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## THE DANUBE – BLACK SEA CANAL: BETWEEN GEOGRAPHY AND POLITICS (THE 1850’S)

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### КАНАЛЪТ ДУНАВ – ЧЕРНО МОРЕ: МЕЖДУ ГЕОГРАФИЯТА И ПОЛИТИКАТА (50-ТЕ ГОДИНИ НА XIX ВЕК)

The idea of a canal across Dobruja is certainly not original. Some work may have been carried out in classical times.

The idea of a canal came up in 1837 and it was fathered by the Scottish diplomat David Urquhart who starting from 1831, spent many years in the Ottoman Empire. Urquhart suggested the construction of a canal “connecting the Danube to the Black Sea at the point where the Danube came closest to the Sea, which would save the delay and perils associated with sailing to the Danube Mouths”.

The end of the Crimean War in 1856, led to a Russian withdrawal from the Danube and the powers now decided to concentrate on the improvement of the river. From 1856, the maritime Danube was administered by a European Commission of the Danube (ECD) in order to keep the river open for the ships of all nations.

The canal scheme lapsed but a railway across Dobruja was considered feasible and was approved by the Porte in 1860. Although the canal was not built, the idea was not abandoned altogether but resumed in 1883, after the union of Dobruja, on several occasions, before World War I and, again, in the Interwar period. During World War I the Austro-Hungarians envisaged a project of a canal following the line of Cernavodă – Murfatlar – Constanța of which 27 miles *had to be in the open* and 10 miles (from Murfatlar to Constanța) – *in a tunnel*. No practical consequence followed in this case either.

**Keywords:** canal, project, Dobruja, David Urquhart, Crimean War, Austrian projects.

The idea of a canal across Dobruja is certainly not original. Some work may have been carried out in classical times. And it seems that there was a canal in existence in the eighteenth century.

This Laman Canal, of very small capacity, was fed by water from the Carasu, Tasaul and other lakes and entered the Black Sea near Cape Midia. But it cannot have achieved great significance because when Austria created a Danube shipping company in 1834, under the supervision of the Hungarian aristocrat Istvan Szechenyi, the company considered a new Bogaskoi – Kustendje (Cernavodă – Constanța) canal as a means of overcoming the navigational difficulties in the Danube Delta.

Moldavia and Wallachia, under Turkish domination and Russian protection, were keen to see commercial developments but the Porte rejected the scheme, apparently because of pressure from Saint Petersburg and goods had to be taken across Dobruja by road (Turnock 1986: 65-79).

From the second half of the eighteenth century Austria's commercial and strategic interest in the Danube Mouths and in navigation in the Black Sea became ever more important and turned into an official preoccupation of the Imperial Court. The first commercial expedition on the Lower Danube to the Black Sea occurred in 1768, with the Austrians reaching Kherson. Hans Kleeman, the initiator of this expedition, made upon his return an enthusiastic report, which Empress Maria Theresa read with utmost interest. In the following decades, Emperor Joseph II believed that the opening of a commercial axis on the Lower Danube to the Black Sea and Istanbul could boost the Austrian-Turkish commercial relations, which had been rather modest until then. The opening of a river and sea route called for an appropriate fleet. Starting with 1779, Austrian explorations on the Lower Danube became systematic and resulted in the drawing of accurate maps and the building of a fleet of light river vessels similar with the Ottoman *kaiks*, far more suitable for the final section of the river. An Austrian-Ottoman commercial convention was eventually signed in 1784 and the Austrians' navigation on the Danube was effectively liberalized. Commercial expeditions were organized, fortunes were amassed and bankruptcies occurred overnight.

The Imperial Court in Vienna encouraged every initiative in the area and at the time when the treaty of 1784 was being signed, the opening of an Austrian navigable way on the Lower Danube seemed to be a political priority to Emperor Joseph II. His death in 1790 and the troubled times of the Napoleonic wars took their toll and Austria, forced to regroup politically and geographically, suspended all plans in the Black Sea. Only in 1834 would Austria become again a force to be reckoned with in the Lower Danube, owing to Donaudampfschifs.

However, a commercial river and sea route entailed great difficulties of geographical, political and military nature.

Each of the three main arms of the Danube (Kilia, Sulina, and St. George) presented serious drawbacks to navigation. The Kilia arm was the deepest, but its mouths were extremely unstable and hence dangerous for navigation. Before World War II, the Russians accommodated here the secondary branch of Otchakof in order to spare their Odessa-Danube line the hazards of Kilia.

The Sulina arm was not sufficiently deep to allow large maritime ships to go upstream to Galăbi or Braila where the journey of the river barges ended, and where the loading of the maritime ships must be affected. Moreover, Sulina was in the thick of the Delta and was isolated from the Romanian railroad network.

Finally, the St. George arm was the least deep and was extremely sinuous, and hence impractical for maritime ships.

Austrian explorations were resumed, in order to find the most convenient link between the Danube and the Black Sea. The idea of a canal came up in 1837 and it was fathered by the Scottish diplomat David Urquhart, who starting with 1831 spent a great many years in the Ottoman Empire. Urquhart suggested the building of a

canal « connecting the Danube to the Black Sea at the point where the Danube came closest to the Sea, which would save the delay and perils associated with sailing to the Danube Mouths.”

The project did not go unnoticed, and the German botanist August Grisebach was one of the first to show interest in it in 1839. At that date, Grisebach was a “private” tutor (*Privatdocent*) at Göttingen University and member of several scientific societies (including the *Society of Botany* of Regensburg, the *Association for the Study of Nature and Medicinal Plants* of Göttingen, and the *Association for Natural Sciences* of Harz). Grisebach was also one of the founders of the geography of plants as a new scientific subject, and his main work was *Die Vegetation der Erde nach ihrer Klimat Anordnung* (2 volumes printed in 1872 and re-edited in 1884).

Trips made to correlate geography with botany also took him to Dobruja, after a long voyage on the Danube. In 1839, along with other researchers, Grisebach decided to make an expedition to the mountains of Albania in order to study flora and geological phenomena, because as he himself confessed, such a study had not been undertaken until then. There were several possible routes for this trip and eventually a roundabout way chosen for reasons of safety. They headed from Vienna, on the Danube and the Black Sea, to Istanbul, in order to procure all the required permits and hire an experienced guide who would to serve as interpreter as well. The latter proved to be very helpful, especially as once in Istanbul, curiosity drove them not to Albania but to Brussa and Bithynia, from where they returned to Thrace to finally reach Macedonia and Albania (Grisebach 1841; see also Călători străini 2006: 756).

All the travel notes are scientific observations. The botanist was only interested in flora, fauna, layer geology, relief and climate information. He was oblivious to social and political aspects, but was impressed by the great ethnic diversity of the area and noted several details, which he considered characteristic for a future anthropological classification.

The cumbersome travelling formalities in the Ottoman Empire made Grisebach stay on Turkish soil and make no incursion into the neighbouring lands. As a result, all his stops were made on what nowadays is the Bulgarian shore of the Danube. The only Romanian towns he visited were Brăila and Galați, where the Danube was in Romanian territory. His notes again make a description of nature and of the inhabitants. However, one may also find information about the sailing difficulties on the Sulina arm, attributable to the natural conditions and to the political situation in the area.

Grisebach was able to find out that upon entering the Delta through Tulcea, it was difficult to make progress, because the river arm was narrow and rather shallow, and the lack of wind, especially due to the tortuous course of the Danube, made it necessary for the ships to be towed from the land, with local help. The Russian control of navigation on the Danube established by the Treaty of Unkiar – Iskelesi (1831) added to these natural difficulties.

“A Russian gunboat greeted us; there were checkpoints along the banks, like on a military border. The entrance to Sulina arm is very narrow. A ship recently sunk half-blocked <the access>; another ship sunk in that place would have sealed out <this> Danube Mouth.” Although there is no other comment, it seems quite obvious

that the vessel had been left there on purpose, and that the Russians had strict control over the Sulina arm and were ready to close it if necessary.

Grisebach greatly admired the Dobrujan landscape and took the opportunity to speak of the Danube – Black Sea project in geographical terms. He notes in a purely scientific way that at Cernavodă “the Danube takes a spectacular turn towards the north, which lengthens its course by at least 30 geographical miles“ (Călători străini 2006: 24)<sup>1</sup>. As a natural result, to shorten the way, the construction of a road linking Cernavodă to Constanța had begun. Additionally, it would have been quite easy to build a navigable canal between Brăila, Cernavodă and Constanța, and the German botanist knew that such a project was under consideration. His love for geography made him consider that the navigable route could be best built “from between the slopes of the Balkans to the south of Babadag, at sea level“ (Călători străini 2006: 25) He takes the opportunity to describe the geological structure of the mountains of Dobruja and of the Babadag plateau as being the linking bridge between Asia and Europe, with a particular relief reminiscent of the Mediterranean cliffs and of the arid landscape of Arabia and Persia. Grisebach believed that the Babadag Mountains closed both the Romanian plains to the east and the Balkans to the south, and therefore it was natural that the Danube – Black Sea canal should be built across this plateau.

In 1844, the Imperial Court in Vienna made a new survey of Dobruja and the Danube Mouths to assess the possibility of building a canal to shorten the way and especially to provide optimal conditions for navigation. Engineer Karl von Birago (Călători străini 2006: 26-27) was sent over, but the project was abandoned due to its costs. However, the issue of a Danube – Black Sea canal was now of general concern and in 1851 Ion Ionescu de la Brad, who was the father of agronomy studies in the Romanian Principalities, brought it back into focus. In an article published in the front page of “Journal de Constantinople”, the Romanian agronomist argued that if the Danube could be redirected on an old arm between Cernavodă and Constanța, this would shorten the distance by 150 French lieues, the canal length being of 16 French lieues, with a French lieue rating 4 km.

A political approach to the importance of a canal linking Cernavodă to the Black Sea was made during the Crimean War (1853–1856) by General Heinrich von Hess in the effort to increase Austrian domination in the Romanian space. The Austrian presence here would have been a model of economic efficiency, probity and humanitarianism. Therefore, the Romanians, weary from years of Ottoman domination, would have seen the Austrians as their liberators and not the Russians.

A professional soldier, Heinrich von Hess enrolled in the army in 1805 and was commissioned with trigonometry operations at the General Headquarters of the Imperial army. In 1809, he distinguished himself in the battle of Wagram and was promoted captain in the campaign of 1813. In 1815 he became a major, in 1822 – a lieutenant colonel, and in 1829 – a colonel. In 1831, his military merits received recognition and he was appointed head of the General Headquarters of the mobile

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<sup>1</sup> 1 mile = 1,6 km.

corps of Lombardy, where he strove to improve military training. He thus became known as one of the best officers of the Imperial army and in 1834 he was promoted major general, and in 1842 – lieutenant field marshal.

In 1851–1853, von Hess was entrusted with several military missions in Warsaw, Saint Petersburg and Berlin.

In 1854, he negotiated and closed the treaty between Austria and Prussia concerning the participation in the Crimean War. He was subsequently appointed at the head of the observation corps for Galicia and Transylvania. In 1854, he occupied Iași (where he stayed until 1856) and was successful in repelling the Russian troops from the Danube Mouths.

The prodigious military, political and diplomatic activity of von Hess made the information conveyed by him to Count Karl von Buol-Schauenstein<sup>2</sup> in October 1854, while in Iași, and in December 1854, when a meeting of the ambassadors of the great powers was being held in Vienna in an attempt to re-establish peace, extremely valuable. He was an eye witness to and a participant in the events occurred in Moldavia and Wallachia during the Crimean War (Iorga 1912: 850; see also Călători străini 2010: 370-381).

Von Hess advocated the idea that Austria by historic vocation was meant to remove the Russian Protectorate from the Romanian Principalities, as the economic interests of the latter were naturally linked to the interests of the Habsburg Empire. Also, the Habsburg Empire had the necessary financial means to take Moldavia out of crisis and build the railroad from Mihăileni to Iași, and to Galați. Von Hess believed that two million guildens would be enough, one to cover the public debt of Moldavia and another one for investments in the railroad. Moreover, the general believed that Austria was an example of moderation and “humanity” in politics, and a model of economic and technical modernization to be followed. To stimulate the circulation of goods on the Danube in the direction of the Black Sea, the best solution was a canal<sup>3</sup> or a railroad between Cernavodă and Constanța.

“One should eventually consider the freeing of all the enclaves Russia had until now at the Danube Mouths, by a convention with the Porte, signed by us (and not the French or English), for the construction of a canal or a railway from Cernavodă to Constanța or Varna, so that commodities might reach the Black Sea and the Bosphorus by the shortest and most convenient route, which would not only bring a

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<sup>2</sup> A well-known Austrian diplomat austriac and a protégé of Prince Klemens von Metternich, Karl von Buol-Schauenstein (1797–1865), was the Austrian ambassador to Piedmont-Sardinia at the outbreak of the 1848 Revolution in Italy. In 1848–1850, he was ambassador to Saint Petersburg. He pursued his career as a permanent representative of Austria at the conference of Dresden (1850–1851), and in 1852, he was appointed ambassador in London. During the Crimean War, he organized in Vienna several rounds of negotiations of the ambassadors of the great powers, with Austria as a peace mediator between Russia on the one hand, and England, France and the Ottoman Empire, on the other hand. In this quality, von Hess made known his opinion on the clauses of the prospective peace. For the biography and the career of Count Karl von Buol-Schauenstein see also Heindl 1970.

favourable turn to our exchanges with the agrarian population of this country, but provide the entire Germany with a safe and permanent outlet at the Danube Mouths as well” (Iorga 1912: 857).

Compared with the sinuous line of the Danube, which in its last section branched into arms full of silt, formed islets and had many rapids whose various depths made navigation difficult, the relatively straight portion between Cernavodă and Constanța shortened the distance considerably, and the technical expertise and financial resources of the “Austrian capitalists” could make the building of a canal or railroad a “mere child’s play”, wrote von Hess. Costs would amount to five or six million guildens, which in the general’s opinion was an investment “as easy as it is safe” and profitable for Austrian finance.

Von Hess’ interest in the mouths of the Danube is formulated in precise terms, with the accuracy of a professional soldier, together with a very good knowledge of European politics and a sense of reality. Security in the area was sought by all the European powers, that wanted free navigation and a restriction of the privileges Russia had obtained from the Ottoman Empire. Any attempt to control Sulina or St. George would have been counteracted by the presence between Reni and Tulcea of the Russians, who could “at any time raise all possible obstacles in the way of navigation on the Danube, both in times of war and of peace” (Călători străini 2006: 858-860).

The Austrian military presence aimed to expel the Russian troops, which had occupied the Principalities in the summer of 1853, this act being considered a blatant violation of the peace between the Ottoman and the Russian Empires, and in response, France and England stated their support for Turkey, declaring war on Russia (Ciachir, Bercan 1984: 333-335; see also *Schroeder* 1972, Boicu1972, Boicu1978).

One should note the general’s moderation in relation to Russia during the negotiations and the hostilities of the Crimean War. On the background of a Europe in which the great powers, alarmed by the rapid Russian expansion in the Black Sea basin and the Balkan region, supported the Ottoman Empire and opposed Russia, von Hess believed that negotiations could bring many more benefits than a costly war could. A peace resulting from an armed conflict could not last, especially if entailing the forced imposition of territorial cession, war reparations to be paid by Russia and her loss of prestige among the great powers of the continent. For all these reasons, the general recommended caution and rational measures by which a brutal recalibration of the balance of power in the Black Sea region, at the Danube Mouths, and in the Balkans could be avoided. Options leading to the same result in a diplomatic manner were to be considered and brought into discussion. Therefore, instead of tearing down Sebastopol, an act that “no power would willingly accept and thus no power should demand”, the constructive solution would have been to build a new fortress in Ottoman territory, near Sebastopol, with funding by Britain, France and Austria, these countries acquiring the same rights of navigation as Russia. Moreover, von Hess insisted on not closing the Black Sea and the Straits (for warships

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<sup>3</sup> This canal project, which had been circulating for several decades, was also mentioned by the German botanist August Grisebach (Călători străini 2006: 765).

this would have been the best solution), and on establishing an equal permissible number of military and commercial vessels for each of the great powers, including Austria, which would match that of the Russian ships.

The general's confidence in the "liberating" mission of Austria, which went hand in hand with the economic interests and the quite realistic solutions identified by him, did not match the policy of the Imperial Court. The presence of imperial troops in the Principalities did not seem so important to the Emperor, especially after the Russian troops had been forced over the Prut.

Eventually, von Hess came to know the real purpose of his mission, which proved to be much more modest than what the commander of the imperial troops had thought it to be in 1854. The purpose had been to evacuate the Russians, re-establish the autochthonous reigns, and restore Ottoman suzerainty.

Nonetheless, the information and plans presented by von Hess to the Vienna cabinet materialized in 1855. The Austrian Finance Minister, Baron Carl Ludwig von Bruck, started a joint stock company in order to build the channel, with France and England showing equal interest in the enterprise. The Ottoman government was to grant concession for the canal and the development of the port of Constanța to a consortium under the direction of the three powers, and a league of land on both sides of the canal for the future settlers. The Sublime Porte was in turn interested in such a project, in order to remove the Russian influence from the East and all the obstacles of trade with Central Europe.

However, in 1856, the Joint Protectorate of the great powers in the Principalities was established at the peace conference, and it took another decade for the Austrians to take up railroads building in modern Romania, which confirmed von Hess' economic predictions. Abandoned by the Austrians, the canal project became a focus of interest for the British entrepreneurs. In 1856, several English businessmen obtained a firman authorizing them to build a canal between the Danube and Constanța, and a year later the "Times" was publishing a note from Constantinople on this project, showing the advantages of such a navigable way in Dobruja. Soon after, the builders arrived at the conclusion that such a canal involved great efforts and considerable expenses.

The end of the Crimean War in 1856 led to a Russian withdrawal from the Danube and the powers now decided to concentrate on the improvement of the river. From 1856, the maritime Danube was administered by European Commission of the Danube (ECD) in order to keep the river open for the ships of all nations.

The canal scheme lapsed but a railway across Dobruja was considered feasible and was approved by the Porte in 1860. Although the canal was not built, the idea was not abandoned altogether but resumed in 1883, after the union of Dobruja, on several occasions, before World War I and, again, in the Interwar period<sup>4</sup>. During World War I the Austro-Hungarians envisaged a project of a canal following the line

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<sup>4</sup> In 1883, "Projet d'un canal danubien de Kustenge – Tchernavoda" by Grigore Emanuel Lahovary and James van Drunen was published in Brussels. In 1897, the Romanian engineer B.G Assan published a project in "Du rôle de la Roumanie dans le mouvement commercial de l'Europe avec l'Asie, l'Afrique et l'Australie", printed in Bucharest. He believed that such a canal "is

of Cernavodă – Murfatlar – Constanța of which 27 miles *had to be in the open* and 10 miles (from Murfatlar to Constanța) – *in a tunnel*. No practical consequence followed in this case either (Spulber 1954).

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indispensable to the economic future of Romania... it will be a project carried out on our territory and it can be considered to belong to our internal economic affairs with which no power has any right to interfere, especially as no power will suffer any prejudice but rather make profit". In 1901–1910, the specialized journals resumed the topic, but King Carol I considered it inopportune at the time, albeit important. In 1922, "The navigable Cernavodă – Constanța Canal" by the Dobruja engineer Jean Stoenescu-Dunare was being published, and a year later the Town Hall of Constanța had a similar initiative mainly out of economic reasons. A last attempt at making feasible the canal project was owed in 1929 to engineers Aurel Barglazan and Octavian Smighelschi, who published in Timișoara the most important and detailed interwar work on the topic: "Study on a navigational Cernavodă – Constanța Canal".