

P L E V N A

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The siege of Plevna (Pleven) is but one of the episodes of the Russo-Romen Turkish war of 1877-1878. However it has been of extreme importance in the course of the war¹. During five months the Russian army was nailed down around this stronghold and the Russians suffered defeats which put the problem of a retreat of the Russian army to the left bank of the Danube and the cessation altogether of hostilities.

Pleven was not a man-made fortress built of stone or bricks. It was built by Nature itself : a hollow surrounded by several hillocks, and the river Grivitsa flowing through it.

The Plevna episode begins with the crossing of Osman Pasha's army, unobserved by the Russians, from Vidin to Pleven. The Russians did not realize the importance of this move. With the

1 *Istoria războiului din 1877-1878* (The History of the War 1877-1878), v. I-III, Bucharest, é 887-1898.

Opissanie russko-turetskoi voiny 1877-1878 Izd. voen. - istor. comissii Gen. Shtaba (The Description of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878, edited by the military-histor. commission of Chief Headquarters (Russ) v. I-IV, St. Petersburg, 1901.

Gen Scheletî. *Adevărul istoric asupra Plevnei* (Historical Truth about Plevna), Iassi, 1911.

Gen. Radu Rosetti, *Partea luată de armata română la războiul din 1877-*

establishment of Osman's army in Plevna begins its heroic resistance to Russian attacks and attempts of assault. As long as the Turkish army of Osman Pasha was based on Vidin, it was exposed to Russian attacks which might possibly be successful. From the moment of its crossing over into Plevna this army became invincible and presented a threat to the western flank of the Russian army. Plevna commanded the highways leading to Ruschuk, Svistov, Sofia, Lovech.

As a matter of fact, the Russian headquarters staff and the supreme commander Grand Duke Nicholas received the tidings of the crossing of Osman Pasha's army to Plevna from a dispatch sent by the Romanian headquarters. But they did not give much credence to information coming from Romanian sources, which when all was told they were to pay very dearly.

Three attempts were made to take Plevna by assault: on the 8 (20 July, 18 (30) August and 30 August (11 Sept), all of them unsuccessful and leading to great losses.

Some authors explain their failure by inadequate organization².

Thus for instance it is pointed out with regard to the first attempt that Schilder was clumsy in his actions. The lines of access to the stronghold instead of being free in order to allow the troops

1878, (The Participation of the Romanian Army in the war of 1877-1878), Bucharest, 1926.

M. Gazenkampf, *Moj dnevnik (1877-1878) (My Diary)*, St. Petersburg, 1908.

E.I. Martynov, *Blocada Plevny, (The Blockade of Plevna)*, St. Petersburg, 1900.

Kuropatkin, *Kritische Rückblicke auf den Russisch-Türkischen Krieg 1877-1878*, Berlin, 1885-1887, v. I-IV.

A. Kornilov, *Istoria Rossii v XIX veke*, v. III (History of Russia in the XIX-th century, v. III, p. 201 etc.

A. Boldur, *Contribuții la Studiul istoriei românilor*, v. III, (Studies in Romanian History, Contributions, v. III), Kishinev, 1940, p. 142-151.

M.N. Pokrovski, *Diplomatia i voyny tsarskoi Rossii v XIX-om stoletii*, (Diplomatic relations and wars of tsarist Russia in the XIX-th century), St. Petersburg, 1926, p. 264-301.

P.K. Fortunatov, *Voina 1877-1878 i osvobodzenie Bolgarii*, (The war of 1877-1878 and the liberation of Bulgaria), Moscow, 1950, p. 95-102 and 116-122.

² P.K. Fortunatov, *id.*, p. 96-97.

space for manoeuvring without hindrance were stuffed up with artillery and carts with supplies. The soldiers did not know the whereabouts of the enemy, and unexpectedly found themselves showered with Turkish bullets. Schilder offered no resistance, postponing his retaliation for the morrow, when instead of attacking the fortress with all available forces, he divided his troops into two columns stationed at a distance of 10 km between them.

The Russian attack failed. The Turks offered a courageous resistance forcing the Russians to retreat. The loss of men amounted to 2500 Russian soldiers and about 1500 Turks. Especially severe losses were sustained by two Russian regiments: the Archangelogorodsky and the Vologda regiments.

The defeat caused great worry at the Russian headquarters. It is not so much the loss of men as the defeat in itself that was extremely annoying. However instead of examining the causes of the defeat, the Russian headquarters was animated with the hope that at least a second attack would be successful.

The Grand Duke Nicholas entrusted the organization of the second attempt to general Krudener. From his esteem for the courage of the Turks in Plevna Krudener did not hurry to execute his orders.

More than a month's time elapsed. Only after receiving several telegrams from the Grand Duke urging him to action did Krudener give the order for the second attack. However, much precious time had been wasted, which permitted the Turks to strengthen their defences.

The Russians also sought to reinforce their position. At this point the correlation of forces of the two adversaries had also changed. The Russians disposed now of 30 000 men for the assault, while the Turks had only 24 000 soldiers for the defence. Osman Pasha received, unobserved by the Russians, reinforcements from the west.

The Russian forces were divided in two columns, in the same way as for the first attack. The distance between the two columns was 25 km. The first column under the command of gen. Veliaminov while Shahovskoi commanded the second.

A dense fog prevailed at the time of the second assault, and the adversaries could not see each other. Because of the fog Sha-

hovskoi's column missed the position assigned to it and going astray was surprised with showers of Turkish bullets. Getting no support this column retreated at 15,00 p.m.

It is interesting to note that Russian artillery fire did no harm to the defenders. It was as though the Turks had dug themselves in into the earth. And ploughing the earth with gunfire produced no effect.

M.N. Pokrovski states that the defeat suffered by the Russians was of extreme significance, since their losses amounted to almost one third of the whole Russian army on the Danube³.

The situation of the Russian army was becoming risky. The panic produced by the defeat suffered was so great that a considerable number of desertions appeared, while Puzanov the commander of the division 30 fled from the battlefield with a couch. The defeat suffered remains in history as a fact of great significance.

The failure of the second attack of Plevna produced a considerable impression in Russia. Criticism to the address of the imperial army appeared.

Pobedonostsev - a person of great influence in Russian society wrote in his letter to the Grand Duke Alexander (Alexandrovitch) : «We find ourselves in a terrible state of utmost tension in consequence of unexpected news from the front. Blunders have probably been made⁴.

At that time current opinion at headquarters put the number of Turks in Plevna at 70 thousand men, whereans the Russians disposed of only 48 thou. men for the assault.

Reinforcements were therefore requested.

The Russian headquarters was under a hypnotic influence of Plevna; the Russian commanders apprehended a Turkish sortie from the fortress and a thrust against the western flank of the Russian army. They felt no interest for ample plans of operation. Plevna was stuck into the flank of the Russian army and it was necessary to remove this threat. A supplementary mobilization was decreed, but since this required time, it was decided at headquarters to request military aid from Romania.

3 M.N. Pokrovski, *id.*, p. 282.

4 P.K. Fortunatov, *id.*, p. 101.

At the beginning of the siege of Plevna Romania was refused any activity. Now in the hour of great need her aid was requested. Great hopes were put on the Romanian army. Prince Carol was nominated in command of the western flank of the besieging army, with Zotov second in command. The latter was in command of the 4-th Army Corps recently arrived at the disposal of Russian headquarters.

As to the number of Romanian soldiers involved, different estimates have been made (at 40 and 50 thousand men. The lowest estimate is that given by Kornilov : 35 thousand⁵).

The Romanian army was familiar with siege operations with trenches, etc. It was not taught however the overwhelming force of the bayonet as the Russian army.

It is interesting to cite the notes of Gazenkampf, professor at the Military Academy in Petersburg, who was assigned the task of keeping a diary of operations and maintaining contacts with the press. His Diary was published in 1908.

Up to the date of the fall of Pleven he mentions several times in his diary the superior characteristics of the Romanian army. After the fall of the fortress when the need for the Romanian army was past, his attitude changes. Here are a few examples pertaining to the former period.

«2 Sept. (1877) The Turks are intensely digging trenches. With us entrenching tools are scarce. We haven't got even simple spades, yet there is nobody to attract attention to this. The Romanians have arranged their trenches beforehand with much precision, in a very fine way, whereas we have not done it.

12 Sept. The Grand Duke has sent Zotov a telegram. It is a shame to us that construction of fortifications should progress in the Romanian camp, while in our camp nothing is done.

20 Sept. I was ashamed to see how much more order there is in the Romanian camp than in ours. Bivouac sites are carefully and meticulously chosen and are arranged with care and punctuality; artillery pieces and soldiers' ammunition are systematically arranged; tents and dug-outs are aligned in rows, with intervals between

5 W. Rustow, *Der orientalische Krieg* (40-50 thou); A. Kornilov *id.*, v. III, p. 201 (35 thou). A. Boldur, *id.*, p. 143.

battalions and regiments. Cleanliness, decoration everywhere, and elegance everywhere. Even for the horses some kind of pent-houses are constructed. There is nothing the like with us even for the Tzar's horses. The troops parading to meet the Grand Duke marched in columns, not in disorder as it happens generally with us. Commanding officers were at their posts. We went to see the Romanian fortifications - and I felt ashamed for our own. The Romanian trenches approached very near the Turkish lines.»

For the third attempt of capturing Plevna it was decided to prepare the attack with artillery fire. This continued several days. But this bombardment was harmless, since the ramparts could not be destroyed and the Russians had very few special siege guns. Obtaining no result with these preliminaries, the Russo-Romanian army went to the assault. In order to avoid excessive bloodshed it was decided at headquarters that instead of concentrating the mass of assault troops at a certain point, the attack should be general, all round the fortress. Zotov was very active in discussions. At first he opposed this plan whose author was Levitski. When however he observed that the Commander-in-Chief approved of the plan, Zotov said no more.

The Russians were confident of their success and therefore fixed the date of the assault for the Emperor's namesday - the 30-th of August.

The Russians had no field telephonic communications. Osman Pasha disposed of telephonic service throughout the several parts of the fortress. The Russian army used telegraphic communications. A dispatch took 2-3 hours to come through.

The general result of the operation was a lamentable failure. Losses were very great not only with the Russians but also with the Romanians as well. The general loss was estimated at 20 thousand men. Here and there losses were even heavier (up to 70 % with gen. Skobelev).

A single item of success had been the capture of Grivitza by the Romanians - a fort of secondary importance. Otherwise the fortress suffered no damage.

The namesday present did not materialize.

The failure of the third attack of Plevna, aggravated by the

loss of some 40 % of the whole force brought over from Russia produced a profound impression. The Commander-in-Chief Grand Duke Nicholas quarrelled with the War Minister Miliutin.

The Emperor was annoyed.

In the afternoon of September 1, the Emperor Alexander II summoned the War Minister saying to him:

«We must give up the struggle for Plevna and retreat. We must admit that the present campaign has been a failure».

«But, said Miliutin, reinforcements are forthcoming (from the homeland)». The Grand Duke Nicholas - Commander-in-Chief declared that until the arrival of reinforcements he saw no possibility of holding out at Plevna, adding with great bitterness: «If you think it possible, please take over the high command and permit me to resign»⁶.

On the next day a large council was held at the Emperor's. The Grand Duke and Nepokaishitski sustained that the Russian army could not maintain its hold on Plevna. Massalski and Zotov supported this opinion. The Grand Duke acknowledged his inability to conduct ample operations and insisted on the idea of a retreat. As a result of prolonged debate, the opinion of those panick - stricken was rejected and it was decided not to retreat from the Danube, retaining the lines actually occupied before the defeat⁷.

M. Pokrovski opines that the defeat was due to the confidence in the bayonet, the assault, the hand-to-hand fight⁸.

Indeed an assault is only possible when the besieged fortress does not dispose of an efficient and numerous artillery. Plevna however disposed of a perfect artillery. It riposted from every side of the fortress with massive gunfire. How could one approach the enemy's lines under these conditions? It appears that at last headquarters realized that in the face of torrents of bullets nothing could be done. This supposition is supported by the fact that the renowned military engineer Todleben was summoned to come to the front. He arrived hurriedly in order to supervise the digging of trenches for siege warfare.

6 P.K. Fortunatov, *id.*, p. 120 .

7 P.K. Fortunatov, *id.*, p. 120-121.

8 M.N. Pokrovski, *id.*, p. 286.

He did not invent however anything original. To say nothing of the fact that he was an old man now, what could he possibly do in the face of an almost total absence of entrenching tools? In Prince Imeretinski's detachment which numbered over 20 battalions there was only a single group of diggers under the command of a non-commissioned officer. Shovels and spades were available in proportion of one spade to 20 soldiers.

These circumstances induced the idea of capturing the fortress by starvation. This required the putting up of a complete blockade of the fortress from every side. The Russians were now able to do this since reinforcements had arrived from the main country (the Imperial Guards and the Grenadiers) so that their army now counted 100 000 men.

Observation disclosed that provisions were brought over to the besieged from Sofia through three fortified strong points : Telis, Gorni Dubniak and Dolni Dubniak. An attack on Telis was repulsed. Gorni Dubniak was taken by assault with the loss of 4500 men. The third strong point was abandoned by the Turks. Plevna was now encircled and watched from every side and its destiny was to be decided by starvation of its garrison. Every path of entry was blockaded. Towards the end of November Osman Pasha's army had exhausted its provisions. On the 28-th November (December, 10) Osman Pasha made a desperate attempt to break through the blockade. However his sally was unsuccessful. Russian grenadiers, Siberian and Ukrainian soldiers stopped his progress. There was nothing else to do now but to surrender to the enemy. There 43 000 men in the fortress. Osman Pasha himself was suffering from a wounded leg.

It is of some interest to mention that on November 26, two days before the date of surrender, the Commander-in-Chief Grand Duke Nicholas telegraphed to general Gourko : «There are rumours that the Turks intend to attack the whole Russian army, yours included. May God help us to resist». The Grand Duke saw no other way of finishing off with Plevna but by a fourth assault. It was with utmost difficulty that Todleben succeeded to prevent him from ordering a fourth attack on the fortress.

Osman Pasha surrendered to the Romanian general Tcherkez. Half an hour later the Russian general Strukov arrived at the house

where Osman Pasha lay sheltered. A meeting between Osman Pasha and Prince Carol took place later, while the Grand Duke was the last to arrive*.

In a letter dated December 4, 1877 Prince Carol thus describes his meeting with Osman Pasha :

«On my way to the bridge over the Vid ... Here I met Osman Pasha : he was in a carriage, escorted by Romanian colonel Polizu's troopers. We approached. I shook hands with him and said that I had admired his courageous defence and that *his name would be glorified in the history of this war*. Although suffering from his wound, he stood up and thanked me ... Later came the Grand Duke Nicholas. We embraced before Osman, and the Duke heartily shook hands with him. Thereupon we two - the Duke and myself - proceeded on our way to town».

In Gazenkampf's diary we find the episode narrated thus :

«On our way to the r. Vid we got first the Romanian announcement of the cessation of the struggle and the surrender of Osman Pasha. Came also Skobelev and the hero of the day-Ganetsky ... We returned by the Plevna route to the bridge ... Soon the Prince Carol arrived. We met him and traversed the bridge over the Vid together ... when I noticed a couch coming towards us. It was Osman Pasha, a young and handsome man. On the opposite seat facing him sat the doctor. The Grand Duke approached, shook hands with him and speaking in French expressed his respect for *his bravery* and distinguished defense of Plevna. Whereupon all of us spontaneously exclaimed «Bravo, Osman Pasha!». It was apparent he was very much moved by such a welcome. Following the Grand Duke, in turn, Prince Carol, Nepokoitski, Todleben and other superior generals approaching presented themselves to Osman, shook hands and paid their compliments to him ... Afterwards, the doctor declaring that Osman's wound was not yet properly dressed, the Grand Duke agreed to his returning to Plevna, there to pass the night at his lodgings».

It would appear that the three narratives cited are concerned

9 A. Boldur, *id.*, p. 148; Gazenkampf, *id.* p. 205-206.

with as many different moments of Osman Pasha's meetings with Russian and Romanian generals.

In Russian historical works the statement is often met : Plevna was taken by the Russians. Thus for instance in the Short Encyclopedia of 1950 we read :

«After a long siege *Plevna was taken by the Russians* on the 26-th November (December 10) 1877, which constituted a turning-point in the history of the 1877-1878 war¹⁰».

The statement is inexact. *Plevna surrendered* in consequence of a shortage of supplies. When its heroic defence was no longer possible because of famine, Plevna surrendered. Of course the Russians subsequently occupied it.

The Plevna episode represents in the history of the 1877-1878 war a brilliant page of resistance of the Turkish army.

10 *The Concise Encyclopedia* (in 3 vol.), v. III, p. 143.