

NEW DOCUMENTS CONCERNING THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ADA KALEH ISLAND IN THE RELATIONS BETWEEN AUSTRIA-HUNGARY AND THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE (1908–1914)¹

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Dans cet article, les négociations au sujet du statut de l'île Ada Kaleh avant comme après les guerres balkaniques sont présentées avec les informations inédites contenues dans la correspondance diplomatique entre Istanbul et Vienne.

Key-words: the occupation of Ada Kaleh by Austrian-Hungarian troops, Ottoman embassy to Vienna, Balkan Wars.

INTRODUCTION

The history of the Ada Kaleh Island still raises many unanswered questions. Which was the reason for not including the statute of the island in the Berlin Treaty? Was its occupation in 1908 a concerted action masterminded by the Austrian-Hungarian strategists and theorists who wanted to create a new system, more efficient economically and administratively, or was it a simple gesture dictated by military reasons? What role did this island play in the general European context: was it just a symbol? Was it a significant pawn in secret negotiations for the Ottoman diplomats, or was it an insignificant issue on their agenda?

All these issues and many others will remain the driving questions for further research. This research will not be possible without looking into some very valuable sources such as Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi – the Ottoman Archives of the Presidency of the Ministers' Council, the former Archives of the Great Viziers.

The novelty of our approach consists in using some unpublished sources, with the help of which we managed to clarify some aspects which are incompletely explained, or absent from the works in this field. The diplomatic correspondence available allowed for deeper analysis of mainly two important things: the views which the Ottoman diplomats had on how to handle their foreign affairs, and the dynamic of the decision-making process within the Ottoman political system.

We found the information concerning the topic of the research in The Ottoman Archives of the Presidency of the Ministers' Council, the former Archive

¹ Throughout the paper we preferred using the original graphics of the documents analyzed.

of the Great Viziers – Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi – in several book funds: *Sadaret Mektubi Umum Vilayat, Dahiliye Mebani-i Emiriye ve Hapishaneler Muduriyeti, Dahiliye Nezareti Muhaberat-i Umumiye Idaresi, Dahiliye Nezareti Umur-i Mahalliyye ve Vilayat Mudurlugu, Hariciye Nezareti Siyasi Kısım* etc. The richest documentation concerns the island during the XIXth century and the beginning of the XXth. The present paper looks at the information concerning the island Ada Kaleh found in the Hariciye Nezareti Siyasi Kısım.

Always situated at the periphery, Ada Kaleh represented a reason for disagreement among the Great Powers, whose interests usually met in the region. On the basis of the above mentioned sources, we tried to outline an “x-ray” of this phenomenon, during the period between the occupation of Bosnia by Austro-Hungary (1908), and the beginning of the First World War. There is a rather simple motivation for why we chose this time frame: although the Berlin Treaty from July 1878 does not say anything specifically concerning the island, under the appearance of keeping the sovereign rights of the Ottoman Empire, an Austrian-Hungarian military unit establishes on the island. Three decades later, in 1908, on the background of rapid transformations in the Balkan Peninsula, Austrian-Hungary increases the number of troops on the island, taking advantage of the ambiguity surrounding the statute of Ada Kaleh. This decision was interpreted at the time by the Ottoman diplomacy as a gesture of real “occupation”.

“THE OCCUPATION” OF 1908

The occupation of the island by the Austrian-Hungarian army in October 1908 must be analyzed in the context of the events going on throughout the Balkans. Soon after the annexation of Bosnia is proclaimed, Serbia called a part of its reservists under arms and addressed violent protests to the Great Powers in order to maintain the *status quo ante* or in order to obtain material recompenses. The Serbian newspapers even asked for territorial. On this chess table, the geo-strategic position of the island of Ada Kaleh could not go unnoticed by the military and administrative imperial mechanism in its efforts to solve the situation. Used as a beach-head for military purposes, the island could become an easy blackmail card against Serbia. But, the long-term gains can be considered more important than the momentary success. Controlling Ada Kaleh would worsen the Ottoman position in the Balkans, while at the same time give Austrian-Hungary the role of arbiter of the situation.

One of the first reactions belongs to the Turkish Foreign Minister Tevfik Pasha who, on October 29th 1908, addresses the Envoy for Turkish Affairs [sic!], requesting from him to ask the Austrian-Hungarian Minister for clarification, and to act in order to preserve the sovereignty rights of the Ottomans on the island: “*Veillez demander au Ministre des Affaires Etrangères des éclaircissements au*

*sujet des dispositions militaires prises à Ada-Kalé et vous inoncer aupres de lui de manière a sauvegarder entierement les droits de souveraineté du Gouvernement Imperial sur l'île*².

The major problem of the Ottoman administration when it comes to the Austrian-Hungarian gesture is the lack of an official document which would explicitly outline the legal status of the island. The main documents which Tevfik Pasha tries to appeal to are the notes exchanged in 1878 between the Imperial Embassy and the cabinet from Vienna concerning the sending of an Austrian-Hungarian garrison to Ada Kaleh. An express request from the Ottoman high official in order to obtain copies of those documents dates back to November 7th 1908 and it is addressed to the ambassador Resad Hikmet Pasha.

However, from a legal point of view, these documents are not binding for the Imperial government in Vienna. Not being part of a bilateral treaty, or a general treaty, the provisions from the notes exchange, do not have a more important value than that of a gentlemen's agreement.

On November 9th, 1908, Resad Bey raise the attention of its highest ranking over a new complication: "... *les anciennes archives étant en très mauvais état, nous n'avons pu, malgré les recherches les plus minutieuses, trouver jusqu'au ici la correspondance demandée. Néanmoins, vu l'importance de l'affaire, nous continuons les recherches activement et je ne manquerais pas d'en faire connaitre le résultat à Votre Excellence le plus vite possible*"³. The copy which the Ottoman ambassador was talking about was of the correspondence from January 16th 1879, between the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the time, Caratheodory and the Ambassador Essad Bey.

*« S.E. Carathéodory Pacha à Essad Bey,
Vienne, le 16 janvier 1879*

Dans la séance du 14 décembre dernier de la Chambre des Députés Hongroise, Monsieur Tisza répondant à une interpellation du député Koloman Thaly, relative à Ada-Kaleh, a dit qu'un projet de loi stipulant l'incorporation de cette île à la Monarchie étant prêt, il ne tarderait pas à le soumettre à la discussion de la Chambre.

*Ce langage du Ministre Hongrois nous a d'autant plus étonnés qu'il est en contradiction avec l'entente intervenue entre nous et le gouvernement austro-hongrois à ce sujet. En effet, cette entente porte que les troupes ottomanes devant évacuer Ada-Kaleh, **ce territoire sera occupé provisoirement par un détachement autrichien et sera restitué à la Sublime Porte en temps voulu.** D'ailleurs, dans la séance du 30 Mai des délégations Hongroises, Monsieur le Comte Andrassy, en rapportant cette entente, avait formellement déclaré que cette occupation serait provisoire.*

² Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi, İstanbul, HR.SYS 2/10, (1909.1.12).

³ Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi, İstanbul, HR.SYS 2/10, (1909.1.12).

En présence des considérations qui précèdent, je vous prie d'appeler sur la déclaration précitée du Ministre Hongrois l'attention de S.E. le Comte Andrassy et de me faire connaître la réponse qu'il vous donnera à ce sujet.»⁴

Therefore, in the second half of November 1908, the situation had become extremely delicate for the Ottoman diplomacy, the Empire being unable to put together any coherent diplomatic action in order to save its rights over the island. The personal initiatives of the Ottoman ambassador focus on meetings with high representatives of the Austrian-Hungarian imperial administration, from which he tries to obtain some more information on the situation. On November 10th 1908, Resad Bey reports to Tevfik Pasha the contents of a discussion he had had with Baron Call, who confirms that the Austrian-Hungarian Ministers of War and Foreign Affairs did not know of the decisions taken as far as Ada Kaleh was concerned. The information is being analyzed by the Ottoman Ambassador himself, who considers aspects which are contradictory to the declarations of the Austrian-Hungarian officials.

« Baron Call que j'ai vu une troisième fois m'a déclaré encore que les Ministres des Affaires Etrangères et de la Guerre ignoraient les dispositions militaires à Ada-Kaleh.

Sur mon insistance, on m'a encore promis une réponse. Mais il est évident qu'on ne veut rien dire. Le mudir fait savoir de son côté que l'installation de l'appareil de téléphone a été achevée, qu'on a transporté beaucoup de munitions, que l'envoi de quatre canons a été confirmé par un soldat autrichien et qu'on a pris des dispositions militaires.

Je prie V.E. de vouloir bien me faire savoir si je dois faire de nouvelles démarches. »⁵

The freedom of action of the Ottoman ambassador is limited. Most of his initiatives are circumscribed by the orders coming directly from Istanbul. To this inconvenient adds up the slowness of the information flow, which creates important phase differences, so that many times, the actions which are being undertaken, are moreover reactions rather than preventive actions. Only on November 21st does a more coherent explanation come from Ambassador Resad Bey.

*«Réchad Hikmet Bey à S.E. Teyfik Pacha,
Vienne, le 21 novembre 1908
Reçu télégramme N° 185.*

J'ai vu le Ministre des Affaires Etrangères et demandé des explications au sujet des dispositions militaires prises à Ada-Kaleh. Après avoir déclaré qu'il ne savait pas au juste ces dispositions, le baron d'Aerenthal m'a

⁴ Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi, İstanbul, H.R.SYS 2/10, (1909.1.12).

⁵ Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi, İstanbul, H.R.SYS 2/10, (1909.1.12).

dit que l'île avait été occupée militairement il y a 30 ans par un détachement austro-hongrois à la suite d'une entente intervenue entre les deux Gouvernements et qu'il ne comprenait pas pourquoi, cette question si longtemps abandonnée, était agitée à présent. J'ai fait observer à S.E. qu'on avait placé, il est vrai, une garnison austro-hongroise à Ada-Kaleh, mais que le Gouvernement Impérial n'avait jamais abandonné ses droits sur l'île qui fait partie intégrante de l'Empire Ottoman.

Cette île, ai-je dit, est toujours gouvernée par la Sublime Porte. Nous y avons eu outre d'autres employés ainsi qu'un conseil « municipal ». Le baron d'Aerenthal a affirmé tout ce que j'ai dit et il a ajouté ce qui suit : « Certainement Ada-Kaleh fait partie intégrante de l'Empire Ottoman mais comme elle est éloignée des autres parties de la Turquie, Celle-ci nous en a confié la garde. Partant nos autorités peuvent prendre dans ce but telles dispositions qu'elles jugeront nécessaires. Puisqu'il est admis qu'il y a une garnison austro-hongroise dans l'île que ce soit cinq ou 500 hommes c'est la même chose. Je puis vous assurer pourtant, a-t-il dit, en terminant, que nous n'avons nullement l'intention de changer le statu quo. » J'ai remercié le Ministre pour cette dernière déclaration et lui ai fait savoir que j'en ferai part à V.E. »⁶

The Austrian-Hungarian authorities did not perceive the measures taken on the island as an act of aggression or as an initiative to change the *status quo*, at least not on a local level. The argumentation coming from the chief of diplomacy of the cabinet in Vienna is rather simple: since in principle the ottomans had not protested against placing one garrison on the island, an increase in the number of Austrian-Hungarian soldiers could not present a reason for concern.

The next informative note dates on January 12th 1909 and talks about the military dispositions taken on Ada Kaleh. The main source of concern at the level of local Ottoman authorities was represented by the attempt to install a telephone post on the island and sending a quantity of ammunition for the garrison stationed there⁷.

«Vienne, le 12 janvier 1909

Suite,

Dispositions militaires prises à Ada-Kaleh

N° 13

Monsieur le Ministre,

Pour faire suivre aux différents rapports et télégrammes de cette ambassade Impériale concernant les dispositions militaires prises à

⁶ Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi, İstanbul, H.R.SYS 2/10, (1909.1.12).

⁷ The mudir from Ada Kale had already given the information of 22 French-made cannons which had been sent on a ship to from Orsova to Bulgaria, and he was estimating that a second transportation will be made soon. This information had been resent by Resad bay to the minister Tevfik Pasa on November 12th 1908, telegram no. 345 Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi, İstanbul, H.R.SYS 2/10, (1909.1.12).

Ada-Kaleh par les autorités austro-hongroises (le dernier télégramme porte la date du 21 novembre, N° 355), j'ai l'honneur d'informer Votre Excellence que le Baron de Call, se basant sur les renseignements qui sont fournis au Ministère des Affaires Etrangères par le Département de la Guerre, a déclaré ce qui suit :

On a institué un appareil téléphonique entre la station militaire d'Ada-Kaleh et celle d'Orsova.

On a envoyé dans l'île une petite quantité de munition pour la garnison austro-hongroise qui y est cantonnée, ainsi qu'une certaine quantité de matelas pour servir dans le cas d'une augmentation éventuelle de ladite garnison.

La nouvelle concernant l'envoi de l'artillerie est dénuée de fondement.

En ayant l'honneur de porter ce qui précède à la connaissance de Votre Excellence, je saisis cette occasion pour Lui réitérer l'assurance de ma très haute considération.»⁸

ADA KALEH IN THE CONTEXT OF THE BALKAN WARS

Unfortunately, the available fund lacks political information for the period 1910–1913. However, a comparative analysis of documents issued at a difference of 4 years, shows no substantial change in the administrative language. This makes me believe that, for the period where we lack the documentary source, no spectacular measures had been taken to clarify the status of the island. Let us not forget that in February 1909 the Austrian-Hungarian Empire had transferred to the Ottoman Empire approximately 2.2 million pounds and the two parties had signed a protocol concerning Bosnia. The documents we have at our disposal do not allow, for the time being, for a direct connection between this event and the moderation of the official Ottoman discourse. But we can not ignore this supposition either, because it is hard to suppose that in the above mentioned time frame this problem was completely abandoned by the two cabinets. What is clear is the fact that in 1913, a new straining occurs in the bilateral relations.

The Ottoman functionaries on the island had not been replaced during this time frame with counterparts representing the Austrian-Hungarian monarchy. Despite the interference and pressures coming from Austria-Hungary, the Muslim community living on the island continued to preserve the feeling of loyalty towards the Ottomans. The most important take of position from the local authorities takes place in the spring of 1913. Following an intimation of the mudir of Ada Kaleh, Hussein Hilmi Pasha, the representative of the Ottoman Empire in Vienna, addresses an informative note to the Great Vizier Said Halim Pasha (1913–1916).

⁸ Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi, Istanbul, H.R.SYS 2/10, (1909.1.12).

«Télégramme
de S.A. Hussein Hilmi Pacha
à S.A. Saïd Halim Pacha
Vienne, Le 14 Mai 1913
N° 277

Mudir Ada-Kaleh m'a fait parvenir un télégramme hier soir pour me dire qu'il viendrait me voir aujourd'hui pour une affaire importante.

Il est arrivé à l'instant et m'a raconté ce qui suit :

« Par une lettre datée du 10 mai sous-préfet Orsova l'informait que le préfet de Lugos viendrait le 12 mai à Ada-Kaleh lui faire visite.

Hier à trois heures de l'après midi susdit préfet est arrivé à Ada-Kaléh accompagné de son adjoint de deux secrétaires du sous-préfet d'Orsova ainsi que d'un officier de gendarmerie et de deux gendarmes.

Préfet s'est rendu auprès du Mudir et lui a donné lecture d'une ordonnance du Président du Conseil des Ministres Hongrois décret ce qui suit : vu qu'armée Austro-hongroise occupe Ada-Kaleh par un détachement depuis 1878 et que depuis cette date aucune protestation n'a été adressée de la part du Gouvernement Ottoman ni de celle de la population de l'île, considérant d'autre part qu'au cours des pourparlers de paix qui vont être engagés entre la Turquie et les Etats Alliés ces derniers pourraient réclamer cession île du reste que ceci pourront donner lieu à des négociations et contestations qu'il importe prévenir ;

Pour ces motifs Gouvernement Austro-hongrois a décidé que l'île d'Ada-Kaleh est désormais annexée au Royaume de Hongrie.

Après lecture de cette ordonnance préfet de Lugos a déclaré au mudir que lui, Naïb et les autres fonctionnaires ottomans pouvaient rester jusqu'à nouvel ordre dans l'île.

Mudir n'ayant pas été autorisé correspondre par télégraphe s'est vu obligé de venir Vienne pour m'exposer ces faits.

Il a déclaré aux autorités hongroises ne pas pouvoir reconnaître annexion et devoir en référer à son gouvernement. On lui a répondu que cela était juste.

Il est évident que cet acte du Gouvernement Austro-hongrois est tout-à-fait illégal, injuste et arbitraire. Mais en prenant en considération article é du traité de paix par lequel Gouvernement Impérial cède à l'exception de l'Albanie, tous territoires situés à l'ouest de la ligne Midia-Enos on doit reconnaître que les Etats Alliés et surtout Serbie pourraient réclamer aussi abandon île Ada-Kaleh.

Je crois qu'au point de vue juridique il nous serait très difficile de nous opposer à une pareille exigence. Il me semble que le Gouvernement Austro-hongrois s'est inspiré d'abord de la portée de l'article II et a envisagé ensuite probabilité cession de ladite île par

nous aux Alliés pendant les négociations paix. Importance stratégique de l'île pour l'Autriche-Hongrie vis-à-vis Serbie a fait qu'elle s'est vue obligée prendre cette décision arbitraire. Aujourd'hui même j'ai vu le Ministre des Affaires Etrangères qui n'a pas laissé échapper une seule parole qui aurait pu me faire présumer une pareille éventualité.

J'ai pensé à un moment donné lui faire une visite demain pour lui demander des éclaircissements au sujet de cette affaire mais après mûre réflexion j'ai jugé plus opportun, vu que je ne connais pas les intentions du Gouvernement Impérial à ce sujet, d'atteindre d'abord les instructions de Votre Altesse à ce sujet, d'atteindre d'abord les instructions de Votre Altesse avant d'entreprendre une démarche. J'ai donné au Mudir ordre rentrer immédiatement Ada-Kaleh. Demain il rejoindra son poste.»⁹

In February 1912 the Bulgarian Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ivan Geshov signed a treaty with Serbia. The same year a similar document was signed with Greece. Montenegro's (proclaimed kingdom in 1910) joining the coalition finally ended the formation of the Balkan Alliance. The Ottoman Empire commenced hostilities on October 8th 1912. The Allies registered a series of fast successes, constraining the Ottomans to ask for the beginning of negotiations in December. In February 1913, due to a talk's deadlock, hostilities resumed and a second truce was signed in March. The provisions of this truce stipulated that the Ottoman Empire would lose all its European possessions west of the Midia-Enos front-line. Bulgaria would obtain almost the whole of Thracia, including Adrianopolis and a piece of Macedonia placed north and east of Thesalonica. The Ambassadors' Conference and the London treaty signed in May 1913 would end the First Balkan War.

During the London Talks, Austria-Hungary and Italy supported the idea of an independent Albania. Therefore, Greece and Serbia asked for territorial reparations in the Macedonian area claimed by Bulgaria. In June 1913 the Serbian Prime Minister Nikola Pašić and the Greek Prime Minister, Elephterios Venizelos closed an agreement against Bulgaria. Although Bulgaria undertook the initiative of attacking its ex-allies in June 29th, the fate of the conflict quickly changed to the favor of the allies. The Romanian intervention in the war precipitated the outcome of the second Balkan War. On July 1913, Bulgaria accepts the conditions of the truce and in August 1913 the treaty of Bucharest is signed.

An interesting exchange of letters takes place among the Ottoman diplomats halfway through the month of May 1913. At that point, the gesture of formally occupying the island could theoretically be placed under the incidence of the March truce provisions. Hikmet Bey, the representative of the Ottoman Empire to Budapest re-counts a meeting with the President of the Hungarian Council, a meeting with the problem of Ada Kaleh as the main discussion topic. Comparing

⁹ Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi, Istanbul, H.R. SYS 3/9 (1913.5.14).

his views with those of his counterpart in Vienna, we can finally outline the attitude of the Ottoman diplomacy towards this issue.

The Ottoman official understands the danger of losing prestige, but he also perceives the danger of breaking the diplomatic protocol of the time. His Hungarian discussion partner invokes a preventive act, which would justify occupying and immediately retrocede in case of explicit provisions of certain peace talks. However, Hikmet Bey could not have been a novice in games behind the curtain. It is hard to presuppose that during this discussion he did not realize that this option mentioned by the Hungarian diplomat was excluded because of the position of the other Great Powers.

*«Télégramme
de Hikmet Bey
à S. A. Saïd Halim Pacha
Budapest. Le 15 Mai 1913
N° 55*

J'ai entretenu ce matin Président du Conseil Hongrois sur l'occupation Ada-Kaleh.

Je lui ai fait observer que l'attitude de Gouvernement Hongrois en cette circonstance est contraire aux décisions désintéressées adoptées par les Grandes Pouvoirs durant la guerre Balkanique.

Monsieur Lukacs m'a répondu que cette affaire devenue très délicate par suite cession territoires situés Ouest Midia-Enos aux alliés il a fallu sauver susdite île de l'occupation Serbe.

Je lui ai fait remarquer que affaire en question devant être réglée par la conférence paix occupation antérieure Adakaleh n'a pas sa raison d'être.

Président du Conseil m'a dit que cette action constituait prévention que si conférence décidait statu quo ante administration Hongroise cessera naturellement dans l'île en question.

Il m'a dit en outre que notre Mudir continua exercer ses fonctions que la solution de cette affaire dépendant Vienne notre Ambassade doit la traiter avec (manque). J'ai saisi des lors Son Altesse Hilmi Pacha de ce qui précède.»¹⁰

CONCLUSION

The period covered for our analysis is very dynamic and transformations took place throughout the whole of Europe. However the Balkan area has a special evolution because of the continuous come back on the historic scene of the convulsions

¹⁰ Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi, İstanbul, H.R. SYS 3/10, (1913.5.17).

in the Ottoman Empire, and the conflict of interests between Austro-Hungary and Russia, the main claimants over this area of traditionally Ottoman control.

Far away bastion of the Ottoman Empire, the island Ada Kaleh represents a major interest point due to its extremely favorable geographical position. The control of the island gave to its possessor the control over the Danube, and an important beach-head in case of pressures on Serbia.

The statute of the island is not outlined in any of the articles of the Berlin Treaty. Ada Kaleh remains formally under Ottoman rule, but even since 1878, the Sultan has to accept an Austrian-Hungarian garrison to be deployed on the island. The fate of the inhabitants is discussed several times between Ottoman officials and their counterparts in the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. The dual monarchy initially assumes the obligation to retrocede the island to its *de jure* rulers “*en temps voulu*” (the expression appears several times in the correspondence exchange between the Ottoman representatives to Vienna or Budapest and the Great Vizier).

The fluctuations in the relations between the two powers are acutely felt when it comes to the dispute over Ada Kaleh. In 1913, Austria-Hungary occupies *de facto* the island, motivating its intervention as a preventive gesture, having at its basis the motivation that the Ottomans did not activate what is meant by “*en temps voulu*” for 30 years.

Based on the documents available, we could also make some interpretations about the functioning of the administrative and diplomatic apparatus of the Ottoman Empire. The slowness of the information flow, and a certain stiff of the system in respecting certain norms, leaving very little room for personal interpretation, leads to a certain homogenization of functionaries in this field. The rigor, the strict formal language, and especially the pyramid outline of the information flow, causes time losses which are often times irretrievable.

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Figure 1. Ada Kaleh general view.



Figure 2. Postcard from Ada Kaleh.



Figure 3. Postcard from Ada Kaleh.

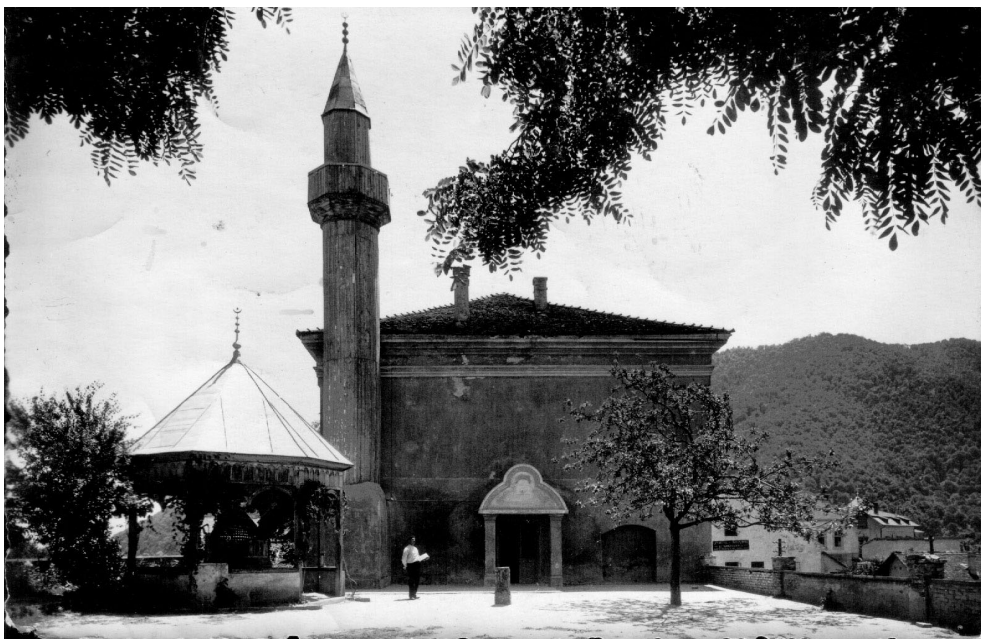


Figure 4. Ada Kaleh mosque.