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War Correspondents, Illustrators and Spies in the Russo-Turkish War (1877–1878)

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Abstract: The Russo-Turkish War (1877-1878), Romania's War of Independence, had the characteristics of a complex confrontation, with many battles in different areas, involving numerous armies, using the best weaponry available at that time. At the same time, the conflagration was also a complex diplomatic effort, both the great powers and the countries involved or nearby trying to influence the fate of the war, in order to obtain advantages at its end, as it was obvious that the geography of Central and Eastern Europe would change radically. At the same time, the confrontation would benefit from complex journalistic coverage, the first of its kind in history. Bucharest would become a logistical center of war, but also of media support. The reports from the front were made under difficult conditions, but war correspondents and illustrators did their job and provided concrete information, but also informed opinions for a highly interested public.

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Correspondents and illustrators on the front

Reporting in theatres of war is always difficult and needs professionals dedicated to their craft. The more difficult was the mission of the front correspondents in the Russo-Turkish War (1877-1878), known in Romania as the War of Independence. It was the first major armed confrontation to receive full media coverage, with reporters and illustrators from all the world's major newspapers present in the theaters of operations. They had to face material problems, travel, accommodation and meals being carried out in poor conditions, often the lives of press correspondents being endangered. The stories dealt not only with victories and defeats, but above all with the unspeakable suffering of thousands of victims killed or wounded in the clashes. Some of them were spies, and others were accused of transmitting information to enemies. A major problem was the sending of publishing materials to newsrooms, as post offices were barely functioning and telegraph stations were few and far from the front line.

There were many places where press correspondents were needed. Among them, illustrators, who would express themselves mainly by making drawings, and less photographs. Camera obscura had begun to be used, but the technological process was still extremely complicated, especially when reproducing clichés in the pages of publications. The engraving technique remained a priority, i.e., the reproduction of drawings by corroding surfaces on metal plates, thus managing to highlight the lines of the drawings. This way of working had been experimented in the Crimean War (1853-1856), but the engraving as press illustration would reach its peak during the Russo-Turkish War (1877-1878).

As Adrian-Silvan Ionescu, an art theorist who focused on these aspects with great interest, would remark, the press service during that war would be well organized, leading to the appearance of the front correspondent and special artist, as the prototype of the later photojournalist (Ionescu 2002, 17). They were looking for information on the ground, gathered by their own means, and that was another development in the history of world journalism. Among the front correspondents we find great names such as: Irving Montagu, Melton Prior, William Heysman Overed, Joseph Bell, Richard Caton Woodville, Dick de

Lonlay, Francis David Millet, Jose Louis Pellicer, Hippolytus Napoleon Henryk Dembitzki, Auguste Meylan, Frederick Villiers, Ivan de Woestyne, Frédéric Kohn-Abrest, Franz Duschek, Johann Lichenstadt, Mathes Koenen, Friedrich Lachmann, Johann Nepomuk Schönberg, Alexander Ivanov, Nicolai Karasin, but also Nicolae Grigorescu or Theodor Aman, along with other Romanian painters. Among them, the incomparable Carol Popp de Szathmári, Hungarian draughtsman and painter, born in Cluj, who, in 1854, had taken the first war photographs, of the confrontations in Crimea.

A review of the contents found in the Romanian publication *Războiul*, a daily newspaper edited by Grigorea H. Grandea and mocked (unfairly!) by I. L. Caragiale in the play *A Lost Letter* [*O scrisoare pierdută*], showed that Grandea used information from important publications of the time, of which there were many. It was primarily Romanian sources: *Monitorul oficial, România liberă, Pressa, Curierul, Săteanul, Reforma, Gazeta Transilvaniei.* The English-language ones were: *Daily Telegraph, Daily News, Times, Morning Post, Standard* (designated as a Turkophile newspaper)*, Birmingham Post, Vanity Fair* and *New York and Commercial Chronicle.* Some of the French-speaking ones were: Le *Figaro, République Francaise, Le Nord, Le petit Marseillais, L'Orient, Le Temps, La France, Le bien public*. There were also many German-speaking ones, those in Vienna being often cited: *Die Presse*, *Neue Freie Presse* (Grandea asked that the two Viennese publications not be confused. He appreciated the former, claiming *Neue Freie Presse* was a newspaper 'par escelentiam Turkish')*, Fremdem-Blatt, Deutsche Zeitung, National Zeitung, Norddeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung, Post, Deutsches Montagsblatt, Kölnische Zeitung, Politische Corespondenz, Wiener Presse, Wiener Abendpost, Berliner Tagblatt*. Of the Italian ones, *L'Italie* caught his attention. Russian-language newspapers also appeared: *Golos, Ruskjckir, Ruskij Mir, Sowremennye Iswestje, St. Petersburgkija Viedomosti, Novoja Vremja*. Hungarian newspapers would be often mentioned: *Pester Lloyd, Kelet Nepe, Hon, Egyetértés, Budapester Corespondenz, Ellenòr,* but also *Hestia*, from Greece. Among the Turkish ones, there is mention of *La Turquie, Itihat and Vachit*. Grandea would often criticize other publications, most commonly *Românul, Telegraful* or *Dorobanţul.* The latter was also published by C. A. Rosetti (same as *Românul*) and its ambition was competing with *Războiul* as an illustrated paper.

In order to present the armed conflict of 1877-1878 in various publications, press people organized their activity thoroughly (Szabo & Ciortea Neamțiu, 2016). Journalists traveled in carts or carriages, many of which were adapted to provide working and sleeping conditions for a longer time, which meant at least a twig roof and a canvas over it. Some of the correspondents disposed of significant amounts of money, so that, for a while, refined food, good wine or even champagne would be present. However, hardly collected from the front, information was difficult to transmit because there was no effective telegraph network. Journalists had to cross the Danube to use the telegraph from Bucharest, Giurgiu, Zimnicea or Turnu Măgurele. At one time, telegraph stations were so in demand that some of the journalists transmitted their news from Braşov. The drawings were sent by post, so a few days or even weeks passed from the date they were made until they were actually published (Szabo, 2015).

We find out more significant details concerning the cumbersome manner in which telegrams from war correspondents were sent from a note in the newspaper. Some publication had gone to great lengths to send people into the field. The teams consisted of reporters and illustrators, and their communication products had to reach newsrooms in order to be published, that is, to reach readers. The mechanism was complex and expensive: "*The Daily Telegraph* in London has six correspondents on the battlefield of Europe, and yet they send their telegrams to Braşov, where there is a seventh correspondent, who sends them to London. The telegram about the battle of Pleven contained 6.000 words and cost a thousand florins (200 gold coins)." (*Războiul*, 24, 1877)

Information from official sources was very difficult to obtain. Not even the authorities involved could benefit from efficient information services, being dependent on the post, the telegraph or their own couriers, having to travel long distances, in a period of time when data lost its importance or was superseded by contrary events. In Bucharest, an important source of information was the Ministry of War. At the time, Ioan Slavici was working at the *Timpul* newspaper, which he had to edit almost by himself, from June to the end of October, when Mihai Eminescu appeared in the editorial office. Slavici recorded a dispute with the directors of the Ministry of War. They had decided to traffic information from the front. They gave them, in time, only to the pro-government newspapers, a habit both old and new. The journalist protested on October 5, 1877, when he also published an open letter. In it, he

demanded that news be posted on the door of the Ministry of War, so that everyone would have access to it indiscriminately. D. Vatamaniuc noted that some officials might have even tried to commercialize information from the front (Vatamaniuc 1968, 214).

Images and words

By following the daily newspaper *Războiul*, we can find interesting information not only about the course of battles and other events on the front, but also about the evolution of media communication. For *Războiul* has the merit of being the first Romanian illustrated publication, but the field and typographical conditions were not the best. Graphic designers needed to prepare, so the early drawings were not directly related to the theme of armed confrontation. The first large graphic illustration, which occupied half of the first page, in the middle section, was a drawing bearing the title *Ternova*, and below it the continuation: *The Old Capital of Bulgaria*. It appeared in number 24 of the newspaper, with a caption underneath: "Street during the Russian occupation." A parenthesis interesting for the history of press follows: "Designated (drawn, ed.) from nature by D. Szathmary". It is in fact the great artist Carol Popp de Szathmári (Szathmári Papp Károly), originally from Cluj (then in Austria-Hungary), but who carried out an intense activity in Bucharest. He published several illustrations in *Războiul*, having works published in many Romanian and foreign publications. Szathmári's collaboration had been announced in the previous issue as follows: "The beloved and talented artist D. Szathmary, the photographer of the Court, will procure for our readers the pleasure of giving views from the theatre of the war, where he follows the movements of the armies. In tomorrow's edition we shall publish a view from Tarnova." *The Illustrated London News* was the newspaper that requested his work the most, the collaboration having been established since the time of the Crimean War. This first drawing by Szathmári depicted in detail a square in Veliko Tarnovo, a mountain town, with two streets separating, one going up towards some one- or two -storey buildings and the other going to the right, towards what appears to be a periphery. The drawing was simple, expressive in its contour lines. Several people also appeared, three of whom were women, right in the centre. On the top and on the right, there were groups of soldiers. Their faces are indistinguishable, the features being only sketched. As Adrian-Silvan Ionescu points out, it was the modern mode of illustration at that time, the artist deliberately leaving aside the individualization of

people, in order to give editors and engravers in printing workshops the freedom to outline physiognomies (Ionescu 2002, 141).

His illustrations were multiplied and offered to newspapers in a quasi-official regime, Szathmári being the official artist of Carol I. Grandea would use graphics from several sources, in the first months often from unspecified authors. Subsequently, very expressive portraits, signed by C. Weidlich, are reproduced. Afterwards, most of the graphic appearances will be signed by Thiel-Weiss, so with the names of those who owned the printing press of the newspaper. In the pages of the gazette, however, one could also find other famous graphic signatures, such as Smeeton-Tilly. These were indeed the two great artists, Englishman Joseph Burns Smeeton, and his French pupil Auguste Tilly, their works being found in some of the greatest museums of the world. Another important graphic artist present in the pages of *Războiul* would be Charles Baude, a French engraver, who was 24 years old at the time. Auguste André Lançon also came from France, and he signed simply A. Lançon. Towards the end of 1877, the publisher Grandea devoted more and more space to illustrations in the gazette. They appeared on the fourth page, sometimes also in the interior pages, with printing over the white section delimiting the page. It was at the time another innovation introduced by the editor. It sometimes happened that the first page reproduced two illustrations, one by Smeeton-Tilly, and the other by Ch. Baude, or both by Baude. Another French illustrator that published was Riballies.

Journalists and spies

The front correspondents, whether they were just reporters or illustrators (sometimes both!) had a hectic life, always ending up in extreme situations. They would be killed or wounded, they would be made prisoners, they would endure humiliation, they would be exposed to cold or heat, they would suffer from hunger and thirst, but they would remain on duty (Szabo 2020, 49). Journalists would be under bombardment, and English journalists would rush to capture the scene. The illustration was published by *The Illustrated London News*. Two months later it would be printed in the Romanian publication. In *Războiul* it was rendered in full on the first page, below the frontispiece. The title was “The Bombing of Rusciuc”, and the caption read: “Before the *Times* correspondent and illustrator of *The Illustrated London News* enters through the gate of the citadel, a bomb drops before their carriage (12th of

August)". The depiction showed an open carriage with three horses at the entrance to the fortress is. The two journalists were in the back, and the Turkish coachman was in front. The explosion took place a few metres in front of the horses, with the cannonball breaking into pieces. The scene was expressive, although the faces portrayed did not show fear. The illustration was not signed, which meant that it was delivered by their own correspondents, who did not have the honour of seeing their names on the drawings.

The Turks were illustrated on the walls of the fortress, from where they fired their rifles and cannons at the opposing forces. The carriage was drawn there, the horses scared by the explosion of the cannonball. The illustrator of The *Illustrated London News* may have drawn himself in the field, which did not only give satisfaction to a small bout of vanity, but was also evidence of the difficult conditions in which journalists worked in theatres of war (Szabo, 2015). Another significant illustration would reproduce a real story: one night, the journalists' camp was attacked by wolves! The drawing was reproduced in *The Illustrated London News* and was very expressive, showing the wolves growling amongst the tents at the frightened people. (Szabo, 2015).

Some of the journalists were also spies, but they were all watched closely, especially by the Russian Military Commandment. The newspaper *Războiul* published an illustration in one of the October issues, under the title "Russian Ante-posts and Outposts," depicting a horse rider stopped by a military man. The explanation given to the illustration was the following: "*Daily News* correspondent stopped on suspicion of being a spy" (*Războiul*, 77, 1877). It was a broader and more difficult context, as Britain supported the Ottoman Empire and was interested in keeping the Bosphorus and Dardanelles free. The following issue featured another illustration on the front page, showing three Russian soldiers surrounding a Turkish spy who had climbed a tree. When sensitive military actions were being prepared, the presence of journalists could be a risk factor. For this reason, they were removed, as the *Telegraful* newspaper recorded before the Pleven offensive: "The difficulty of the correspondent becomes more and more difficult, if not null, because apart from staying in his country to give imaginary correspondences from the battlefield, I do not see what he could write (...) It is natural, it is indispensable even, that in a regular siege the most inviolable secret should be preserved, every indiscretion, committed even thoughtlessly, resulting in incalculable losses." (no. 1749, 1877).

The problems of war journalists were peculiar during these confrontations, but two cases particularly grab one's attention. The commanders of the Russian troops allowed themselves to chase away two correspondents of important publications. The first case is that of Frederick Boyle, of the *Standard*, banished from the Russian quarter of Gorni Student. The reason stated by the Romanian publication is that this correspondent "violated his word of honour, by which he obliged himself not to communicate anything exact about the positions of troops and reinforcements" (*Războiul*, 80, 1877), adopting a tone considered hostile and insulting towards the Russian army, not to mention an ironic tone (Ionescu 2022, 37). Boyle admitted his guilt and prepared to leave. Frederick Boyle was a writer and journalist. He travelled all over the world, writing several volumes of memoirs that prove to be very interesting to this day. He defended himself in front of Colonel Hasenkampf, who responded for the war correspondents, by stating that, being a writer as well, he might have accidentally used darker nuances in describing the pitiful state of the Russian army. In fact, Boyle himself described the incident in a volume full of information and extraordinary events (Boyle 1877). As we can see, the book appeared shortly after the expulsion, that very year, which proves the rigour and promptness of a journalist! His big surprise came when he learned that he was not allowed to stay on Romanian territory either. The aspect is interesting, showing that Grand Duke Nicolae also commanded Bucharest. In this first situation, Grandea did not comment, but delivered the news as such. Martina Baleva examined the collection published by *The Illustrated London News,* where she discovered that two British war correspondents had been taken prisoners. They were depicted walking in a dignified manner through the snow, at the head of the column of prisoners. When they returned home, they were received as heroes (Baleva, 2012). The illustration referred to was made by one of the war correspondents himself, Joseph Bell.

Two weeks later, history repeated itself with the correspondent of the *New York Times,* general Carol Tevis (Florescu 1989). Things are a little clearer here, because Tevis had been, in 1854, a squadron commander in the Ottoman army. The expulsion order, signed by General Dreutsche, stated that the journalist was obliged "to leave Bucharest and the main areas of the Danube region within 24 hours." This decision, taken on Romanian soil, would make Grandea react, considering it a violation of the independence proclaimed a few months before. The argument was simple: "Today an American correspondent is being sent across the

border. Tomorrow it will be the turn to expatriate, arrest or shoot all those Romanians whose patriotism will upset Russian generals." (*Războiul*, 88, 1877). Unfortunately, Grandea was right: those times would come and claim many victims!

However, the problem of spying through journalists or people with this coverage is not negligible. As shown, many major publications around the world had sent correspondents to military headquarters, to be as close as possible to events. Among them was Friedrich Lachmann of the *Augsburger Allgemeine Zeitung*. He was useful to both the Bavarian publication and the German government. A researcher points out that, as he was misinformed and not knowing, in fact, about Lachmann's secret activity, Carol I decorated him as a token of appreciation for his journalistic activity, the fault being that of the inexperienced Romanian counterintelligence service (Popescu 2011, 125).

The Pleven of world press

The news of the encirclement (siege) of Pleven by the Christian armies was officially recorded by Grandea on November 29 (December 11) 1877, on the last page, which showed that it was last minute information. It was rendered with a bold font of size 14. The wording was very cautious: "The talks that had begun a long time ago between the supreme commander of the Danube army and Osman-Paşia eventually resulted in the surrender of his army and of Pleven, the Russian-Romanian armies entering it victoriously." (*Războiul*, 130, 1877) The same would be printed in the next issue, but on pages two and four. Some of the news was a bit older, temporally speaking. The same agglomeration of breaking news with outdated information was recorded in the *Telegraful* newspaper, here the encirclement of Pleven being announced only in the October 30 issue (*Telegraful,* 1665, 1877). Pleven was only conquered definitively on November 22 (December 4), 1877.

Providing data taken from various places, Grigore H. Grandea would often signal manipulation attempts or errors. A special incident would be recorded on September 1 (13) 1877, when a gazette announced the fall of Pleven, without the event actually occurring. Frédéric Damé, a well-known press editor, then in Bucharest, launched, together with Caragiale, *The Romanian Nation* [*Naţiunea română*]. At that point a correspondent sent a telegram that would become famous: *"Médoc fini. Vodka, Tzuica, dedans."* Decoding was provided by Caragiale: "*Médoc* - Pleven; *fini* - taken; *Vodka* - Russians; *Tzuica* - Romanians;

Dedans - inside" This article appeared in the widely circulated daily *Universe*, issue of 31th of December 1899. It has been reproduced in various volumes with the author's writings (Caragiale 1997, 437). But Pleven had not fallen, and the siege would last another three months. The correspondent had taken for granted false information given by drunken Russian officers... A clear example of fake news, the fake news of those times.

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