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Turkish military hospital at the Skull Tower in Niš (1872–1878)

Турска војна болница код Ћеле-куле у Нишу (1872–1878)

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SUMMARY

With a history that lasts for 146 years, the military hospital at the Skull Tower in Niš is one of the most esteemed medical institutions of the Army of the Republic of Serbia. However, in previous researches about it, it was not sufficiently emphasized that the hospital was, in the same place and with the same function, an inherited institution from the Ottoman era, which ended in Niš in 1878. In Serbian historiography, there are practically no works on this topic. This is exactly why we conducted the research of the history of this military hospital in the period under the Ottomans. In that way, we achieved the goals of our research: to establish direct connection between the Ottoman and Serbian military hospital (as well as the health practices that were carried out in both) and move the year when military health institution at the Skull Tower was founded deeper into the past. In addition, the research also led us to findings that challenge the established opinion in Serbian historiography, that in Niš during the last decades under the Ottomans there were no highly educated health personnel and that modern medicine was not practiced there during that time. To achieve all of the above, we used unpublished Ottoman archival materials, narrative sources and Ottoman press from the 19th century, as well as the works of various scientific formats by contemporary Serbian, Turkish and European authors.

Keywords: Niš; Ottomans; health care system; army; hospital; 19th century

САЖЕТАК

Са историјом која траје већ 146 година, војна болница код Ћеле-куле у Нишу једна је од најугледнијих здравствених установа Војске републике Србије. Међутим, у досадашњим истраживањима о њој недовољно се наглашавало да је болница била, на истом месту и са истом функцијом, наслеђена институција из османске епохе која је у Нишу окончана 1878. године. У српској историографији радова на ту тему практично нема. Управо смо због тога спровели истраживање о историји ове војне болнице у периоду под Османлијама. На тај начин остварили смо циљеве нашег истраживања: утврдили смо директну везу између османске и српске војне болнице (као и здравствене праксе која се у обе спроводила) и померили дубље у прошлост годину оснивања војне здравствене установе код Ћеле-куле. Осим наведеног, истраживање нас је довело и до сазнања која оспоравају уврежено мишљење у српској историографији, да у Нишу током последњих деценија под Османлијама није било високообразованог здравственог кадра, као и да се у граду за то време није спроводила савремена медицинска пракса.

У циљу постизања свега наведеног, за истраживање је коришћена необјављена османска архивска грађа, наративни извори и османска штампа из 19. века, као и дела различитог научног формата савремених српских, турских и европских аутора.

Кључне речи: Ниш; Османлије; систем здравствене заштите; војска; болница; 19. век

INTRODUCTION

After the Principality of Serbia took over Niš in 1878, a new era began in the history of this city. Aside from the political and urban changes, the city also went through a cultural metamorphosis in which the Ottoman westernization of Niš was replaced by the Europeanization under the Obrenović dynasty [1]. However, several institutions from the Ottoman era not only survived those changes, but also evolved in such a way that they almost retained their original function and continued to exist under the new authorities. One of such institutions is the military hospital at the Skull Tower.

Ottoman military medicine is a topic that is generally not sufficiently explored even by the Turkish researchers, so the information about the military hospital at the Skull Tower is extremely scarce. That is why we had to rely on indirect data, in order to reconstruct its work. In addition, we consulted the references about the issue of public health in the Ottoman Empire

and analyzed the state of health care in Ottoman Niš during the 19th century for projecting the functioning of the hospital and evaluation of its importance.

THE ISSUES OF PUBLIC HEALTH IN OTTOMAN NIŠ DURING THE 19th CENTURY

During the 19th century under the Ottomans, Niš was a particularly colorful community of various ethnicities and religions. As opposed to politics and religion, the domain in which they all voluntarily embraced the influence from each other was folk medicine or, to be more precise, the mixture of phytotherapy, folklore and superstition.

The Muslims in Niš were inclined to the mysticism and folklore of other religious groups due to the great popularity of the Bektashis in this city. The theosophy of this dervish order was a mixture of mysticism, folklore, and Islamic and Judeo-Christian beliefs [2], which helped in developing the cults of several local Muslim saints to whom Muslims used to pray for aid [3].

The local Christian population was traditionally treated with various herbs that were picked on major religious holidays or consecrated in churches during the ceremonies. When the herbs did not provide a solution, the people turned to superstition and quacks, who treated more with autosuggestion than proper medical intervention. Ottoman Niš in the 19th century was full of such „experts”: Muslim priests who made magical writings and amulets, Christian monks who read special prayers, self-taught midwives and bone settlers, barbers and tin artisans, spell casters, and self-proclaimed pharmacists who treated all possible diseases with their strange remedies [4, 5]. All of them offered solutions to combat the omnipresent invisible demons and spirits (bacteria and germs) who brought disease and death. The remedies and treatment methods of these people were equally obscure, ranging from the use of herbs that actually have medicinal value to animal feces, human urine and dust from craftsmen's shops [4, 5].

Naturally, such ignorant understanding of health was reflected in public hygiene. The streets were narrow and the districts dark and airless, always shaded by overgrown gardens and lush trees full of mosquitoes. The artisans used to dump waste water in front of their shops [6]. Inns and taverns often did not have stables, so the feces of draft cattle and horses remained around these buildings, causing a bad smell and dense swarms of flies. Septic tanks in households were dug shallowly and, when overflowed, they were simply

buried and new ones were dug nearby. There were 17 public fountains in the city. Most of them had poorly maintained pipeline, so during heavy rains the water from them was full of mud, rot

and insects [7]. Private wells were not in better condition, either. Households usually burned garbage on Saturday evenings, so the whole city was enveloped in thick smelly fog for a day [7]. Domestic animals moved freely, so it was normal for their half-decomposed corpses to be found everywhere [6, 8].

All this caused Niš to be an epidemic hell, a community where deaths from tuberculosis, venereal and intestinal diseases, malaria, dysentery, scarlet fever and typhoid were an accepted everyday occurrence for decades [5, 7, 9].

THE OTTOMAN PUBLIC HEALTH CARE SYSTEM IN 19TH CENTURY

The development of modern public health care mechanisms in the Ottoman Empire begins with Sultan Selim III (1789–1807) and his military reforms [10]. With the aim of modernizing the Ottoman army according to the European model, the sultan began to develop the services that should take care of it, including health condition. In this regard, the first Ottoman military hospital was founded in 1799 under the name Levent Estate Hospital (Levent Çiftliği Hastahanesi) [11]. It worked parallel with classical public hospitals (dâr-üş şifâ) and, as the rest of Selim III reforms' outcomes, it was promoted in different regions of the country over time. A system of barracks of the modernized Ottoman army was developed with the hospital department attached to them. This system of military barracks was maintained throughout the 19th century, and in many provincial centers

(including Niš) these military hospital departments would be responsible for local public health care.

The first modern Ottoman medical school was founded in 1805 under the name Medical School at the Imperial Arsenal [12]. It provided not only medical education, but also health treatments, working that way as some sort of a clinic. However, the school burned down in 1822 and it was left as such for several years.

The new enhancement of the Ottoman public medical system was the foundation of the Imperial Medical College in 1827 in Constantinople [13]. In the following decades, this higher education institution grew, changed its name and location, raised the quality of teaching, and developed courses for numerous branches of medicine. By the middle of the 19th century, it had become a custom for the lecturers to be distinguished experts from the countries of Central and Western Europe, and for the courses to be conducted in French, as complex and modern as in Europe at that time [13, 14]. Although the sultans and the State generously supported the work of the

college, throughout the 19th century the staff it trained was not numerous enough to visibly contribute to the health picture of the Ottoman state, especially in the provinces. The Crimean War (1853–1856) further emphasized the need for trained doctors at the state level, but the percentage of applicants to the Imperial Medical College was chronically low. The reasons for that were the social structure of Ottoman society and the European character of the college's program, which was too alien and challenging to most potential candidates. This situation forced the State to tolerate the work of quacks and questionable practitioners in the provinces. However, in order to distinguish valid physicians from mere quacks, the Law on the Practice of Medicine in the Provinces (1861) mandated that all of them must have certificates and licenses to practice medicine or pharmacy [13]. Filtering provincial quacks in this way, the State referred people in the provinces to the services of trained doctors.

MEDICAL STAFF AND CAPACITIES IN NIŠ BEFORE 1872

Although the population relied on quacks and folk healers, the local authorities did a lot to ensure there are always trained doctors in Niš and the capacity for the proper medical treatment. For this reason, we challenge the findings of some Serbian researchers and claims in official monographs about the military hospital at Skull Tower, that there were no civilian or other trained doctors in Niš before 1878 [5, 7, 8, 15].

According to the published narratives from the 19th century, trained doctors were present in Niš since 1829 [16]. Also, the holdings at Archives of Presidency of the Republic of Turkey (BOA), such as Sadaret Mektubi Kalemi Evrakı, Mühimme Kalemi Evrakı, Hariciye Nezareti Mektubi Kalemi, Hariciye Nezareti Tercüme Odasi, Sadaret Umum Vilayat Evrakı, Meclis-i Vala and Irade Dahiliye preserve numerous documents which confirm the presence of the official doctors at Niš until 1878. Often, they were not entitled with the same position or qualifications – some were mentioned as surgeons, city doctors (Niš kasaba tabibi), military doctors or simply as doctors [16–20]. For some of them it is mentioned they were trained at the Imperial Medical College in Constantinople [17, 21], but for the others the information about their education lacks. Also, all the doctors were not the Muslims by default. Many of them were native Ottoman Slavs, Jews or Greeks [4, 17], some even Europeans (Austrians, Italians, French) who sought the service on the

Ottoman side [16, 22]. Although their services lasted in average from one to three years, the point is that Niš has never been without an educated doctor from 1830s till 1878. Therefore,

every civilian or soldier who trusted them (of who could afford them) had a chance to have a medical treatment proper for that time.

As for the medical institutions, in 1878 the Serbian authorities in Niš inherited the hospital on the Leskovac Road, Islahana and the large hospital at the Skull Tower [8, 9, 15]. The first was actually the sick bay of the modern military barracks under Bubanj Hill (so called *The New Barracks*), which Midhat Pasha built in 1862 [23]. Islahana was an orphanage and a craft school, which was adapted into a hospital on the eve of the Serbian-Ottoman wars (1876–1878). The third building was the only one built with the purpose and with the specialized facilities to provide professional medical help, hence, a hospital in the true sense.

THE BUILDING OF THE MILITARY HOSPITAL AT THE SKULL TOWER

In search for primary material about this hospital in the period 1872–1878, we looked into the Archives of Presidency of the Republic of Turkey (BOA) and examined about 10,000 pages of Ottoman press from the 19th century. We did not manage to find a single archival document directly related to this building before 1878, though it is certain that Serbian authorities in 1883 passed over to the Ottoman counterpart all documentation found in the Ottoman hospitals in Niš [24]. We managed to solve this obstacle by consulting the sources, narratives and literature that provide indirect information. That way we successfully reconstructed the capacities and conditions in which this institution

worked. The large military hospital in Niš was built right next to the Skull Tower, the edifice which the governor of Niš Hurshid Pasha built after the victory over the Serbian insurgents on Čegar in 1809. This location was suitable for technical, financial and logistical reasons.

The main part of the building that was used for the hospital was actually a summer residence owned by the successors of Hafis Pasha, an Ottoman commander and the governor of Niš who died on Ivankovac (1805) fighting against the Serbian insurgents [25]. Since the Ottoman government in the late Tanzimat (1853–1876) preferred to buy off existing buildings, instead of building the new ones from the scratch, from the point of saving costs it was quite understandable why spacious (and neglected) buildings like a residence on the outskirts of Niš were a financially suitable solution.

Logistically, the hospital in this place was suitable because of the proximity of the section of the Via Militaris which led from Niš to Sofia. In this way, the hospital was located at the very opposite end of Niš from where it could be in danger in the case of a war with the Principality

of Serbia. In addition, the spacious field that stretched from Skull Tower to Niška Banja to the east offered the possibility, in case of need, to erect additional barracks directly around the hospital for the reception of the sick and wounded, without being hindered by the dense city infrastructure. Also, to the west of Skull Tower, in the direction toward the center of Niš, there was a colony of Circassian and Tatar refugees from the Crimea. The hospital near Skull Tower could directly meet their health needs. With all this, we should not ignore the fact that the hospital in this part of the outskirts of Niš, with its human nature, pacified the terrible Skull Tower, a building that spread a bad name about the Ottomans in Europe and which the governor of Niš Midhat Pasha wanted to remove in the 1860s [25].

What other conditions the Ottoman engineers used to take in consideration when building the hospitals can be seen from the report of certain major Tosun Effendi. In 1860 he was engaged to inspect the location for building a hospital in Priština. For the parcel he found suitable for a hospital in his report he wrote it was on the meadow (vast, green and suitable for growing garden), it is located in the upper part of the town (secure from floods), it was 3 to 5 minutes away from the downtown (meaning, from the noise, dirt and bad smell from overcrowded districts), it was supplied with running water (streams or creeks) and the micro-climate was mild [12]. The location at Skull Tower was simply perfect by all these standards, with one exception. The creek Gabrovačka Reka, which passes only 100 m from Skull Tower, had a water flow too weak, so it was most likely used only for removal of waste and wasted water from the hospital. What is certain is that the Serbian hospital after 1878 used the creek for that [26]. Ottoman engineers solved the supply of drinking water in some other way.

Due to the lack of archival materials, especially budget and inspectional ledgers (keşif defters), it is impossible to reliably estimate the costs of building the hospital. Based on preserved documents on the construction of military hospitals in the Balkan provinces since the 1860s and the funds Ottoman authorities spent for the construction of complex institutions in Niš in the 1860s and 1870s (Islahana, telegraph station, the New barracks, Serbian school), the expenses might have stretched from 116,000 up to 860,000 piasters [12, 25]. This is where our further speculation ends.

Finally, on May 1, 1872, a hospital, projected by Major Osman Effendi from Sofia, was opened [27]. The ceremonial opening was attended by the current governor of Niš, Ali-Riza Pasha, and, as was the protocol, representatives of the high city administration and religious communities in Niš, notable citizens and numerous crowd.

According to Osman Effendi's project, the hospital had two floors. On the ground floor, there were two sickrooms, a room for orderlies, an operating room, a pharmacy, a storage room for clothes, a pantry room, a kitchen and a bathroom. The second floor had two sickrooms with 88 beds, two rooms for servants, a pharmacy lab, a room for the orderlies, a visiting room and a special room for women who have recently given birth [25].

Since the hospital was the largest medical institution in the County of Niš, and from the very beginning, it had complex units (operating room, pharmacy, laboratory), performed deliveries and took care of bedridden patients, we can speculate what other ancillary facilities must or could have been part of the hospital complex. For this, we used the organization plan of the Imperial Medical College in Constantinople (from the second half of the 19th century), which was the most equipped medical institution in the Ottoman Empire [12]. According to our estimates, because of the pharmaceutical laboratory where the drugs were prepared, the hospital must have had some kind of greenhouse or botanical garden. Also, the spacious field around it made it possible to have a garden for convalescents to walk and to grow fruits and vegetables for feeding the sick. A barn was also necessary for the latter. If patients were not fed in sickrooms, the hospital probably had some kind of canteen or messroom. As the largest hospital in the county, this institution could also have had its own morgue. The operating room and the surgeons in the hospital's permanent staff allowed for the possibility for the autopsies to be performed as part of the investigative procedure: however, this is questionable due to the unpopularity of this procedure among the Muslim population from the religious perspective. Of the auxiliary facilities, the hospital certainly had a reservoir with accumulated water for the maintenance of sanitary conditions and fire prevention, a firewood and coal shed, a basement, etc.

From all this it is obvious that the hospital right from the start was not intended for the military staff only, but to provide health care for the entire civilian population, as well. Regarding that, we even have statistics for the first year of its work (March 1872 – August 1873). According to these statistics, during the first year, the hospital treated 311 male and 293 female patients, of which 21 men and 3 women died [27]. The newspaper article from "Tuna gazetesi" did not specify which territory this number refers to, whether it is only the city of Niš or the entire county. Also, it is unknown what was the ratio between the patients who were treated in the hospital and those who did it at home, using other methods. The only conclusion is that according to the number of patients who died (only 4%), the hospital undeniably contributed to the quality of health of the local population.

The circumstances during the Serbian-Ottoman wars completely exhausted the capacities of the hospital, so the Serbian authorities in 1878 found it as a neglected and ruined institution. The head of the Serbian military medical service, doctor Vladan Đorđević, visited the hospital during the very first days after the Serbian army took Niš. He did not leave a description of the state in which he found it, but indirectly stated that it was in the same condition as the hospital at The New Barracks: sheets and blankets were dirty beyond any acceptance, the patients were left neglected and without any professional supervision, the floors and corridors were muddy and contaminated heavily with filth, pharmacy stocks in disarray and the medical utensils scattered or stolen [28]. However, a lot of hospital materials and supplies were still there, which convinced doctor Đorđević that it was indeed a healthcare facility, so it could be still used as such.

The importance of the hospital at the Skull Tower was already known to Serbian authorities. Therefore, the Serbian government invested funds in its renovation and immediately returned it to its original function. The process was initiated by doctor Đorđević himself. On January 7, 1878, he submitted a proposal to the Serbian Supreme Military Staff to form a system of a Great military hospital in Niš, made of the hospital at the Skull Tower, Islahana and The New Barracks. The Serbian Ministry of Finance approved the funds for the initiative on January 9, and the very next day the new medical system in Niš began operating [28]. The Great military hospital in Niš was organized in six medical wards. The First ward was located at the hospital at the Skull Tower, which indicates the importance this facility had for the new authorities. A large complex of supporting facilities was built around it, and the hospital was handed over to the Chief physician, doctor Đorđe Dimitrijević to run it [29]. This completed the transfer of the hospital from the Ottoman to Serbian management and started a new era in its work, to become a reputable institution of Serbian military healthcare system, which lasts till these days.

CONCLUSION

Due to historical circumstances, before 1878 Niš was exempted from the modernization that the Serbian state was going through at that time, but in the same period it was included in the strategy of adopting European novelties implemented by the Ottoman state. The most visible evidence of this is in the matters of general public interest, such as public health. In this regard, the results of our research proved that the Ottoman hospital at the Skull Tower was the first primary healthcare institution in Niš and the predecessor of the Serbian military hospital founded in 1878 at the same place. The historical facts are that these institutions had different

organization and technical conditions; moreover, they belonged to different states and governing systems. But they also had the same primary function and the importance for the local community, which makes them the sole institution that actually belongs to two different eras.

The milestone of evolution that the hospital at the Skull tower has gone through was the year of 1878. Although with the capacities crippled by the Serbian-Ottoman wars, the hospital at that time still had potential to evolve further. Its position, capacities and strategical value, which the Ottomans set, made it easy to Serbian doctor Vladan Đorđević to act swiftly and turn the hospital at the Skull Tower into what it is today. Due to historical circumstances, we will never learn whether the Ottomans also had such ambitious plans for the hospital after 1878. The only certain things are the straight historical continuity in the functioning of the hospital under the Ottoman and Serbian authority and the fact this institution moves the foundation of modern health care in Niš deeper into the past. That way, in the wider scope, the hospital at the Skull Tower contributes to heterogeneity (therefore, the cosmopolitan character) of the historical heritage of this city.

Ethics: The authors declare that the article was written according to the ethical standards of the Serbian Archives of Medicine as well as ethical standards of institutions for each author involved.

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