

THE TRAGEDY OF THE ROMANIANS IN 1812, A PREMEDITATED ACT

Corneliu-Mihail LUNGU*

Abstract. The present study deals with the tragedy undergone by the Romanians in 1812, which was by no means a random occurrence. On the contrary, it can be considered the result of a long expansionist policy of Tsarist Russia. The severance from Moldavia of the territory between the Dniester and the Prut rivers was also due to the tolerant attitude of the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires combined with the compromises made by other great powers such as France, England and Prussia.

Keywords: Romanian Principalities, Russia, the great powers, The Eastern Issue, Russo-Turkish War, the Ottoman Porte, Austria, France

The tragedy lived by the Romanians in 1812 was not a random occurrence, was not due to the complex events of those times and cannot be considered the immediate consequence of the Russo-Turkish War started in 1806. It was rather the result of the long-standing policy carried out by the empires surrounding the Romanian Principalities: Habsburg, Tsarist and Ottoman. Unfortunately, the act of territorial rapine of 1812, neither the first nor the last in the Romanians' history, was made possible by the contribution of other great powers such as France and England, which were trying to reach their political objectives by making compromises and agreements in favour of Austria and Russia, thus sacrificing the territorial integrity of the Danubian Principalities.

What is much more tragic – in our opinion – is that the ordeal the Romanians went through occurred despite the existence of several agreements and treaties, signed and sealed by the very great powers, which acknowledged the existence, territorial extent and autonomy of Moldavia, Wallachia connected with Transylvania by kinship relationships.

In order to prove such realities and avoid going back too far in history, we deem it sufficient to return only a century ago and start with the times of Peter I and the Treaty signed by the Tsar and Dimitrie Cantemir, Prince of Moldavia, on April 13th, 1711. The first one, which cannot rule out Peter I's goal, became a political testament for his descendents to make Russia control the mouths of the Danube, turn the Black Sea into a "Russian lake" and penetrate further towards

* Correspondent Member of Academy of Romanian Scientists.

the Orient through the straits that had caused so many confrontations, debates and even armed conflicts in history.

Such an objective could only have been reached by annexing to the Tsarist Empire the territories stretching at the mouths of the Danube, along the large Delta of the great river, which allowed the access to the Black Sea. From these points of view, not only Moldavia, but also Wallachia offered strategic possibilities to Tsarist Russia, providing direct access to the maritime basin.

It is precisely why the two Principalities were constantly part of the political and military prospects of the Tsarist Empire. Such obvious intentions, that had become realities, did not prevent the Russian authorities from assuring the Romanian Principalities that they would respect their boundaries and territories.

A first document we have used to demonstrate our assertions is the above-mentioned Treaty in which article XI stipulated that: “The Principality of Moldavia, according to its ancient rights, is bordered by the Dniester river, Camenița, Bender, the entire territory of Budjak, the Danube, Wallachia, the Grand Duchy of Transylvania and the territory of Poland”¹. Following a thorough analysis, it should be noted that Russia acknowledged not only the extent of the Moldavian territory but also the long existence of the Principality with its long-lasting historic past.

In the same context, Article XVI of the Treaty is also worth mentioning. According to it, both Peter I and “the descendents of Our Imperial Highness shall forever guard these pacts and shall treasure and keep them untouched and shall strengthen them”².

Despite its commitments, Russia was to open the saga of expansion which targeted well-defined coordinates in southeastern Europe and the Balkan Peninsula wherein the Romanian Principalities presented special strategic importance.

In addition to the promises made by the great powers and the official engagements stipulated in various treaties and accords of the time, the Romanian countries benefited by the so-called **Capitulations**, or **Ahidname** in the Turkish version³, documents which stipulated the political administrative autonomy of the Principalities and vassalage to the Ottoman Porte. Regrettably, throughout the centuries, such special treaties which certified the fact that the Romanian Principalities were distinct territories from the High Porte were not completely complied with. Especially following the conflicts arisen between the Tsarist and

¹ Iulian Cârțână, Eduardt Samoilă, *Geopolitica Dunării. Dunărea în relațiile internaționale*, Edit. Transversal, Târgoviște, 2010, p. 156.

² *Ibidem*.

³ Stan Apostol, *Protectoratul Rusiei asupra Principatelor Române. 1774-1856*, Edit. Saeculum I.O., București, 1999, p. 10.

the Habsburg empires and the Ottoman Porte was the autonomy of the Principalities put through difficult situations. From this point of view, it is significant that, of all the Russo-Turkish armed confrontations unfolding in the 18th century, more than twenty took place on Moldavian land.

With the passing of time, although documents such as the Capitulations (ahidname) no longer recorded the rights acknowledged by the Ottoman Porte, they were to be mentioned in other legal acts such as the **Hatti-sherifs** and the **Berâts**¹.

We have considered that, in order to show how the three empires made an attempt on the Principalities' autonomy and, at the same time, to illustrate how superficially they treated their own decisions, the Russo-Turkish war, which broke out in 1768 and concluded with the Treaty of Kuchuk-Kainarji in summer 1774, is clarifying in this sense. It is one of the provisions of the peace treaty, namely that which established that Russia should withdraw its troops from Moldavia over the left bank of the Dniester, that the Habsburg Empire was to take advantage of when laying claims to the north of the Romanian Principality, appealing to unsubstantiated arguments and defying historical reality. In 1772, Austria had taken possession of a part of Poland (Pokuttia and Galicia), therefore it considered it was time to expand its domination over northern Moldavia as well, on the grounds that, years before, this territory had been part of Pokuttia and this particular area would have provided a direct connection with Galicia. Going even further, the Habsburg Empire managed to receive the approval of the Ottoman Porte to annex Northern Moldavia, which was established by the Constantinople Convention signed on May 7th, 1775².

The unjust decisions made by the great powers disregarding the will of the Principality made Nicolae Iorga conclude that, following the Kuchuk-Kainarji peace: "Moldavia paid for the acknowledgment of its rights by submitting to Russia and greedy Austria, which had failed to obtain its much desired former possession, Oltenia, its northern provinces with the old capital Suceava, the tomb of Ștefan cel Mare and the proud free peasants of Câmpulung"³.

Indeed, any researcher eager to conduct his or her investigations and analysis of phenomena towards and in terms of the historical truth raises the issue of the legal value of the Constantinople Convention and even of the measures established by the peace of July 1774. As a matter of fact, one can rather speak about their legal nullity considering that the Ottoman Porte had given in a territory

¹ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

² Viorica Moisuc, *Istoria relațiilor internaționale (până la mijlocul secolului al-XX-lea)*, Edit. „Fundăției România de Măine”, București, 2007, p. 43.

³ Nicolae Iorga, *Istoria relațiilor române, antologie*, ediție îngrijită de Florin Rotaru, Edit. „Semne”, București, 1995, p. 225.

not in its possession, and, according to its obligations stipulated in **ahidname**, it was supposed to protect Moldavia, and Wallachia for that matter, from the bellicose intentions of Russia and Austria.

Unfortunately, such concessions and compromises were to recur with serious repercussions on the Romanian Principalities, especially since the end of the 18th century brought about a deterioration of the situation in the south-east of the continent against the background of increased contradictions among the great powers. Moreover, Russia would seek, with its distinctive perseverance, to resume its old expansionist plans, and mainly to advance towards Moldavia and even Wallachia.

Thus, in June 1780, an envoy of Tsarist Russia, Serghei Lascarov, was sent to Constantinople to obtain, from the Porte, his acknowledgment as consul of the great eastern power in Moldavia, Wallachia and Bessarabia. The Turks' reaction can be grasped from a conversation between the ambassador of France and an official of Constantinople who, declining the proposal, stated that the acknowledgment of Serghei Lascarov as consul would have meant a renunciation of the rights of the Porte over the Principalities¹.

Alongside this remark we simply cannot overlook, we consider it necessary to draw the attention on a previous consideration of ours on which historical research, particularly the current one, should focus more. And that is a stratagem of Tsarist Russia, to which it appealed on many other occasions, namely the presentation of another province, **Bessarabia**, as separate from Moldavia and Wallachia, as if it had never been part of the historical Moldavian territory.

That was a cheap diversion which went on throughout the history and which was resorted to on several occasions, and even today, when claims are, unfortunately, different, it is still among the "means that justify the end which must be reached".

Growing interest of the ambitious tsarina Catherine II in the Danubian Principalities was also nourished by Petersburg's increasingly obvious fear that in a not too distant future Moldavia and Wallachia would end up under Austria's trust.

All these political manoeuvres were well known by the king of Prussia himself who, in April 1783, remarked that Russia was expected to appropriate "by the force of armies **the entire Moldavia, a part of which the High Porte would not have been far to submit** (author's emphasis) had Austria not preferred a piece of Wallachia"².

The events unfolded in 1787-1791 and, particularly, the armed Russo-Turkish confrontations and Austria's machinations enabled Russia to accomplish

¹ Nicolae Iorga, *op. cit.*, p. 229-230.

² *Ibidem*, p. 231.

some of its plans. The presence of foreign armies in the Principalities and, most of all, the raids of the Tsarist troops led by Potemkin who had practically settled in Iași by 1790 made Nicolae Iorga conclude that the occupiers' goal was to "turn the entire Romanian land stretching from Khotyn to Orșova into a province of the Emperor"¹.

An important Prussian minister, Hertzberg, made a highly valid remark stating, in his turn, that "Prince Potemkin has hopes to become sovereign of Moldavia and Wallachia, which would not serve the interest of any of the powers involved, but his own. Therefore, he will be supported by none of them"². If, at the beginning, these were merely rumours, in December 1789 they began to take shape following Catherine II's proposal regarding "the formation of a free independent state comprising Bessarabia, Moldavia and Wallachia ruled by an Orthodox prince"³.

Well aware of these realities, the king of Prussia took into account and even formulated the possibility that the new state should be ruled by prince Constantine, which would have nourished the hope, nurtured ever since Peter I's times, that one day they should reach Constantinople, the next step being "the throne of Byzantium"⁴.

With a view to reaching such goals, it is not difficult to conclude that, for Russia – despite reassurances and benevolent affirmations – Moldavia could not have been an obstacle on the way.

If one were to go back in time tracing the evolution of Russia's tendencies and its specific methods, one would notice that the same happened in 1828-1829, 1848-1849, 1856, 1877, 1918-1919, 1940 and even nowadays when the so-called Republic between the Prut and the Dniester is being harassed by the East and threatened by pro-Russian mini-satellites such as Transnistria.

Machinations and compromises of the three empires, later joined by Prussia, had direct repercussions on the destiny of the Danubian Principalities. First, the Russo-Turkish conflict worsened, the High Porte denouncing the Russian consuls' behaviour and, consequently, asking for their replacement, a demand not approved, and thus the armed confrontation became imminent. Although Austria sought to keep a certain reservation regarding the outbreak of the conflict, it had to intervene, about half a year later, as a result of message exchanges and agreements between the empress of Russia and Joseph II.

The circumstances would prompt Catherine II to agree to the expansion of Austria in Bosnia and Oltenia, which would suggest to the Prussian king that: "the

¹ *Ibidem*, p. 235.

² *Ibidem*.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 236.

time has come to support its minister, Hertzberg, to achieve his plan regarding the ‘issue of the Principalities towards Austria’¹.

It was becoming increasingly obvious that Russia’s grand purpose to have a direct border on the Danube with its old Ottoman rival was difficult to reach and thus had to settle for a boundary on the Siret, the Prut or just the Dniester, especially now that the Galați truce with the High Porte had been signed on August 11th, 1791².

Only five months later, on January 9th, 1792, the two empires concluded the peace treaty of Iași which stipulated that the territory bounded by the Bug and Dniester rivers remained annexed to Russia, the frontier with Moldavia being established on the Dniester. It was a great step towards reaching the political goal, but the utmost limit was still far.

At the time, Tsarist Russia was forced to content itself with incorporating only a piece of the old historical province, and soon after that, numerous emigrants, “many of which Polish fugitives”³, were colonized in the “New Moldavia” between the Bug and the Dniester.

The expansion of the Tsarist Empire defined by Nicolae Iorga as “incessant policy of appetite for possession which represents one of the main directions of Russia’s history”⁴, could not have stopped on the Dniester. Russia was doing what it had always done throughout its history, which is waiting for the right moment or the favourable circumstances to put its plans into practice.

The late 18th century and early 19th century, marked by the outcomes of the French Revolution, found Russia with other preoccupations which prompted it to place the Romanian Principalities on a different agenda, though without letting them slip from its sight or giving up “protecting” them.

The favourable moment arisen in 1805 stands proof of this. The Ottoman Porte supposedly accepted the renewal of the 1789 and 1799 Conventions signed with Russia and England against Napoleon. This put the issue of Russian imperial troops passing through the Danubian Principalities. The hostilities between the Turks and Austria, in addition to the rumours regarding a possible accord between France and the Habsburgs, delayed the resumption of Tsarist plans for a short time⁵. Nevertheless, in early 1806, following France’s actions and Austria’s demarches, Russian imperial authorities took into account the possibility of occupying the Principalities, a measure justified with counteracting a potential attack of the Porte.

¹ *Ibidem*, p. 232.

² *Ibidem*, p. 236.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 237.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 239.

The Eastern Issue and outbreak of a new Russo-Turkish war offered pretexts for action to the Tsarist Empire, resulting in the imperial troops' penetrating into the Romanian Principalities. Notwithstanding the revival of an idea approved by Catherine II regarding the formation of a kingdom of the Dacians ruled by Grand Duke Constantine, European diplomatic circles shared the conviction that Russia wanted to annex the Romanian Countries and Napoleon I himself had been drawn in these project.

Certainly, all these assumptions became certainties after the Treaty concluded between France and Russia, on July 7th, 1807, in Tilsit, when Russia voiced its real intentions regarding the Principalities. As a matter of fact, about a year later, on October 12th, 1808, the two emperors would renew the initial agreement and the new secret document stated that "His Majesty, Emperor Napoleon, recognizes the unification of Wallachia and Moldavia and the borders of the Russian Empire on this side as far as the Danube"¹.

Even if we were to accept the idea that Napoleon had attempted a strategic coup in order to deceive Russia's vigilance and hide France's real intentions, we could not accept any justification for the betrayal of a great power which left two Romanian Principalities at the mercy of greedy Russia. As a matter of fact, what distinguishes this betrayal from that of 1872, at Reichstadt, when Germany and Austro-Hungary gave Russia a free hand to tear the three southern districts: Cahul, Bolgrad and Izmail from the Moldavian body and, last but not least, what is different about Germany's betrayal in 1939, when it accepted Soviet Russia's claims to the province of Bessarabia?

Returning in time again, all we are left with is asserting that history repeats itself and the policy of the great powers is just as perfidious, whatever the time, only the methods used are improved and refined each and every time.

What with the increasingly complicated events occurring in Europe and worsening of contradictions among the great powers, Russia announced, formally indeed, as far as May 1810, the annexation of the two Principalities, followed by the withdrawal of its consuls from their posts.

Things would not just stop here for, that same year, Petersburg demanded the High Porte to acknowledge that: "the Principalities of Moldavia, Greater and Lesser Wallachia (Muntenia and Oltenia) and Bessarabia are annexed by the peace treaty to the Russian Empire along with their towns, cities, villages, their inhabitants of both sexes and their belongings, and the Danube River shall from now on be the border between the two empires"².

Fortunately, this new overt breach of the treaties concluded by the Romanian Principalities, mainly with the Porte, as well as the demonstration of force attempted did not end as Russia had wished.

¹ *Ibidem*, p. 243.

² Viorica Moisuc, *op. cit.*, p. 43-44.

The long Russo-Turkish negotiations, which lasted from October 1811 until spring of 1812, concluded with the Peace Treaty of May 16/28, 1812, signed in Bucharest. Although Russia's plans had not been completely fulfilled, it still managed to lay hold of Moldavia as far as the Prut river and to gain the boroughs of Chilia and Cetatea Albă together with a part of the Danube Delta, having thus access to the Black Sea.

The Romanians' tragedy of 1812 was primarily due to the long-lasting and obsessive Russian policy but it also occurred, to a great extent, because of the tolerant attitude, concessions and compromises made by the other great powers.