

BUCHAREST DURING THE RUSSO-TURKISH WAR 1828-1829

Ana-Maria Lepăr *

Abstract. *This article presents the image of the Bucharest during the Russo-Turkish war 1828-1829. Compared to the Russo-Turkish war from 1806-1812, which was more documented in the Romanian historiography, the 1828-1829 conflict can be restored from the testimonies of foreign travelers, most of which are soldiers of the Russian army crossing the Romanian territory. The available information about Bucharest is related to the number of citizens, the general image of the city, the mixture of Eastern and Western influences, the merchandise that was being sold, the way that the population perceived the Russians, and the power games played by boyars who were seeking various benefits.*

Keywords: *Bucharest, 1829, Russo-Turkish War, Adrianopole.*

The year of 1828 introduces another episode in the Russo-Turkish series of conflicts, starting with April 26. This conflict is caused by the suspension of the Akkerman Convention and the Ottoman Empire's decision of closing the Bosphorus and Dardanelle straits. This measure was a direct result of the Turkish defeat in the Navarino battle that took place a year before the context of the Greek War of Independence.

Due to their geographic position, the Romanian Principalities came under the occupation of The Russian Empire which conducted parts of its military operations from there. Thus, 105,000 Russian soldiers cross the Prut River and occupy the two capitals at the beginning of May¹. Bucharest faces Russian occupation on May 12 1828, when the Russian army set camp in

* Ph. D. Student at the "Nicolae Iorga" History Institute Bucharest, amylepar@yahoo.com

¹ Giurescu, 2009, 263.

Colentina, two days later emerging into town². As expected, Prince Grigore Ghica leaves Wallachia, leaving the administration to Count Pahlen and the boyars.

The confrontations last more than a year, until 1829, when the Adrianople Treaty is signed. Within the Principalities, the Russian occupation persists, especially as the protectorate of the Tsar is acknowledged, the suzerainty of the Ottoman Empire is diminished, the rulers are chosen for life, and the Danubian thalweg becomes the border between the Sublime Porte and the Wallachia³.

Compared to the Russo-Turkish war from 1806-1812, which was more documented in the Romanian historiography, the 1828-1829 conflict can be restored from the testimonies of foreign travelers, most of which are soldiers of the Russian army crossing the Romanian territory.

The available information about Bucharest is related to the number of citizens, the general image of the city, the mixture of Eastern and Western influences, the merchandise that was being sold, the way that the population perceived the Russians, and the power games played by boyars who were seeking various benefits.

According to the estimates made by some of the travelers, among whom was the Russian officer Frederik Nyberg, active participant in the war, Bucharest had 80,000 citizens. The overall image resembled an “extraordinary mixture between Europe and Asia”⁴, due to the mixture of nationalities: Russian, German, French, Italian, Turkish, Greek (in small numbers, as most have died in the carnage made by Chehaia-Beiu in the Autumn of 1821), and Jewish, due to the mixture of Asian and European architecture styles, and the mixture of Eastern and Western products available in shops.

Another unusual aspect for a foreigner was the presence of books and newspapers in Western languages, especially since the education level of the population was low. Carriage rides through the gardens of the city, after 6 in the evening, where everyone displayed their best garments, represented the only form of

² Giurescu, 2009, 263.

³ Xenopol, 1930, 79-81.

⁴ Cernovodeanu, Bușă, 2005, 359.

entertainment for the inhabitants during the war. The Viennese provenance of the carriages enhanced the Western atmosphere⁵.

Berndt Johan Rosenström, a participant of the Russian-Turkish war, in the Uhlan regiment of Courland, presents a few aspects related to the conduct of hostilities. His testimonies also contain information about Bucharest. The Russian army was fair to the occupied inhabitants, as they were treated well and received financial compensation for the supplying of the soldiers.

Those who were seen as enemies were the Turks, stationed in a garrison in Bucharest, with the purpose to set fire to the city. This news determined the regiment to which Rosenström belonged to go to the capital, in order to foil the plans of the Ottomans, who, after being warned, left the establishment. Uhlans were received as liberators, being “acclaimed with joy by the inhabitants”⁶. Moreover, for preventing the destruction of the city, the Uhlans received “everything free of charge”⁷.

Apart from this episode, strictly correlated with the development of the war, the soldier also mentions aspects related to daily life. According to his testimonies, the clothing was not expensive and the Ottoman influences still persisted, because, despite belonging to the Orthodox faith, most of the people in Bucharest were wearing Oriental clothing.

Rosenström also captures the end of the war when, in 1829, he returns triumphant to Bucharest, marching as if on a parade: the Russian generals are escorted by Albanian mercenaries (*arnăuți*) “mounted on small and beautiful horses”⁸. They are received with joy by the citizens, and most enthusiastically by Romanian women, who were staying in the front rows, welcoming the victors.

On this occasion, Rosenström performs a new review of Bucharest, which was hosting, according to his estimates, about 50,000 inhabitants, a quite large number considering that, in 1828, a plague outbreak ravaged the city. As expected, the general aspect of the city could not have changed in a year, maintaining

⁵ Cernovodeanu, Bușă, 2005, 359.

⁶ Cernovodeanu, Bușă, 2005, 381.

⁷ Cernovodeanu, Bușă, 2005, 381.

⁸ Cernovodeanu, Bușă, 2005, 383.

the same Turkish characteristics, with the winding and narrow streets and the Oriental costumes⁹.

Similarly, according to the description of the Russian military writer Alexandru Ivanovici Mikhailovski-Danilevski, a participant in the 1828-1829 war, Bucharest “is not a European city, the streets are narrow and dirty”¹⁰, populated by people with Asian features, speaking a language unknown to him.

Danilevski takes notice of the boyars, well known for their lack of activity, spending their “lives in idleness and sloth. They neither work, nor study sciences, they start and end their lives on soft couches, surrounded by clouds of tobacco smoke. The monotony of their "lives is interrupted only by the occasional wars between Russia and the Ottoman Porte”¹¹. On this occasion, a competition starts between boyars for various administrative positions and alliances are made and broken. The alliances involved external supporters, the Russians being the most wanted, as they were not connected to the Ottoman administration that still named the Prince, and, indirectly, all the clerks. The Russians took advantage of this game of alliances formed between boyars, as they received various “favors and services”¹², which diminished the expenses for the supply of the army.

This is also reflected in a document dated on November 11, 1828, which presents how the Stewards Gheorghe Golescu and Alexandru Nenciulescu are named by the Divan to take care of “supplying the army” in exchange for some benefits¹³. They were hoping for a new position in the committee led by Count Minciaky, whose purpose was, officially, limiting abuses, but, in fact, it was the enlargement of the Tsarist authority.

The Divan had also gotten involved in building horse mills in every monastery to fulfill the food requirements of the population and of the Tsarist army. The decision was determined by the water level decrease of river Dâmbovița and by the arrival of winter, affecting multiple ecclesiastic centers such as Radu-

⁹ Cernovodeanu, Bușă, 2005, 383.

¹⁰ Cernovodeanu, Bușă, 2005, 410.

¹¹ Cernovodeanu, Bușă, 2005, 410.

¹² Cernovodeanu, Bușă, 2005, 410.

¹³ Potra, 1975, 328.

Vodă, Sf Spridion-Vechi, Sf Ecaterina, Sf Krețulescu, Sărindari, Sf Gheorghe, Sf Apostili, Cotroceni, Văcărești, Mărcuța¹⁴.

Among the measures taken to sustain the war was also the closing of schools, already few in number and with an irregular schedule, and turning them into hospitals to treat the Russians that were wounded on the battle field. The medical personnel was not qualified, any person being able to participate; most of the participants were seeking financial gain¹⁵. The lack of spaces for tending to the wounded or for quartering soldiers determined the expansion of the decision towards ruined buildings, which were rebuilt¹⁶.

Danilevski has captured the time when the plague was ravaging the city, thus access to the boyars' houses was restricted. In the beginning, the plague was kept secret, so as not to demoralize soldiers. Thus, false testimonies, attributed to physicians, were written, among whom was also the chief physician of the army, professor Witt, who, on February 21, 1829, noted: "I, during my stay and practice here, have not seen, nor had the occasion of treating someone affected by the plague; I've seen, however, and tended to people affected by typhus and similar diseases"¹⁷. Although the epidemic had not been declared officially, there were a few measures taken in that regard: removing beggars from the streets, as they were considered to be contagious¹⁸.

Apart from the medical aspects, Danilevski shows an interest regarding the cultural-educational aspects, because, just as Frederik Nyberg, he notices the variety of books, many of which had been banned in Russia: *Mémoires de Michael Oginski*, *Las Cases*, *Mémorial de Sainte Helene*, *Mémoires d'un homme d'Etat*¹⁹. The existence of this literary freedom is justified by the lack of involvement by the leading class in controlling the population, which was caused by the idleness of the boyars and by their interest for politics.

¹⁴ Olteanu, 2002, 132.

¹⁵ Samarin, 1938, 195.

¹⁶ Iorga, 2008, 201-202.

¹⁷ Samarin, 1938, 96.

¹⁸ Samarin, 1938, 40.

¹⁹ Cernovodeanu, Bușă, 2005, 410.

The image of a green city, surrounded by wine yards and plains, is presented by P.D. Holthaus, a tailor from Westphalia that had gone to the Middle-East to become rich. He passes through the Romanian Principalities during the Russian-Turkish war of 1828-1829. The contrast between proximity and distance is astonishing to the traveler, the city not being what it seems: the streets are narrow, dirty, unpaved, covered with logs, under which there are drains that collected garbage – a source of disease; the houses are small, made of wood, low and shattered. All this presents the image of a settlement that is insalubrious, disorganized and poor²⁰.

According to Holthaus, the capital is 9 miles in length and has many slums, being split by Dâmbovița, both a symmetry axis and a source for water supply. Unfortunately, this water is not as clean as it should be, since all the dead animals are thrown in it. As a consequence, instead of having a purifying role, the water becomes a source of infection and disease for the population. Water is sold in barrels without being purified, at prices that vary each season, from 20 Para during summer to 2 silver Grosh in the winter²¹.

The most shocking fact is the large amount of Orthodox churches, most of them having three towers, low ceilings and paintings of saints on the walls²². The Metropolis captures the attention of Holthaus through its exquisite painting, depicting the Last Judgement. He notices that the bells now have a diminished role (only to announce peril), as decided by the Turks. Holthaus also makes mistakes, believing that church Colțea is Swedish. There was, in fact, a Colțea tower (almost destroyed by the 1802 earthquake), which, according to the tradition, had been built by the Swedish troops defeated at Poltava in 1709²³.

Another building that catches the eye of Holthaus is the Old Princely Court, which he considers “a fairly beautiful palace”²⁴. On this occasion, he expresses his opinion of the boyars, which is not different from the opinions of the previously mentioned travelers: the lack of education, of a code of conduct,

²⁰ Cernovodeanu, Bușă, 2005, 440.

²¹ Cernovodeanu, Bușă, 2005, 441.

²² Cernovodeanu, Bușă, 2005, 440.

²³ Cernovodeanu, Bușă, 2005, 440.

²⁴ Cernovodeanu, Bușă, 2005, 441.

the mixture of German and “Oriental behaviors”²⁵, the luxurious life. The ones who are the most willing to express this luxury are the wives, who spend large amounts of money to acquire modern garments and accessories. At the same time, they are more receptive to novelty, so they are less ignorant than their husbands, also showing interest in foreign culture, especially French culture. Their interest, of course, is superficial, only seeking to impress instead of learning something well.

During the ten months spent in Bucharest, the main attraction point for Holthaus was the German street, where he spent the “day after the German rite and almost all night in the cheerful sound of wine glasses”²⁶, in hospitable company. The price of wine was very low, due to the significant number of wine yards that surrounded the city.

By making an overall analysis of the events that occurred within the Principalities during this conflict and of the decisions made by Tsar Nicholas I, it can be said that the relationship of the Principalities with Russia has taken a new direction, one in which Russia is actively involved in the destiny of the Principalities.

By comparing the testimonies of the previously mentioned travelers, we can notice that they are impressed by the “green city”, as it seems from the distance, however, once they get near, the travelers see the filth, the poverty, and the Oriental atmosphere, unexpected to some. The streets maintain the same characteristics that they had at the dawning of the century: narrow, having drains underneath, and covered with logs. The clothing of the inhabitants also plays an important role in the construction of this image. Although it suffers a few modifications compared to 1812, the clothing style remains Oriental. The ones who are able to stand out are the boyars and their wives, who taste the luxury of modernization and can afford Western-style garments.

Another common problem that the travelers note is the lack of hygiene, a factor that causes epidemics. The sanitary system is poor and the number of hospitals is low, having insufficient personnel. This is why, during the war, some buildings that are relatively spacious (such as schools) are used as hospitals and people who are willing to help work as medical

²⁵ Cernovodeanu, Bușă, 2005, 441.

²⁶ Cernovodeanu, Bușă, 2005, 439.

personnel. The intent is praiseworthy, since even in a time of war, the people who become involved receive financial compensation. However, few people are willing to be useful and help the diseased; most of the applicants do not have special knowledge and are only concerned with their personal gain.

The boyars also leave a bad impression, through their opportunism and lack of education. They are raised in an Oriental system, only seeking high positions and privileges, without being morally involved in the decisions that they make – which, eventually, mark the future of the community that they belong to.

Mentally, one can notice a liking for the Russians, who were perceived as liberators and modernizers. This vision is somewhat predictable, as their opposition to the Turks determines the inhabitants to perceive the enemy of the enemy as their friend. Although the actions taken by the Russians have the purpose of integrating the Principalities into the Tsarist sphere of influence, at first they are perceived as positive due to the novelty and organization that they bring.

Shorter in development, the war of 1828-1829 has had a smaller impact on the city, not requiring extreme measures, thus there is no evidence about new taxes, nor about an opposition to quartering from the population.

References

Cernovodeanu, Paul, Bușă, Daniela (coord.), *Călători străini despre Țările Române în secolul al XIX-lea*, serie nouă, vol II. București: Editura Academiei Române, 2005.

Giurescu, Constantin C., *Istoria Bucureștilor*. București: Editura Vremea, 2009.

Iorga, Nicolae, *Istoria Bucureștilor*. Ed. a 2-a. București: Editura Vremea, 2008.

Olteanu, Radu, *Bucureștii în date și întâmplări*. București: Editura Paideia, 2002.

Potra, George, *Documente privitoare la istoria orașului București 1800-1848*. București: Editura Academiei Republicii Socialiste România, 1975, doc. 238, p. 328-329.

Samarian, dr. Pompei Gh., *Medicina și farmacia în trecutul românesc*, vol III. București: Tipografia Cultura, 1938.

Xenopol, A.D., *Istoria românilor*, Ed a 3-a, vol XI. București: Editura „Cartea Românească”, 1930.