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# **MEMOIRS AND PRESS OF THE BALKAN WARS**

**- THESIS SUMMARY -**

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## **Introduction. Context. Objectives**

The controversial subject of the Balkan Wars from 1912-1913 manages to create interest, especially in the years 2012-2013, those of their centenary, remaining yet unsettled in the eyes of many South-East Europeans. A symbol of the violent and tumultuous beginning of the 1900s – followed by dire straits of two world wars, totalitarianism and economic depressions –, the Balkan Wars mark a context of a transfiguration in the Romanian historiography, reflected by alterations of history and attempts to influence and obliterate memories. Therefore, probing into the past solely from the historiographical standpoint can prove to be an incomplete undertaking and history books alone should not define our perspectives. In the case of the disputed episodes of the Balkan Wars, the eye of history is all the more blurred. Beyond the historical point of view, which accompanies numerous episodes that mark Europe's past, lie sources whose incorporation within the official history has been oftentimes disregarded in favour of the accredited history. 100 years after the peak of the Balkan Wars, the study of these sources and their interpretation promise to reveal unique views of the events and possibly new approaches. In addition, this type of information supports attempts to better understand why the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century bears a revival of conflicts in this area so loaded with territorial, religious and ethnic disputes.

The Balkan Wars, two conflicts that separated the Near East into two distinct regions – the Balkans and the Middle East, or in other words, a marginal part of Europe and the barbarian Asia –, registered not only political or military causes and consequences, but also religious, cultural, social and psychological ones. Such human dimensions of conflicts have been barely investigated and brought to public attention. These conflicts created more than political disturbances in the peninsula – under the shape of significant boundary changes. They have occasioned debates about nation, nationalism, patriotism, and also identity changes and a strengthening in the perception of neighbours as *others*, as a result of migrations, territorial losses, war settlements, and the formation of new national borders. Moreover, given such aspects, seen from the perspective of individual participants, each country shares its own history. Often, opinions and interpretations diverge from those of neighbouring states.

For these reasons, the thesis *Memoirs and Press of the Balkan Wars* has been guided by the need for a multidisciplinary approach of the complex subject represented by the Balkan Wars. As the title states, the research within this thesis brings forward two sources of reflection of the Balkan Wars: memoirs and journalism. The events of the two wars have undoubtedly attracted significant coverage in both of these two means of communication.

First, the memoirs resulting from the conflicts constitute true archives of events, in which the unique experience of the war is reflected and a particular history of the conflicts takes shape from the perspective of the eyewitnesses. Although the study and valorisation of the Balkan Wars memoirs were not possible for nearly half a century, the publication of these volumes was noticed, since many of them were appreciated not only as literary works, but also as documents carrying information and documentation value. Through the personal way of sharing the happenings by the participants themselves, the thesis *Memoirs and Press of the Balkan Wars* argues that memoirism is the only direct source able to highlight perspectives that historiography cannot capture. The press is, in turn, a valuable source in the research of the Balkan Wars due to its ability to record events immediately after their production, unlike memoirs, some written within a few years after the remembered moments. In this way, the newspapers of the time – as the main sources of information for the Romanian population – hold information recorded in the form of snapshots and testimonials from the moments of the two wars and offer us the opportunity to look directly into the past.

A significant endowment of the past is that of clarifying the present. Given this quality of past times, remembering history brings clarification about who we are and where we are going, not just where we come from. From this point of view, the preoccupation for the past is a key element in evolution. Testimony is an article discovered during the research of the Balkan Wars which makes the following statement: ‘The old chronicler Grigore Ureche compared the people who do not know their country’s and nation’s past to “the mute and mindless beasts and animals”.’<sup>1</sup> How do we, however, remember history? Where do we take it from and what we forget from our historical past? How accurate are its reminiscences? Here are some of the key questions in the search of whose answers this thesis was guided. History, like the human mind, is susceptible to influences, selective remembering, and forgetting. It is often said that he who has forgotten history, has lost his own memory. The Balkan Wars contain memory fragments buried deep into the pages of history by the passing of time and hostile ideologies, remaining forgotten or unknown by many Romanians. Investigating a story left untold and passed in the shadow of two major conflicts – the World Wars – the purpose of this work is to bring back to light a forgotten episode of Romanian history. In the words of the Russian poet and essayist, the Nobel laureate Joseph Brodsky, ‘there are worse crimes than burning books. One of them is not reading them.’ In addition, the connections of the research topic to the communication sciences through the study of journalism and memoirs – as a

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<sup>1</sup> *Cultul trecutului*, în *Gazeta Transilvaniei*, an LXXV, nr. 183, 21 august/3 septembrie 1912, p. 1.

species of border literature with strong reportage accents – were a key factor in choosing this topic. Given not only Romania's intervention in these events, but also the complexity of the historical context, the involvement of so many countries and the extensive consequences of the Balkan Wars, we can assert that a comprehensive research of this theme brings a definite contribution to the historical and cultural fields, both at a national and European level.

In the centenary year of the Balkan wars, it is impossible not to reflect on the fact that for nearly half a century the study and publication of any type of work on the subject were heavily restricted, if not completely banned. Whereas in the decades before World War I there were a large number of books written on Romania's crucial historical moments, the Balkan Wars were not similarly reflected in the writings of the time. Although a large number of Romanian writers were mobilised in the Bulgaria campaign, the Romanian literature is not abundant with memoir works in order to provide a real alternative documentation of the events. Towards 1920 their number is visibly decreasing, leading to the general opinion that the 1913 campaign was ignored in favour of the bloodier World War. Only in the interwar period the subject returned to the eye of great Romanian historians and memoirists, but often the years past had left their mark on the views expressed and the discourse suffered a gradual alteration. Along with the ideological changes after the Second World War, the study of these memoirs was severely restricted, and references on the subject disappeared almost entirely. Blamed as an offensive against the Bulgarian neighbours by the communist governmental policy, along with history, alternative sources of information such as the memoirs on the events have fallen victim to the same politics. The post-communist period was the one who restored the freedom of researchers on the subject, although initiatives have been restricted around the names of a handful of authors. The Balkan Wars topic is still little known and investigated in Romania, despite the extensive historical literature created around the subject in the involved countries and the special attention international research has devoted to it.

## **Method**

The present thesis addresses the study of the Balkan Wars from a triple perspective that includes war as an experience, a memory, and, last but not least, a perception. This diversity of aspects, obtained by combining the memoirs and the press within the study of the subject, allows for the fulfilment of the main objective of the research – revealing the two conflicts from an angle with multiple and especially intertwined reflections. The research includes 16 volumes of memoirs, written by 14 Romanian authors, and 6 Romanian

periodicals. The approach implied an initial stage of documentation and identification of the works and publications to be analyzed. Considering the limited research and the reduced number of previous analyses in the studied area, it can be said that this phase presented the highest difficulty. The second step dealt with the actual research, carried out by using the content analysis method. In the case of memoirs, the main recurring themes and moments were identified, classified, and analyzed, being grouped into episodes of the Balkan Wars and rendered in a chronological manner. Regarding the press, although the ordering according to the chronology of events has been preserved, the selected manner of presenting was by individual newspapers and magazines, in order to capture the particularities of each publication included in the analysis. Similar to memoirs, the content analysis was the method chosen for the study of the press. In each periodical the focus has been to identify the key issues which the studied newspapers and magazines emphasized while reporting on the Balkan Wars, as well as high impact articles on the decisive moments of the conflicts, both at national, European, and Balkan levels. Using this approach, the stake of the thesis was to illustrate perceptions of wars beyond the dominant historical perspective of previous research. The content analysis was completed for both memoirs and the press with theoretical and context information.

### **Structure**

The thesis *Memoirs and Press of the Balkan Wars* is divided into five chapters combining theoretical and practical research. The five divisions are preceded by an introduction to the subject at hand. At the end of the thesis, the conclusions restate the most important results of the research findings and the potential future directions in the investigation of the topic, while the appendixes complete the work with a variety of graphic materials (postcards, photos, illustrations etc.).

Chapter I brings into question the historical background of the Balkan Wars starting with their preliminaries, the outbreak of the first conflict, Romania's position, the Romanian-Bulgarian dispute, the second war, and, lastly, the Peace of Bucharest and the consequences of the 1912-1913 wars. The need for their investigation and presentation is self-evident, given the complexity of the events and the context in which they developed. In addition to the historical information, the results of a brief research we conducted on Romanian history textbooks are depicted to show how the Balkan Wars have been portrayed to the young generations of Romanians over time.

Chapter II reviews the international perspective on the two wars based on papers presented at the international conference ‘The Centenary of the Balkan Wars (1912-1913): Contested Stances’ hosted in 2013 by the Middle East Technical University in Ankara, Turkey. The most relevant papers, out of more than 100, were analyzed to reveal trends in the coverage of the subject in countries such as Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia, Turkey, Austria etc., compared to Romania. Through this approach we have outlined both differences and surprising similarities that can be the subject of future in depth research.

The third chapter opens the research on Romanian memoirs of the Balkan Wars and consists, before the actual analysis, of a discussion regarding memoirs from the point of view of the genre’s characteristics, as well as the particularities of the works included in the study. These are then analyzed thematically and chronologically in four main episodes: the First Balkan War, the Bulgarian-Romanian dispute, the Second Balkan War, and the Peace Conference of Bucharest. As a result of the study on memoirs a distinct and unique feature of these writings came into emphasis, namely the authors’ attention to the portrayal of combatants. The analysis of such representations has resulted in a subchapter dedicated to the subject of identity and otherness in Romanian memoirs of the Balkan Wars, in correlation with the concept of balkanism.

Chapter IV deals with the press of the two wars. In order to track the specifics of each researched publication, the analysis was divided into titles, as follows: *Universul*, *Gazeta Transilvaniei*, *Epoca*, *Viitorul*, *Gazeta ilustrată*, and *Furnica*. A chronological representation on the coverage of the events has been applied in this chapter as well, due to the desire to preserve the logical sequence of the developments which led to Romania’s intervention in the conflicts and to expose the unwinding of its action over the Danube.

The fifth chapter consists of a brief look at the subject in the moments of its centenary, providing a starting point for future research directions of the Balkan Wars topic in Romania nowadays.

## **Conclusions**

It is often said about war that it is an inescapable part of the inherently violent human nature and culture. Sometimes it is stated that the political, economic, social, or cultural circumstances make war inevitable. Fought as a result of enmity between religions, nations, ideologies, or races, or simply for a woman, in the case of the Trojan War, in the end, regardless of its motivations, war is often judged by its consequences: too often death,



devastation, destruction of neighbours' relationships, genocide or torture, and too rarely victory and freedom. As for the Balkan Wars, the tempestuous century of nationalities, as the nineteenth century had been called, did not seem to have given sufficient lessons to the Balkan countries, which were at the brink of war in the early years of the following century as well and willing to make the greatest sacrifices for their ideals.

Even after the fall of communism and the lifting of restrictions on the research and publication on this topic that has drawn sharp criticism for nearly 50 years, the theme of the Balkan Wars in Romania remains neglected by scholars and unknown to the general public. This fact is visible from textbooks and to the Romanian public discourse surrounding the centennial events. The two conflicts of 1912-1913 led to an increase in Romania's prestige through its action at the South of the Danube and the Peace of Bucharest, being acclaimed as a force which ended the Second Balkan War. On the other hand, the Romanian campaign in Bulgaria met difficulties because of the cholera epidemic that claimed the lives of over 1,500 people. This aspect remains hardly discussed and developed in Romanian historiography, which recorded the events of the two Balkan Wars in its specific manner, but did not encapsulate, beyond the political and diplomatic levels, the social and human facets of war. Moreover, ideological changes have transformed the heroic discourse into a reproachful one.

The thesis at hand discussed the two alternative sources of coverage on the two Balkan Wars – memoirs and newspaper articles –, in order to complement the dimensions underestimated by history. During the study an important argument has taken shape: in fact, the goal of the undertaking exceeded the initial intention to guide the research towards seeking the differences between memoirs or the press and historiography in a debate on the 'truer' truth. Rather, the research has developed towards the appreciation of the fascinating way in which border literature, together with the press, and complementing history, can all contribute to the creation of a valuable overview on the Balkan Wars. The underlying thesis statement is that only by incorporating discourses and complementary sources a balanced knowledge of a subject can be achieved. Due to the approach this work put into practice, numerous details have been revealed from multiple and diverse perspectives that come to complete the picture of events. Given the 100 years past since the Balkan Wars, the complete lack of direct contact with eyewitnesses, accentuated by an absence of memorialisation actions in Romania even after the fall of communism, we find ourselves compelled to an entirely archival memory, based on historical documents. In addition to these sources, the

study at hand has projected an overview of the reports recorded by the memoirs of the few participants who published their experiences.

Firstly, the thesis discussed the Romanian memoirs of the Balkan Wars by analyzing their content, in order to illustrate the various points of view in the rendering of the 1912-1913 events. Whether signed by direct participants of the battlefields or by the diplomats who took the necessary decisions from their comfortable ministerial chairs, the investigated memoirs have embodied valuable archives of the events. Beyond numbers and statistics, the work at hand has highlighted the Balkan Wars' episodes as experienced by writers, lawyers, doctors, politicians, teachers, officers, and soldiers, each of these volumes contributing with a unique perspective on the happenings. From Sadoveanu's detailed descriptions and portrayals, Gane's horrifying stories about his cholera sufferings, Topîrceanu and his obsessive and hidden thoughts, to Dabija, Marghiloman, and Maiorescu's journals, the 16 analyzed volumes, signed by 14 authors register notable differences, as well as various points of convergence. They each reconstruct a complex picture of the events, seen through the eyes of eyewitnesses. Introducing the human and social dimensions brings us closer to the subject, making it more personal and easier to grasp. From minor facts, to artistic descriptions, extensive characterizations, and dialogues, or the most secret thoughts entered in a journal, all these notes reflect the authors' concern for capturing and communicating the information perceived. In this way, the memoirists fulfilled their responsibility as witnesses, that is to share the recorded experience. Extremely valuable are the memoirists' reports on the unique moment of the mobilization. Also, the entire atmosphere around the preparations of the campaign and its debut are uncovered and completed by accounts regarding the life of the troops on the frontline and the inherent campaign difficulties. The episodes describing the cholera epidemic and the army's return to the country are the most dramatic and also the most novel. In addition, the present research has revealed leitmotifs (the patriotic discourse, poetic passages, anecdotes, religious references etc.) and recurring themes (the importance of Romania in the Balkans, its superiority by force of civilization and Latin heritage, the military momentum in the Bulgaria campaign, the cholera, the peace signing etc.) present in the Romanian memoirs of the Balkan Wars.

Finally, representations of identity and otherness in the difficult context of diplomatic relations between Romania and Bulgaria around these conflicts have been identified. A problematic geographical position, doubled by a stormy history, is proving to form the basic recipe for alterity. In the case of the Balkan area, the tales that accompany this history are

continuously constructing identity issues and keeping people from abandoning stereotypes and misconceptions. The concept of alterity has taken different proportions in the context of the Balkan Wars and their resulting consequences. Followed by the First World War and the reignited conflicts of the 1990s in the region, identity and alterity remain a very actual issue. Along with geography, politics and economic interests, such events have hindered the creation of a real sense of togetherness, of familiarity with our neighbours. Their culture and true identities remain overshadowed by century-old stories and stereotypes. However, through the present study we have revealed possible new sources of the aforementioned stereotypes, essential for a better understanding of the formation of otherness and bearing as final goal the attempt to surpass this standstill. The highest attention was given by memoirists to the situation of Bulgaria and its people, which are permanently characterized in contrast to Romania, in a discourse based on the superiority of Romanians as descendants of the Latin civilization.

Despite the undeniable value of memoirs in the study of the Balkan Wars subject, the border literature raises some issues that are difficult to establish regarding the question of truth in perception, particularly in the case of war memoirs. Moreover, the traumatic experiences of war are in themselves difficult to recount. However, the expectations from memoirists are high: we ask for objective and balanced stories that are authentic and realistic, but disregard that no communication medium can provide the much sought for certainty that the public expects in the information. In this search for truth, we often forget that every item of knowledge we gain about the realities of war reflects the way they were perceived by those who have fought it. On the one hand, we cannot idealize memoirs up to expecting a complete lack of bias and constructivism, just as some completely realistic writings would probably not arouse our interest. On the other hand, it should be noted that not even history represents an absolute truth, being in turn recorded by people guided by their own beliefs, hopes, experiences etc. Beyond the inevitable subjectivity of memoirs and their often challenged reliability – born from the intrinsic involvement of the memoirist into the narrated event –, the value of such writings results precisely from the authenticity of the story and from the fact that the information originates from a unique perspective that only the memoirist can render. As a conclusion, it remains remarkable how these memoirs – some highly detailed, with descriptions of the surroundings and the human characters encountered, therefore with strong reportage accents – can create an overview of events completely unfamiliar to our experience,

exclusively through the memoirist's words and most often without needing or possessing a material image such as a picture.

At a second level of the thesis, through the study of the press as an alternative source of documentation regarding the Balkan Wars, yet another step has been taken beyond the prevailing historical research on the subject in the Romanian space. The newspaper articles of the time were brought back to light, to be valorised and not remain forgotten on library bookshelves. The goal of this undertaking has been to explore the experiences of the two wars, seen through the angle of the press articles left behind as snapshots of the events. Such an approach provides us with the chance to take a look into the past and reflect on the media effects among its readers, with the aim of helping us better understand the 1912-1913 events. The chapter dedicated to the press examined the journalistic materials published over the course of 12 months between September 1912 and September 1913 by six Romanian publications: two weekly illustrated magazines (*Gazeta ilustrată* and *Furnica*) and four daily newspapers – two independent (*Universul* and *Gazeta Transilvaniei*) and two political (*Epoca* and *Viitorul*) summing up to over 1,300 issues. Among them, the most important articles and recurring themes were identified and presented in the context of the Balkan Wars to illustrate how the media, even 100 years ago, would choose to develop specific topics, giving rise to practices such as *agenda-setting*. Also, in many of the studied articles *framing* trends were discovered, as well as *social constructions of reality* and *propaganda* discourses, particularly in the political press. In addition, concepts such as *yellow journalism*, *censorship* and *public opinion*, also characteristic to the reporting of the Balkan Wars, have been investigated.

Given the highly politicized matter, placed in an extremely tense context, marked by the lack of information from the field and the large number of news taken from the European press, the journalistic discourse in the coverage of both wars proved to be characterized by an amalgamation of heterogeneous views and interpretations, materialized in different representations of the events. The wars' coverage in the analyzed newspapers is visibly affected by the strong political and military censorship practiced during the two Balkan conflicts. Newspapers repeatedly complained about the lack of official information and the numerous rumours that were created as a result thereof. The few correspondents sent by Romanian newspapers in the Balkans were, similar to their colleagues from other countries, kept away from the battle lines by the harsh censorship and therefore sending their reports from the Balkan capitals, where they were located.

In the First Balkan War, the Romanian press served as a mirror of the events in the region, to the extent that information was available. Where journalists lacked information obtained directly, a trend of reporting based on the foreign press and private sources was identified. This practice predisposed the Romanian media to the influence of the European press, which sometimes seemed to hold more information about our country than Romanian journalists themselves. Far from rarely, fabrications and the inconsistency of private sources were exposed by the Romanian newspapers, but only after the information had been published and the readers already influenced by their appearance and the resulted scenarios. This context proved to be ideal for the launching of propaganda actions and attempts to mobilize the public opinion in favour of the war. Moreover, the media acted to maintain the patriotic momentum through its articles, necessary for supporting the campaign in the South of the Danube. The tone used in the coverage of the Second Balkan War was a mostly positive one. This trait is equally visible even in the dark days of the campaign, when cholera decimated hundreds of people daily and the press choose to focus on other issues and not discuss the subject of the epidemic among the troops. After the campaign, the papers returned to the previous attitudes and intrigues and launched accusation campaigns against the sanitary and quartermaster services for their irregularities which had, in view of the newspapers, provoked the disaster of the cholera epidemic in Bulgaria and in the country alike. Rather than acting as the society's watchdog, the press attacked, often without concrete evidence.

The use of photographs and illustrations humanizes and draws the subject near to the readers and researchers as well, revealing unique dimensions of the war. From the pictures on the frontlines, to those taken in the days of the Romanian military mobilization and the army's advance towards Sofia and the Quadrilateral, and those portraying the Peace of Bucharest, the press offered readers a generous visual coverage of the events. The weekly *Gazeta ilustrată* (*Illustrated Gazette*) contributed with illustrations and images with a high impact, while the satire and humour magazine *Furnica* (*The Ant*) used the symbolic language in portraying the Balkan Wars by its distinctive cartoons and rhymes aimed at characters from the local and international political scenes.

Therefore, it can be asserted that the impact of the analyzed press items on the perceptions of the readers – and thus on the Romanian public opinion – was significant, with repercussions on the collective memory of this historical episode, as a result of the influence on the memory processes. Using the power of speech, the press has not only contributed to informing the public, but also to the growth and maintenance of patriotism necessary to

achieve national goals, as well as to render the atmosphere of the times around the Balkan Wars. Moreover, the media served as a coagulant and voice of the public opinion, which requested to be involved in foreign policy decisions.

### **Future Work**

Considering the complexity of the subject and the limited existing research on the theme to date, the present approach consists in an early stage and a starting point for future work on the Balkan Wars, in the hope that through the dissemination of the results this taboo topic will be rediscovered and valorised. Among the projected directions for further research on the memoirs and press of the Balkan Wars, a comparative and integrated approach of these writings with the European and Balkan sources represents a valuable future undertaking. The stakes of such research is to illustrate the local perception in a broader European or Balkan context. Also, taking into account the influence of mass media on the memory processes and the collective memory, the research can be guided towards the study of current perceptions regarding the Balkan Wars and the transformations undergone by them during the last century. Last but not least, a subject for future investigation complementing the present approach is aimed at comparing the war correspondences of the two Balkan conflicts to today's trends of this journalistic genre.