

## THE PRINCIPALITY OF MOLDOVA SEEN BY THE DECEMBRISTS

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The state reform project formulated in 1822 by the Russian Decembrists considered an extension of the boundaries of the Russian Empire beyond the river Prut, *i.e.* including the entire Moldavia. This idea was permanently supported by the politics of the Empire until the World War I.

**Key words:** Decembrists, project Russia, Bessarabia, Moldova.

P.I. Pestel (1793–1826), the founder and the leader of the Decembrists society from Southern Russia, issued a project of constitutional reform for Russia, which they called *Ruskaia pravda* (Russian justice). That project was subject to discussion in a congress of the leaders of the Southern society, held in 1822, in Kiev. After debates the decision was made to give the members of that society a one year interval to brood over it. In exactly one year's time – *i.e.* in 1823, within the framework of yet another congress held by the leaders of the society held also in Kiev, the principles exposed in the project were adopted and discussed by the whole society, only to be made into the ideological platform of the Southern organisation of the Decembrists<sup>1</sup>.

In the first chapter of the project, (all in all there were ten such chapters) called About the width of the state, the territories annexed to the Russian Empire are recounted, Bessarabia included<sup>2</sup>. With the exception of these territories the text goes, “ which have to stay in the structure of the Russian state”, “one needs to draw attention to some neighbouring lands to Russia, which are due to be annexed to Russia so that the state security is firmly assured .These lands were as follows : 1. Moldova. 2. The lands of the independent mountain Caucasian peoples, situated at the North from the frontier with Persia and Turkey, the West Caucasus seaside area which now belongs to Turkey included 3. The lands of the Kirgiz from the hoard of the Kaisak which lead a nomadic life north from the mountain chain laying from the city of Buhtarma till the Aral Sea. 4. Parts of Mongolia, so that the whole stream of the river Amur, starting with the lake of Dalai, become part of Russia”<sup>3</sup>.

The Decembrists further explained the necessity of this territorial layout. In the case of Moldova they argued: “The inhabitants from Moldova Bessarabia make

<sup>1</sup> *Восстание декабристов. Документы*, Москва, 1958, том VI, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 122.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 124.

up just one nation but belong to two different countries and from the viewpoint of natural riches there is mutual need, while if extended the frontiers of the state will be protected from any kind of free communication. The extension was also necessary to their mind because the river Prut was a long but weak frontier. The Carpathian mountains laying on the West side of Moldova would be an exceptional state frontier while the short distance from the Danube to the Carpathian mountains, through the town of Focșani, would be a perfect milestone for the frontier. Finally if the Turks were to pull together an army in Moldova, could unexpectedly invade the depths of Russia through Hotin, over the Nistru river avoiding Bessarabia”<sup>4</sup>.

The final point of the Decembrists in their conception of the new frontiers of the Russian state was the necessity that one part of it, the South –Western be drawn on the Black Sea, Danube and along the frontier of Wallachia.<sup>5</sup>. (See a fragment of the map attached to the above mentioned project<sup>6</sup>).

From a recently published paper on this subject one may glean that these intentions of the Decembrists to extend the territory of the Russian Empire to its „natural limits” were partly made reality by the very emperor Nicholas I. Among the territorial gains registered by Russia during the rule of czar Nicholas I there was the Danube Delta, included according to the stipulations of the Adrianopole Treaty of 1829. „This was an immaterial win, nevertheless important from a strategic point of view as it offered the possibility of control over navigation on the Danube”<sup>7</sup>.

The Soviet Union historiography commented in a rather general manner on the territorial appetite displayed by the Decembrists. According to Pestel’s constitutional project, wrote M.V. Necikina, the frontiers of the Russian republic would be extended till its “natural limits”. Besides other territories Pestel had equally in view “the annexation to Russia of the Moldovan lands, after the war with Turkey, under the flag of the struggle for the Greek freedom and the liberation of the Slavic peoples enslaved by the Turks”<sup>8</sup>.

With in view this aspect of the foreign policy of the future Russia seen by the Southern Decembrists M.V. Necikina insisted that it would be “extremely de incorrect to imagine the revolutionary Russia to be as an aggressive power , which uses its bayonets at all its frontiers and threatens with war almost everyone of its neighbours”<sup>9</sup>. Here is a naïve assumption meant to protect the Decembrists from being accused that in their foreign policy if one is to judge by their project, Russia had to follow an expansionistic policy. It would be to say that the territories annexed by Russian Empire were not conquered by bayonets.

We thus see that the tendencies to subjugate foreign territories were not just characteristic to the Russian autocracy but also to the Decembrists even if these Russian revolutionaries with an aristocratic background were professing progressive

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 125.

<sup>6</sup> *Восстание декабристов. Документы*, Москва, 1958, том VII, p. 130–131.

<sup>7</sup> Л. Выходков, *Николай I*, Москва, 2003, p. 248.

<sup>8</sup> М.В. Нечкина, *Движение декабристов*, Москва, 1955, том II, p. 84.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

ideas for their time. Although the constitutional draft under scrutiny was confiscated when the Decembrists was arrested and was laid to rest after they were investigated “in secret places of the Tzar’s archives”<sup>10</sup>, Russian imperialism followed the same expansionistic goals set by the Decembrists and in most part it reached them. Fortunately it was not able to annexe the principality of Modavia.

Let us mention in this framework that the officials of Sankt Petersburg made such an attempt during the Russian Turkish war of 1806-1812, when the emperor Alexander the 1<sup>st</sup> instructed M.I. Kutuzov to ask in the course of the negotiations the integration of both Romanian principalities into the Empire of the double headed eagle and afterwards diminishing its territorial ambitions it ordered to insist on annexing the territory the Principality of Moldavia up to the Siret river.

Projects of annexing the Romanian territory existed during the WWI, and they were issued by the Special Political Department, integrated in 1916 in the structure of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Russia. In 1916, the mentioned department paid special attention to the issue of the East Slavic population living in the Austro-Hungarian Empire<sup>11</sup>. The authors who tackled this in their projects were concerned by the post war frontiers issue and by the virtual annexations after the victory of the Entante. Thus Budilevici, one of the authors “insisted that the whole Hungarian Russia<sup>12</sup> be incorporated into Russia and the frontier be settled on the Siret river, by no means on the Prut river and so much more not on the Nistru river”<sup>13</sup>.

Back to the program we mentioned at the beginning of this article, in the national issue as A. Pokrovski, the man who prepared the text for print, noticed, the outlook of P.I. Pestel “bore the print of hegemony”<sup>14</sup>. According to the Decembrists all the nations who inhabited the huge empire “had to melt into the Russian nation and gradually lose their national traits”<sup>15</sup>. That is the reason why they did not accept the federalisation of Russia.<sup>16</sup> This was a specific autocratic policy which through the Rules on the administration of Bessarabia issued on the 29<sup>th</sup> of February 1828, did away with the limited autonomy granted ten years before to the Romanian province laying among the Prut and Nistru rivers.

In the reform draft of the Decembrists united in the Southern Society, the Russian Empire was divided, under a territorial aspect into 53 de departments, of which 50 were to be called circumscriptions (okrug). These 50 circumscriptions had to make up 10 regions<sup>17</sup>, of which one was the Black Sea Region, with as a residence the city of Kiev and with the following five circumscriptions within its limits: Kiev, Moghiliov, Iași, Cherson and Odessa. The circumscription of Moghiliov had to encompass, besides the whole deparment of Podolia which already existed

<sup>10</sup> Восстание декабристов, том VI, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> А. Миллер, *Империя Романовых и национализм*, Москва, 2006, p. 174.

<sup>12</sup> Ugric – subgroup of the finno-ugric group, to which Hungarian language belongs.

<sup>13</sup> A. Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 176

<sup>14</sup> Восстание декабристов, том VI, p. 70.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 127.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 128.

(except for the Southern counties which were part of the circumscription of Odessa), the Northern parts of Bessarabia and Moldavia. The circumscription of Iași had to comprise the remaining part of Bessarabia and Moldavia.

The first version of the constitution draft drawn by Nikita Muraviov, a member of the Decembrists' society of Northern Russia, provided the division of the empire into 14 major administrative and territorial divisions (called in Russian *derjavî*), one of which was called The Black Sea, with as an administrative capital the town of Odessa<sup>18</sup>, with no provisions as to the limits of these departments. According to the second variant of the constitutional draft of N. Muraviov, Kiev was to become the capital of the administrative and territorial department of the Black Sea<sup>19</sup>.

The final document of the Southern society displays the idea the Decembrists had on the nations incorporated in the empire. They were grouped in peoples (*plemea*), which were divided into 10 categories. The Moldavian nation was in the position no.3 and the comments were: "The Moldovans live in the province of Bessarabia and in the Principality of Moldavia. This last has to be enslaved and annexed to la Russia. Both sides of the Moldavian lands will have the same kind of organisation conceived for the whole Russia. We have to use all the means so as to enable these two provinces to completely turn Russian and become homogeneous parts of the same whole, i.e. the Russian state"<sup>20</sup>.

In Russia of the Decembrists' imagination the aim to unify all the nations living in the area would have become a state reason so that these peoples were united "in a common body, and thus the inhabitants of the entire territory of the Russian state could be Russians". All had to be called Russians and the Russian language had to dominate unchallenged<sup>21</sup>.

Drawing on this chauvinistic ideas of the December fighters M.V. Necikina thought that the opinions of Pestel regarding the "national issue bore the mark of the predominant nation". Pestel did not recognize the right of other nations to get separated from the Russian state: all the nations living in Russia had, according to him to melt into one Russian nation and do away with its ethnic characteristics"<sup>22</sup>.

Thus, drawing the map of the Russian Empire with in view a territorial expansion, The Decembrists had as a vital priority the annexation to Russia of the second half of the Principality of Moldavia.

<sup>18</sup> Н. Дружинин, *Декабрист Никита Муравьев*, Москва, 1933, p. 308.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 141.

<sup>20</sup> Восстание декабристов, том VI, p. 141.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 149.

<sup>22</sup> М.В. Нечкина, *op. cit.*, p. 83.