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THE VLACHS AND THE BALKAN WARS 1912-1913

Abstract:

A couple of centuries before the Balkan Wars, the leader of the pro-Romanian Vlachs in the Ottoman Empire, Apostol Margarit, made a prophetic prediction: "Our first interest is the safety of the Ottoman Empire. If a new Eastern Crisis arises and we fall in Serbian, Greek or Bulgarian hands, our schools will be closed and our communities will be scattered".

The Balkan wars in 1912-1913 made Apostol Margarit's greatest fear a reality. Ottoman Macedonia, together with its inhabitants, was divided between Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia. Suddenly the Vlachs, considered among the most faithful Christian subjects of the Sultan, had to face a new reality and new masters.

The purpose of this study is to explain the rationale behind the choices made by certain Vlach individuals and groups to pick a side during the wars, to demonstrate the consequences of the Balkan wars for the Vlach population in the Balkans, as well as to show the efforts made by the Vlach intellectuals to preserve the rights granted to the Vlachs by the Ottoman authorities.

Key words: Vlachs, Ottoman Macedonia, Balkan Wars, Romania, George Murnu

An analysis of the Vlach question until the Balkan Wars, shows that we can easily draw parallels to the Macedonian question. As a matter of fact, to a certain extent, the Vlach question was a miniature version of the Macedonian question. As in the Macedonian case, the Vlachs were nothing more but background actors in a play directed by people living far from the territories inhabited by Vlachs. Organically weak and without their own religious and educational institutions, the Vlachs were an easy prey for the Balkan propagandas and they were forced to split into many hostile factions. This division led to internal struggle between the Vlachs with Greek sentiments and the pro-Romanian Vlachs in Macedonia and Albania. The animosity, which started right after the first Romanian school was open in Macedonia in 1864, culminated during the Macedonian Struggle (1904-1908), and, after a more peaceful period

after the Young Turk revolution, it exploded again during the Balkan wars, when the Vlachs participated in the armies of four Balkan states.

Unfortunately, it is an impossible task to determinate the correct number of Vlachs who fought in the Balkan wars. The Vlachs did not join the allied armies and the various volunteer squads as an organized group. Their approach to one or another warring party was on an individual basis, and it often depended on which army would first pass through the territories inhabited by Vlach population. On the other hand, nobody in the whirlwind of the war was concerned to note the ethnicity of the soldiers and the volunteers. These circumstances manifoldly complicate any attempts of historians today to reach an approximate figure representing the number of Vlach fighters in the Balkan wars. However, scattered archival and historiographical notes enable us to partially capture the Vlach presence in these wars.

For the first time in the history of the Ottoman Empire, the lack of soldiers forced the authorities in Istanbul to enlist Christians in the regular army. It was envisaged that up to 25% of the army should be filled with Christian subjects of the Sultan.¹ Thus, Vlach soldiers were mobilized for the first time in the Ottoman military ranks.² Vlachs from Ioannina, along with the local Turks and Albanians, joined the struggle against the Greek army during the siege of the city, which lasted until March 1913.³ However, as it was the case with the Macedonians in the Ottoman army, we could assume that most of these Vlach Ottoman soldiers quickly deserted from the Ottoman army and joined the closest Allied troops. This was how part of them found themselves in the Serbian army.

Undoubtedly, the majority of Vlach soldiers were enrolled in the Hellenic army. Given that the Greeks acted in regions with compact Vlach population, such as Epirus and southwestern Macedonia, as well as the fact that a significant number of Vlachs already lived in the Kingdom of Greece, above all in Thessaly, it was logical that large majority of the Vlachs fought on the Greek side during the Balkan wars, in the army of Epirus and the army of Thessaly.

¹ Исмет Кочан, Битка за Македонија (Турската историографија за Балканските војни 1912-1913, со посебен осврт за Македонија), Скопје 2010, 125-126.

² For the names of some of these soldiers, see: АО ИНИ, Јован Цевелеков, Хроника на село Купа, Околија Гуменца, Егејска Македонија, Хр. IV.113, passim; Силвана Сидоровска-Чуповска, Влашката фамилија Машо од Велес (1851-1922), Зборник на трудови од меѓународниот научен симпозиум „Власите на Балканот, одржан на 09-10 ноември 2001 во Скопје, Скопје 2002, 202.

³ Max Demeter Peufuss, *Chestiunea aromânească, Evolutia ei de la origini până la pacea de la București 1913 și poziția Austro-Ungariei*, București 1994, 111.

More concrete data on Vlach participation in the Balkan wars can be found about the Vlachs who fought on the Bulgarian side. Although all the names of the volunteers in the Macedonian-Adrianopolitan Volunteer Corps (MAVC) of the Bulgarian army are given in a Slavicised form, the Vlach origin of some volunteers can be determined by the birth place of the fighters. The majority of the Vlach volunteers in MAVC (exactly 74) came from the Exarchist villages in Almopia (Moglena/Karacaova). These fighters originated from the villages: Sermenin (29), Konsko (12), Kastaneri (10), Skra (8), Huma (6), Arhangelos (4), Koupa (2), while villages Perikleia, Lankadia and Livadia contributed with one volunteer each.⁴ Exactly 24 volunteers came from the Vlach villages Gopeš (9), Magarevo (5), Malovište (5), Trnovo (4) and Nižopole (1) in the Bitola (Monastir) region. Three volunteers originated from the Vlach villages Gorna Belica and Dolna Belica on the slopes of Mount Jablanica, two came from Kleisoura, one from Nymfaio, and one from the Vlach hut settlement Kalin Kamen on Mount Osogovo.⁵ Thus, the number of Vlach volunteers in the MAVC climbs to 105, although this figure is undoubtedly higher, since many volunteers originated from towns and villages with significant Vlach population, such as Kruševo, Bitola, Resen, Jankovec, Bojdovo, Gramada, Ano Poroia and Argos Orestiko. However, due to the Slavicised form of their names, we cannot confirm the Vlach origin of these volunteers.

The attitude of the Allied armies towards the Vlach civilian population mostly depended on the political affiliation of the respective civilians. In the Serbian zone in Macedonia, the attitude of the Serbs towards the Vlachs was very good, especially in Kruševo, which was home to a numerous pro-Romanian Vlach community, where the Serbian military troops were mostly consisted of Romanians from Eastern Serbia.⁶ However, in the Serbian occupation zone in Albania, the pro-Romanian Vlachs took the Albanian side, while the Vlachs with Greek sentiments refused to send delegates to the Assembly of Vlorë where independent Albania was proclaimed, and they saluted the Serbian occupation of their towns.⁷ The Vlachs from Bitola especially could not conceive that their town was to become Serbian and not Greek, and they blamed the Prime Minister of Greece, Eleftherios Venizelos, for the fact that the Serbian army reached Bitola before the Greeks. Right up until the Treaty of Bucharest was signed in 1913, these Vlachs still hoped that Bitola and the surrounding area would eventually go to Greece and it was a bitter blow when Venizelos himself stopped off in Bitola on his way back from signing

⁴ Македоно-Одринско Опълчение 1912-1913 г., Личен Състав по документи на Дирекция „Централен Военен архив“, София 2006, *passim*.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ M.D. Peyfuss, *Chestiunea...*, 111.

⁷ *Ibid.*

the Treaty of Bucharest and told the Bitola residents that the Serbs were to have their town. The only consolation he could offer was the suggestion that all those who wished to do so might move to nearby Florina, where the Greek state would help them to establish a “New Bitola”.⁸

Given that Bulgaria was a Greek ally in the First Balkan War, the attitude of the Bulgarians towards the pro-Greek Vlachs was decent. In this context, one Vlach from Thessaloniki noted: “The Bulgarians respect (our) lives, (our) properties, (our) schools and our churches”.⁹

The most severe consequences of the Balkan wars were suffered by the Romanian supporters in the newly conquered Greek territories. “After the withdrawal of the Turkish army and the penetration of the Greek troops, those who suffered the most from the Greek rage were our Vlach townsfolk, part of which were massacred, one part were thrown in prisons, while the rest were robbed of their possessions” – writes one of the Vlach leaders in Bucharest, Dr. Leonte.¹⁰

The terrors inflicted by the Greek troops on pro-Romanian Vlachs from the villages on Mount Pindus were of such an extent, that the teacher Stere Caragiani wrote: “This is the end of the Vlach element on Pindus... If they destroyed our villages, robbed us of our properties and burnt our churches, they could at least spare the human lives “. ¹¹ The main target of the Greek soldiers were the leaders of the Romanian propaganda in the region of Grevena. The teacher Dimitri Cicma was arrested in Grevena, tried and convicted by a kangaroo court, taken outside the town and horribly mutilated by cutting his nose, ears and arms, while his eyes were removed from their sockets.¹² Several others pro-Romanian notables from the regions of Grevena and Veria were murdered, many women were raped, while the houses of pro-Romanian families were robbed and set on fire.¹³ Vlach pro-Romanian priests were forced to seek forgiveness from Aimilianos, the Metropolitan of the Metropolis of Grevena, who told them that he will accept them as Greek priests, but never as Romanian ones, to which he added: “even if the Hellenic

⁸ Astrerios Koukoudis, *The Vlachs, Metropolis and Diaspora*, Thessaloniki 2003, 466.

⁹ *Școli și biserici românești din Peninsula Balcanică – Documente – (1864-1948) – Volumul I (Adunarea și selecționarea documentelor, introducerea, bibliografia și indicia de: Adina Berciu Drăghicescu și Maria Petre)*, București 2004, 252.

¹⁰ Стојка Ласку, *Перипетииите на некои трговци Ароманци по потекло од Магарево (1912-1915)*, In: *Документи II/3*, Скопје 2005, 1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Școli și biserici românești...*, 249.

¹³ *Ibid*, 249-256, 272-274, 285-287.

government recognizes the Vlach community, We, the people of the Church, will fight against that decision and we will never accept it”.¹⁴

The Vlach intelligentsia was aware of the realities in the Balkans and they knew that the constellation of international relations did not contribute to the fulfillment of the ideal – the creation of a Vlach state. Therefore, during the protracted diplomatic negotiations to find a solution for the Balkan crisis (1912-1913), the Vlach patriots made every effort to preserve at least part of what they managed to gain during Ottoman rule. With discreet help from the Romanian government, a delegation of the Society of Macedo-Romanian Culture undertook a diplomatic tour (February-April 1913) to the most important European centers. The purpose of the delegation was to earn support for the solutions it offered to resolve the Balkan crisis, as well as to retain the acquired Vlach rights from the time of the Ottoman rule.¹⁵

The delegation was composed of George Murnu, Iuliu Valaori and Nicolae Papahagi. From February 13 to April 5, the delegates visited Vienna, Paris, London, Berlin and Rome, and they asked the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the European Great Powers for help to provide guarantees from the Balkan successor-states of the Ottoman Empire that the acquired Vlach rights will be respected. In addition, they issued a brochure titled “Macedonia to Macedonians”, where they demanded Macedonia to follow the Swiss model, and to organize itself as an autonomous state of cantonal type. According to the delegates, this state would be neutral and all nations should enjoy religious and linguistic rights anywhere in the country.¹⁶

The formula “Macedonia to Macedonians” was not accepted by the European powers, while the Romanian government, which was initially open to this idea, eventually decided to abandon it by accepting the policy of the Central Powers on this issue. Hence, in order to speed things up, but without giving up on the idea that only “Macedonia to Macedonians” would be the optimal solution to the Vlach question, the delegation took the liberty to promote a new formula for the political organization of the Vlachs – the creation of an Albanian-Vlach federation, in which the Pindus zone, inhabited predominantly by Vlachs, would be included as a canton.¹⁷

Quite predictably, the tour of the Vlach delegates did not bear fruit. By the end of his visit to Rome, the disappointed George Murnu sent a letter to his brother, where, speaking in a very lucid manner, with bitterness, but without any illusions, he gives his final judgment on the

¹⁴ D. Constantinescu, *Biografia*, Scopia 2002, 44.

¹⁵ N.Ș. Tanașoca, *Chestiunea aromânească între diplomație și utopie*, In: *Perenitatea Vlahilor în Balcani*, III-a, 1997, 15.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 15-16.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 16.

significance and the perspectives of the mission: “We did all we could. Our idea to create an autonomous Macedonia is unachievable. Its echo could not be heard in the European political circles. Everyone told us that it is too late. The Powers no longer want to mingle and they left the Balkan states to be masters of the situation. All they are interested about is Albania and the conflict between Romania and Bulgaria. Therefore, we were forced to seek nothing else but guarantees of our very existence and our national development in Macedonia. This right was recognized by the Great Powers and they assured us that it will be taken into account for the final solution of the Balkan affairs. We are well aware of the value of these guarantees, especially among Greeks. We are concerned that these rights will be lost if an autonomous Macedonia will not be created... Alas! What more could we do without hundreds of bayonets behind us? The guilt lies with those in Bucharest, who did not put forward this issue at the right moment. Everyone knows and acknowledges their guilt. There is no doubt that Romania suffered a bitter defeat. Not only did Romania abandon the Macedo-Romanian element in a cowardly manner, but it also lost great national interests and humiliated itself in front of the Bulgarians. In view of this handicap, we were considering a solution which will be as satisfactory as possible for our national problem. The only chance we got in London in this regard, was when it came to regulating the southern Albanian border. Some sought to include (in Albania) as many Aromanian settlements as possible. I am fully convinced, though, that... the Aromanians can not expect a brighter future with the Albanians... Regarding Albania, there is this combination for our (people), namely, to create a province (canton) which will include as greater part of Macedonia as possible. This province will be reserved for us Aromanians, it will be headed by an Aromanian prefect and it will have an autonomous Aromanian church... I worked for this idea in London and here in Rome. The idea was heard and its realization is possible, especially if those from the State (Romania) are seriously engaged in it. There is no other way out of this crisis the *Aromanianism* is going through...”¹⁸

The hope of creating some sort of political autonomy for the Vlachs, either within autonomous Macedonia, or as a federal Albanian-Vlach state, was a utopia.

The Balkan crisis in 1912-1913 opened a new stage in the evolution of the Vlach question. The replacement of the Ottoman authority with the authority of the Balkan states in territories inhabited by Vlachs, forced the Vlach nationalists to reconsider their political actions in accordance with the new realities in the Balkans. However, Romania, as the self-proclaimed patron of the “Macedonian Romanians”, did not show greater interest in the fate of the Vlachs in

¹⁸ Ibid, 23-24.

this historical moment. The main priority of the conservative government of Titu Maiorescu was the annexation of Southern Dobruja, not the Vlachs and their local problems. This is evident from the official and unofficial statements of the Romanian political leaders, and, above all, from the context of the Treaty of Bucharest. While the annexation of Southern Dobruja by Romania was regulated with article 2 of the Treaty, as well as with a protocol which defined the new border between Romania and Bulgaria, there was no mention of the Vlach question in the Treaty, and it was regulated only with an exchange of letters between the Prime Ministers of Romania, Bulgaria, Greece and Serbia. In response to the note sent by the Romanian government to the governments of the Balkan states, the signatories of the Treaty of Bucharest committed themselves to securing the rights of the Vlachs to their own schools and churches, to allow the creation of a Vlach bishopric and to allow the Romanian government to subsidize these schools and churches. If we take into account that the Balkan states, with Greece being a notable exception, did not respect these obligations, it should be acknowledged that the words of the former Romanian minister of religious affairs and education, Take Ionescu, who considered the Vlachs a bargaining chip and a path towards a future conquest of South Dobruja, seem quite justified.¹⁹

After the Treaty of Bucharest the Balkan Vlachs were divided between four states. The majority found themselves in Greece, while the rest became new citizens of Albania, Serbia and Bulgaria. Thus all the illusions that the Vlachs could organize themselves in an independent state or in some federation disappeared. The Vlach population was subjected to intense assimilation and the Vlach language was sentenced to a 'silent death'. In this context, almost 20 years before the Balkan wars, the leader of the pro-Romanian Vlachs in the Ottoman Empire, Apostol Margarit, made a prophetic prediction: "If a new Eastern Crisis arises and we fall in Serbian, Greek or Bulgarian hands, our schools will be closed and our communities will be scattered".²⁰ A similar prediction was made in 1898 by the editors of the journal "Revista Pindul". They were aware that outside the Ottoman Empire the Vlach language will be sentenced to death, and "without the language, the nation is dead and wiped out from the book of the World. After many years, history will call the Aromanian a Greek, Serbian, Bulgarian, a Jew if you wish..."²¹

¹⁹ Ibid, 13-15.

²⁰ Victor Bérard, *La Turquie et l'Hellénisme contemporain*, Paris 1897, 258-259.

²¹ Cătră Armâni, *Revista Pindul*, I/1, s.l., 1898, 1-2.