

Project ABOLITIONISM

Project Description

The study of the Romanian abolitionism is important because it sheds light on the emancipation of Gypsies, a major legal and social process in the history of the Romanian principalities with major economic and demographic implications.

In Wallachia and Moldavia Gypsies had been slaves for five centuries. The emancipation of the approximately 250,000 Gypsies (about 7% of the total population) was carried out via a series of laws, each emancipating a particular category of Gypsy slaves: state Gypsies in 1843 in Wallachia and 1844 in Moldavia; monastery Gypsies in 1844 in Moldavia and 1847 in Wallachia; private Gypsies in December 1855 in Moldavia and February 1856 in Wallachia. Gypsy emancipation was part of the modernization of the Romanian principalities in the years preceding the foundation of modern Romania through the unification of Moldavia and Wallachia in January 1859. Abolition was a complex process that implied not only granting individual freedom, but also (at least in intent) the elimination of nomadism: sedentarization, acclimatization to farming and crafts, integration in rural and urban communities, and so on.

The abolition of slavery was to a great extent the result of the activity of the liberal intellectuals who put the issue of emancipation in the 1840s and 1850s as part of a wider agitation for the social and institutional reform of the country. The breadth of this initiative allows us to speak about a Romanian abolitionism. The abolitionists were primarily writers, journalists, teachers, lawyers, and others who had studied in the West, especially France, where they had been impressed by the liberal ideas they subsequently attempted to introduce back home. The abolitionists exerted their influence through political activity and also by mobilizing public opinion, achieving the most palpable influence on adoption of the laws of 1855 and 1856. With its first shoots appearing as early as the 1830s, the Romanian movement paralleled in some

ways abolitionist movements in the West.

This project anticipates comprehensive monographic research embracing all aspects of the subject. Based heavily on archival materials, the contemporary press, and also other contemporary publications, we plan a major reconceptualization of politics and cultural developments influencing the emergence of modern Romania. These were related to wider West-European and North-American movements, including abolitionism. Our research will not only cover a little studied topic, but will bring into circulation data and documentation that will be available to all students of nineteenth-century Romania for the first time.

Our research will examine Romanian abolitionism not only in the twin contexts of the longer history of slavery in Romania and in the Atlantic world, but also in the context of civil and political emancipation in modern Romania in general. An important component of Romania's modernization process was in fact emancipation of numerous population groups previously excluded from the full rights in the public sphere and even in some private spheres (various ethnic and/or national minorities, women, social groups such as peasants, who can be characterized as "underprivileged," as well as other groups too). In this sense modernization correlates to democratization, or perhaps more accurately "mass politics." In addition, the invasion of the public sphere into the private, the birth of "public opinion" and its influence on "popular" currents, and the (varying but widespread) belief in "evolution" and "progress" all shaped both elite and public attitudes toward those perceived as marginalized—and in particular attitudes on which of the marginalized to be integrated versus which should continue to be excluded.

We estimate that the project will lead to publications that are significant not only for the history of Romanian slavery and emancipation, but for all of Romania's modern history as well as for the study of slavery, abolitionism, and emancipation in Europe and the Americas.