“BABEȘ-BOLYAI” UNIVERSITY

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Haiduks, Robbers, Bandits:

A Social History of Brigandage in Early Modern Moldavia and Wallachia (18th - 19th centuries)

- PhD thesis -

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Summary

This work is an effort to gain an understanding of early modern criminality in Moldavia and Wallachia. The focus here is on what social historians and sociologists at times call 'social banditry', on other occasions 'robbery', nevertheless social phenomena which can be subsumed to brigandage in general. There are two major strands of theory concerning bandit activity in today's academia, each with its supporters and detractors. In the introduction of the present thesis I outlined the core tenets of both of these theoretical camps, but also where I situate my research in relation with any of the two.

One very influential perspective on banditry is that crafted and advocated by British historian Eric Hobsbawm. In his early works, he advanced the concept of 'social banditry', a form of pre-political protest, undertaken by certain members of the peasantry against the ruling classes, which it robbed and punished for its misdeeds, giving the proceeds to the poor, thus achieving some degree of social justice. Against this conceptualization, a contending faction of the historiography – dubbed as 'revisionists' by the advocates of the theory of the 'social bandit' –, being unsatisfied with the lack of hard evidence to support Eric Hobsbawm's claims, came up with its own notions concerning banditry. Less theoretically inclined, these revisionist studies nevertheless pointed to the actual shortcomings of the 'social bandit' theory, favouring a more empirical approach instead. From 'primitive rebels', the bandits in these studies were demoted to mere robbers, making no discrimination in the choice of their victims, keeping all the stolen goods for themselves, thus achieving no social justice whatsoever. On the contrary, they are accurately depicted as trusty allies of the ruling classes, getting on their payrolls and advancing the interests of their employers, even if they come against those of the peasantry. The fact that these individuals are sung and celebrated in the popular culture of the lower classes is attributed by the same revisionists to mythmaking and human imagination, the noble bandit being nothing more than a construct, an ideal type, imagined by an exploited but hopeful peasantry.

In the present research I did not assume a position for or against any of these theoretical approaches concerning banditry, but instead I tried to adopt an explanatory framework that both accommodates the strengths, but also answers the criticism directed at those very same theories. I attempted this through a more sociological and historical focus

on the subject at hand. From a sociological standpoint, I did not operate with the 'social bandit'/mere robber dichotomy, as they both appear to be morally charged notions from the outset, and instead opted for a criminological understanding of banditry. Seen as crime, in its sociological definitions, brigandage is not so much a breach of law or of some moral principles, nor a matter of psychological pathology, but a social phenomenon, with specific social determinants. From the historical standpoint, I did not consider banditry as a perennial, transhistorical phenomenon, at least not in its substance. Being present in most societies based at least in some degree on private property, banditry tends to look unchanged in its manifestations throughout the ages. Nevertheless, the fact that it is a social phenomenon, with social determinants, means that it will endure alteration whenever there is social change. Thus, although in its outward form brigandage hasn't changed much with the passage of time, in its patterns and substance we must accept the fact that it went through significant transformations throughout history. Banditry consequently has historical determinants, alongside those of a social nature. The present thesis is not therefore concerned with banditry in general, but with the social phenomenon bearing that name in early modern Moldova and Wallachia.

With the methodological and theoretical matters in place, in the second chapter I went about exploring what early modernity entails for Moldavia and Wallachia. Borrowing heavily from Henri H. Stahl's theoretical and empirical work, my understanding of the age is that of a mixture between tributary, feudal and capitalist elements, specific to the two countries from about the beginning of the 1600s through to the 1850s. This mixture results in such wide-ranging phenomena as 'the second serfdom', the advent of private property and of market relations, the commodification of things, the monetization of the economy, but also in phenomena of a more local nature – which are nevertheless part of the process of primitive accumulation – such as the dissolution of communal property and of land use rights, or the separation of the corvée peasant form his land. Also part of this chapter is a model o social stratification of the inhabitants of the two Romanian countries, that I devised based on the theoretical conceptualizations of class envisioned by Gerhard Lenski and Erik Ohlin-Wright. I attempted this in order to produce a more adequate base for a class analysis of banditry in early modern Moldavia and Wallachia. The result is a stratification scheme with seven classes, on what I consider to be objective criteria, and which is well suited to the social realities of early modern Romania. These classes are: the ruling class,

the servants, the entrepreneurial class, the artisans, the peasants, the salaried, and the Roma slaves.

The picture sketched in the second chapter served as the basis for the analysis in the third chapter. Based on the edited source material produced by the criminal departments of the two Romanian principalities in the second half of the 18th century, and the first half of the 19th century, but also on other secondary documentation and studies concerning the criminality of the era, I attempted to identify the structural encouragements towards crime committing in the case of each of the classes taken into consideration. The main point of the analysis was that the more conservative classes, still engaged in feudal relations of production and dependence (i.e. peasants and artisans), are less structurally encouraged in taking up a criminal career than members of the classes more accustomed to the market, the moneyed economy and wage labour. With the advent of modernity, it's these classes in the latter category that are more inclined to resort to banditry, because it's also these classes that receive the most incentives towards accumulation, but also suffer from the social instability that modernity brings about. While most crimes are still committed by the peasantry in this period, this class in under-represented in the statistics I elaborated, while the other classes appear to be overrepresented (compared to their social averages).

The fourth chapter deals with the political implications of banditry. Being usually regarded as 'the avengers of the poor' – mostly in the social bandit camp – bandits are expected to take part in the upheavals that seem to burst all over the world during the first stages of modernity, of course on the side of the peasantry or of the exploited in general. This is also true for early modern Romania, since multiple bandit figures do participate in Tudor Vladimirescu's uprising from 1821. Their role here is nevertheless a secondary one, as I try to argue in contradiction with certain strands of Romanian historiography, which place such bandits at the forefront of the revolutionary struggles. Acts of brigandage are nonetheless very much present during Vladimirescu's uprising, but instead of being celebrated as redistributions of wealth, they are condemned by the leaders of the revolt themselves. Tudor Vladimirescu has such a hard time putting a stop to the general pillage enacted by his troops, that he ultimately enforces strict death penalties and performs countless summary executions, which in the end alienate him from his supporters who decide to betray him. Banditry, although not a central coordinate in the revolutionary

efforts of 1821, is one of the background elements of the uprising that strongly resonates in the foreground.

The fifth chapter deals with the social environment of the bandit in early modern Moldavia and Wallachia. The focus here was on the one hand, the relationship of bandit gangs with the community, their many associates, hosts and fences, as well as the dynamics at the basis of gang formation, and on the other hand, the very rich popular culture around bandits which coagulated mainly in the form of the folk-song, but also in various popular beliefs, fairy-tales, stories, legends or proverbs. All of these point in the direction of the existence of distinct bandit subcultures, similar to the delinquent subcultures of the present, which make banditry possible and resilient over long periods of time, through the various networks of support that sometimes extend to entire villages and the positive sanction of theft and other associated bandit acts in popular culture.

The last chapter of the present thesis is reserved for the conclusions. What ensues from my analysis is that criminality in Moldavia and Wallachia (and banditry in particular), although seemingly a transhistorical phenomenon that went unchanged throughout the ages, is in fact a phenomenon that has undergone significant alterations during the transition to modernity. These have to do with the broader structural changes that manifest themselves in the society at that time, in property relations, mode(s) of production, monetization, the commodification of things, etc. All these changes promote structural encouragements towards banditry, especially directed at those social categories that are most affected by the very same changes, the servant class, the entrepreneurs, the salaried, while the more conservative classes, the peasantry and the artisans, are less inclined to give in to 'criminal impulses' (at least of the kind that are more frequent in modern societies). Crime is therefore subjected to the social forces in effect in a certain time and space, those various acts that are identified as banditry having in fact different meanings for different times and places. What modernity manages to do is to reshape banditry from what it allegedly was in pre-modern times – that is an inter-personal conflict management institution (vendetta), or a tool for political change in the hands of various pretenders to the throne, or simply a survival strategy for the impoverished – into one of the instruments of the ever present capital accumulation typical of all early modern societies, Moldavia and Wallachia included.