

A SUCCESSFUL HABSBURG EXPERIMENT. THE MILITARIZATION OF THE BORDER BETWEEN AUSTRIA AND TURKEY

Nicolae BOCȘAN*

Abstract. The defeat of the Turks at the siege of Vienna sparked the campaign waged by the Habsburg Empire for the *Reconquista* of the territories occupied by the Ottomans. The gradual ousting of the Ottomans from the territories in Hungary, Serbia, the Banat and Transylvania shifted the boundaries of the Empire to these places. The Austrian-Turkish wars and the peace treaties that accompanied them changed the boundaries, which were to stabilize after the Peace of Belgrade. In the liberated territories, the emperors of the House of Habsburg colonized Christians from the Balkans, refugees because of the Turks, and used them primarily for military purposes. To strengthen Austria's border with Turkey, important parts of the border territory were militarized, under the direct leadership of the Aulic War Council. To this end, the Slavonic, Croatian, Banat, Tisza-Mureș military borders were created. Border guards became free men and enjoyed a higher social status than those in the civil province. The institution of the military border was efficient because it relied on its own resources and offered an armed force that proved very useful in the wars Austria waged in the 18th and the 19th centuries.

Keywords: the Slavonic military border, the Croatian military border, the Banatian military border, the Transylvanian military border, the Tisza-Mureș border, the House of Habsburg.

Border territories have always enjoyed a special status because borders represented, especially in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period, a fluid reality, with more or less extensive periodical modifications. After the siege of Vienna in 1683, the border between the Habsburg Empire and the Ottoman Porte was in constant motion, as the *Reconquista* of the territories in Central or South-Eastern Europe advanced.¹ Even before 1683, the Habsburgs had been faced with

* PhD., „Babeș-Bolyai” University, Cluj-Napoca. Associate member of Academy of Romanian Scientist.

¹ For the history of the Austrian military frontier, see: Carl Bernhard Edlen von Hietzinger, *Statistik der Militärgrenze des Österreichischen keiserthums*, Wien, 1817; J.H. Benigni, *Statistische Skizze des Siebenbürgischen Militärgrenze*, Sibiu, 1834; George Bariț, *Istoria Regimentului al II-lea românesc grănițiar din Transilvania*, Brașov, 1874; Fr. Vanicek,

the threat of Ottoman expansion towards the borders of the empire and were forced to take special measures to secure the borders with the Turks. After the battle of Mohacs, many refugees from Serbia settled in Slavonia. The House of Habsburg proceeded to the militarization of the territory along the frontier, offering the recently settled populations a series of privileges, in exchange for military service, on 5 September 1538. These settlers formed three border captaincies, establishing the Slavonic border. In 1540, a new military district was established in Croatia and it endowed with privileges in 1544, the Croatian military border being created thus. Populated through new colonizations of the former Ottoman territories, the border units received new privileges from Emperor Ferdinand I in 1564. The year 1597 saw the establishment of the Kulpa or Petrinja military *confinium* (border region), headed by the Ban of Croatia, who was appointed Supreme Captain thereof in 1696. Thus, it became an independent Banatian border region, known as the *Banial* or *Banalist Confinium*.

On 5 October 1630, the border guards' status was regulated by the *Statua et privilegia in generalatu Varasdinensi*, a status subsequently extended to all militarized regions. After this regulation, the two military border regions received the name of generalates, of Varasdin and of Karlstad. They were divided into proto-captaincies, captaincies, companies of hussars and voivodates. A new attempt to reorganize the border occurred in 1737, when another statute was published in Krizevci, first applied in the Generalate of Varasdin and then, from 1746 on, in the Generalate of Karlstad. After the Austrian-Turkish war of 1737-

Specialgeschichte der Militärgrenze, Vienna, 1875; Szádeczky Lajos, *A székelly határőrség szervezése 1762–1764*, Budapest, 1908; Virgil Șotropa, “Înființarea graniței năsăudene (1762),” in *Arhiva someșană*, 1939, no. 24, pp. 1-129; no. 25, pp. 261-273; Emil Micu, *Contribuțiuni la istoricul Regimentului grăniceresc întâi valah*, București, 1943; Amstadt Jakob, *Die k.k. Militärgrenze 1552-1881*, Würzburg, 1969; Carol Göllner, *Regimentele grănicerești din Transilvania (1764-1851)*, București, Editura Militară, 1973; Bujor Surdu, “Granița turco-austriacă din Banat în secolul al XVIII-lea,” in *Anuarul Institutului de Istorie din Cluj*, 1969, XII, pp. 267-276; A. Dolga, “Condițiile înființării regimentelor grănicerești în Banat,” in *Studii de istorie a Banatului*, 1976, pp. 45-56; Antoniu Marchescu, *Grănicerii bănățeni și comunitatea de avere. Contribuții istorice și juridice*, Caransebeș, 1941; Liviu Groza, *Grănicerii bănățeni. Pagini din cronica Regimentului de grăniceri din Caransebeș*, București, Editura Militară, 1983; *The Austrian Military Border. Its Political and Cultural Impact*, ed. Liviu Maior, Nicolae Bocșan, Ioan Bolovan, Iași, Edit. Glasul Bucovinei, 1994; Havadi-Nagy Kinga Xénia, *Die Slawonische und Banater Militärgrenze: Kriegserfahrungen und räumliche Mobilität*, Cluj-Napoca, Centrul de Studii Transilvane, 2010; Adrian Onofreiu, Ioan Bolovan, *Contribuții documentare privind istoria regimentului grăniceresc năsăudean*, second ed., Cluj-Napoca, Edit. Argonaut, 2012, pp. 49-181; Josef Wolf, “Granița militară din Transilvania și Banat (1762/64-1851/73),” in *Călător prin istorie. Omagiu profesorului Liviu Maior la împlinirea vârstei de 70 de ani*, ed. Ioan Bolovan, Ioan-Aurel Pop, Cluj-Napoca, Centrul de Studii Transilvane, 2010, pp. 83-113.

1739, many soldiers emigrated from Serbia to the military border, so in 1750 there were established three infantry regiments and one of hussars on the Slavonian boundary, while in the *Banalist Confinium* there were created two infantry regiments and one of hussars.²

The defeat of Turkey at the gates of Vienna in 1683 ushered in a new issue in European politics: the Oriental matter. According to Andrei Oțetea's interpretation,³ this was a matter pertaining to the succession of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, the most active competitor vying to take over the territories ruled by the Turks being the Habsburg Empire, which assumed the mission of ousting the Turks from the Balkans. Austria began the recapture the territories occupied by the Turks (the *Reconquista*). To support the military effort against the Ottomans, the Viennese Court issued six letters patent (diplomas) between 1690 and 1695, whereby the Christian peoples in the Balkans were summoned to join the imperial armies in the offensive for the expulsion of the Turks. The first letter patent, *Litterae invitatoriae*, of 6 April 1690, promised the peoples of Serbia, Albania, Bulgaria and Macedonia military protection and the restoration of their former rights and privileges, from the period before the Ottoman rule, inviting them to rise up against the Ottoman rule.

Defeated by the Turks and led by the Serbian Patriarch Arsenie Cernoevici, a large number of Christians from the Balkans, including Serbians, Romanians and Macedo-Romanians, emigrated to the territories controlled by the Habsburg Empire. Under the letter of 21 August 1690 autographed by the emperor and under *Litterae protectionales*, of 11 December the same year, the House of Habsburg recognized the so-called Illyrian privileges of those colonized in the Austrian territories. These provided for the right of the newcomers to keep the Julian calendar, the right of the clergy and the laity to choose the patriarch, the free exercise of faith, the right to build churches and monasteries, exemptions from tithes, contributions and billeting. Following the Ottoman offensive and the occupation of Belgrade, a large number of Serbs settled in Hungary, which led Emperor Leopold I to issue the letter patent of 11 December 1690, which reconfirmed the old privileges.

Because of the authorities' protests and the opposition of the Catholics, under the letter patent of 4 March 1691, the newly colonized, who were Serbs in their vast majority, were removed from Hungarian Comital jurisdiction and they

² Antoniu Marchescu, *op.cit.*, pp. 1-6.

³ Andrei Oțetea, "Contribuție la chestiunea orientală," in *Scieri istorice alese*, ed. Florin Constantiniu, Șerban Papacostea, Cluj-Napoca, Edit. Dacia, 1980, p. 75 sqq.

received the right to choose their own voivode. Under the letter patent of 20 August 1691, there were reconfirmed the old privileges granted to the Serbs and the patriarch was recognized as their supreme leader in matters spiritual and temporal. The sixth letter patent, issued on 4 March 1695, was issued to defend the Serbs from the claims of the Hungarian political and ecclesiastical authorities and it acknowledged the new church organization of the colonized.⁴

According to Paul Bruslanowski's conclusions, the six letters patent recognized the existence of an autonomous, privileged "community of Greek rite and of Rascian nationality," called the "Illyrian nation," which was led by the archbishop and was under the protection of the Imperial Court.⁵

The Balkan Christians colonized in the territories belonging to the Habsburg Empire were settled on the plain between the Danube and the Tisza in 1698.⁶

Following the Peace of Karlowitz (1699), the border between the two empires was fixed up to the Danube, the Tisza and the Mureș. The Commission appointed for the settlement of the colonials proposed that they should be organized in a military *confinium* along the Sava, the Danube, the Tisza and the Mureș. In the years 1701-1702, two other generalates were created, the Sava-Danubian and the Tisza-Mureșan, formed to defend the cities and for the cordon service. The Sava-Danubian *Confinium* stretched from Gradišča to the Danube, while the Tisza-Mureșan *Confinium* extended further eastwards, up to the border with Transylvania.⁷

The Peace of Passarowitz (1718) brought to the Habsburg Empire the entire territory of the Banat, between the Mureș, the Tisza and the Danube, up to Orșova, Oltenia, and Serbia from Belgrade to the Timok. Thus the new border between the Ottoman Porte and the Habsburg Empire was set along the Olt, the Timok, the Lower Morava, the Drina and the Sava.⁸

Following the 1737-1739 war against the Porte, under the Peace of Belgrade, the Habsburg Empire lost everything it had conquered in 1718, the border between the two countries being settled, for a long time henceforth, along the Danube, The Tisza and the Mureș.

⁴ For the six diplomas, see Paul Bruslanowski, "Jurisdicția bisericească și privilegiile illire în Banat și Ungaria de Sud/Serbia de Nord în secolele XVII-XVIII," in *Piramida* (Zrenianin), 2012, II, no. 4, pp. 127-131.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ Antoniu Marchescu, *op.cit.*, p. 23.

⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 23-24.

⁸ George Bariț, *Părți alese din istoria Transilvaniei. Pe două sute de ani din urmă*, vol. I, second ed., ed. Ștefan Pascu, Florin Salvan, Brașov, 1993, p. 49.

For the Viennese Court, there appeared the necessity to strengthen these frontiers given the decrease of the eastward Austrian expansion and the loss of its initiative concerning the Ottoman legacy to Russia. Until the Russo-Turkish War of 1768-1774, Austria's Oriental policy had a contradictory evolution, favoring the Russian Empire's expansion to the South-East of Europe.⁹

After the expulsion of the Turks from the Banat, the existence of the military border along the Tisza-Mureş was no longer justified, in the midst of the country. In 1741, Maria Theresa decreed the abolition of this border. The former border guards were offered to remain in place under the authority of the civil administration or to move into the existing military border. In 1751, some of these guards emigrated to Russia and others to the Banat.¹⁰

Following the abolition of the Tisza-Mureşan *Confinium*, it was decided that a new military border should be formed along the Danube to the north, close to Caransebeş. As of 1752, the obligations of those who had settled in the Banat were laid down and border militia was formed, which consisted of eight companies in 1753. It was not a militarized institution, as it was placed under civil administration.¹¹ Following the model of the other militarized territories, on 1 May 1764, the Southern Banat passed under military administration. At first, there were organized two border regiments, the Illyrian-Banatian Regiment and the German-Banatian Regiment, between 1765 and 1768.¹² To ensure the continuity of the military *confinia*, Emperor Joseph II ordered, on 18 April 1768, that a Romanian battalion of border guards should be organized in the Banat, which was to complete the Empire's southern border from the Adriatic Sea to the Banat. Between 1769 and 1773, the Romanian border battalion was established, at the beginning consisting of 35 villages, to which were added another 33 in 1774. The Aulic War Council decided the unification of the Serbian border (the Illyrian *confinium*) with the Romanian border, and in 1764 the Romanian-Illyrian Border Regiment was organized; after the incorporation of the Banat within the Kingdom of Hungary, this regiment expanded to Caransebeş. The military constituency of the Romanian-Illyrian Regiment comprised 99 villages, 16 companies deployed across the militarized border and 11,313 border guards, fit for military service.¹³ The organization of the military border in the Banat and the South

⁹ Harald Heppner, *Austria și Principatele Dunărene (1774-1812). O contribuție la politica sud-est europeană a habsburgilor*, Cluj-Napoca, Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2000, passim.

¹⁰ Antoniu Marchescu, *op.cit.*, p. 25.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 69-71.

¹² *Ibidem*, pp. 72-74.

¹³ *Ibidem*, pp. 80-82.

of Hungary came to an end in 1775, when the militarized territory was divided between the three regiments.¹⁴

If the organization of the southern border of the Habsburg Empire did not encounter too much resistance from the population and the provincial administration, this was due to the status of the Banat as a province of the crown, directly subordinated to the emperor. This was not the case of Transylvania, where the estates and the orders in the province, founded under the provisions of the Leopoldine Diploma and headed by Governor Ladislau Kemeny, disapproved of the formation of a militarized territory, removed from the authority of the Gubernium and placed under that of the War Council.¹⁵

Appointed as the new civil and military Governor of Transylvania, General Buccow proposed, in 1761, the formation of seven border, one cavalry and two infantry regiments, from among the Romanian population in the Năsăud area from the south of the province, as well as three Szekler infantry regiments and one of hussars.¹⁶ To acquire the border guard status, the Orthodox Romanians had to accept the union with the Catholic Church. Another impediment to the militarization of the villages in the Rodna district was the opposition manifested by the magistrate of the town of Bistrita, who was against ceding this district. The militarization works started in the Rodna district in 1762, were interrupted by the revolt from Salva, on 10 May 1763, which rejected the militarization, and ended on 16 March 1764, when an imperial patent was issued, stipulating the rights and duties of the border guards. The Constituency of the Border Regiment no. II, headquartered in Năsăud, comprised 44 villages, had three battalions, 12 companies and 3,000 soldiers.¹⁷ In 1769, there took place a rectification of the frontier along the Carpathians in favor of the Habsburg Empire, which received 54 mountains, most being given into service to the border regiments.¹⁸

The Romanian Border Regiment no. I was based in Orlat and incorporated 81 villages stretching from the border with the Banat in Haţeg and Făgăraş.¹⁹ In 1764, there occurred the militarization of the seats of Ciuc and Three Seats, where one cavalry and two infantry regiments were organized. The Szekler Border Regiment I incorporated 49 communes, Border Regiment II had 98 communes, and the

¹⁴ A. Dolga, *op.cit.*, p. 52.

¹⁵ George Bariţ, *op.cit.*, p. 28.

¹⁶ Ioan Pop, *Istoria Regimentului II românesc de graniţă de la Năsăud (1762-1851)*, Târgu Mureş, Edit. Ardealul, 1999, pp. 61-62.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 65.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 68.

¹⁹ George Bariţ, *op.cit.*, p. 30.

constituency of the Hussar Regiment extended over 159 communes.²⁰ The Szekler military *confinium* was organized under the statute of 27 March 1764 and the Romanian military *confinium* in Transylvania was established under the statute of 12 November 1766, subsequently amended by ordinances.²¹ There were differences between the Transylvanian and the Banatian military borders. Under the imperial rescript of 22 April 1751, the Transylvanian border regiments were disbanded.

The Romanian-Illyrian Regiment participated in the war against the Ottoman Porte in 1787-1789, when it occupied important strategic localities; however, under the Peace of Sistov, Austria surrendered all the territories it had conquered, keeping only Orșova.²²

The account of the events so far has shown that the improvement of the defensive system in the border area had concerned the imperial circles long before, as the border of the Empire advanced eastward, but the period that was the richest in initiatives concerning the militarization of the border with the Ottoman Porte was the era of the enlightened monarchy.

The reasons that prompted the House of Habsburg to intensify the militarization of the border with the Turks were military, imposed by the geopolitical and strategic situation of the area, given the stabilization of the monarchy's border with the Ottoman Empire along the Danube and the Carpathians. In addition to these, there were reasons determined by the local realities and, especially, by the effectiveness of the military border system, already verified in other border areas, a system that subsisted on its own resources, ensuring an appreciable armed force in the Empire's service and proper border security, preventing defections, stopping epidemics and deterring smuggling. The organization of the military border in the Banat and Transylvania was part of a more extensive plan of securing the imperial border with the Ottoman Porte from the Adriatic Sea to Bukovina, annexed to the Habsburg Empire in 1775, after a period of recoil in Austria's eastward expansion.²³

The administrative, legal and military status of the military border and of the border guards was strictly defined and regulated, being restricted only on account of the military rigors. Because of the elevation of the *confinium* to military status, the border guards obtained a higher social status than the civil population in the province, primarily evinced by their capacity as free men, by their superior

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 31.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² Antoniu Marchescu, *op.cit.*, p. 115.

²³ Nicolae Bocșan, "The Establishment of the Banatian Military Border and the Social Status of the Border Guards," in *Transylvanian Review*, 2014, XXIII, Supplement 2, p. 24.

opportunities for instruction, provided by the very well organized education system in the border area, by a better material situation and by an array of facilities, such as the access to trades and commerce, to education, freedom of religion, and the opportunity to climb the military hierarchy.²⁴

Thus the House of Habsburg secured a loyal military structure, which along with the line regiments, participated in all the wars against Turkey or against revolutionary and Napoleonic France. The border guards' loyalism was also demonstrated during the events of 1848-1849, except for the Szekler regiments, which joined the Hungarian revolution against the Habsburgs, leading to the dismantlement of the Transylvanian regiments. Only the border regiments from the Banat survived until 1871, continuing to participate in all the wars of the Habsburg Empire after 1849.

In addition to the diplomatic efforts made by the Habsburgs with a view to establishing and consolidating these boundaries, the creation of the military border that stretched from the Adriatic to Bukovina represented a successful experience of the House of Habsburg. It was appreciated by military personalities of the time, such as the Duke of Ragusa, the former Marshal of France from the Napoleonic period, Marmont, numerous diplomats and journalists specialized in the problems of Eastern Europe, who noted the effectiveness of the *confinium* system, often comparing it to the Cossack colonies in the Crimean.²⁵

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ Idem, "Observateurs français sur le confins militaires austro-hongrois," in *The Austrian Military Border. Its Political and Cultural Impact*, ed. Liviu Maior, Nicolae Bocșan, Ioan Bolovan, Iași, Edit. Glasul Bucovinei, 1994, p. 10 sqq.