part of oral folklore, although nowadays this genre is quite rare.

The first sources on Russian Romani culture date back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but the true breakthrough was made in the

beginning of the 20th century, when V. Dobrovolsky published a series of fairy tales and stories collected from Russian Roma living in the Smolensk region. The first grammatical description of Russian Romani as spoken in Moscow appeared on the edge of the 20th century and was written by Pyotr Patkanov (Istomin), a guitar player and composer, closely affiliated with Roma choirs.

As a result of liberal ethnic minorities policy in the early Soviet Union, in 1926 a Romani language commission was created and led by the specialist on Romance languages, professor Maksim Sergiyevsky. The work of the commission and Roma activists resulted in more than 200 books published in a standardized version of Romani based on Russian Romani, a short grammatical description and a Romani-Russian dictionary.

A new wave of research on Russian Roma started in the late 1980s and continues, with such scholars as A. Rusakov, V. Shapoval, O. Abramenko, I. Makhotina, and K. Kozhanov.

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