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To Crimea via Belgrade Thomas Fonblanque to Lord Raglan 1854–1855

Abstract: Eleven letters sent to Lord Raglan, Commander-in-Chief of British troops in the Crimea in 1854 and 1855, by Thomas Fonblanque, British Consul General at Belgrade, constitute a little known group of documents that provided useful information for the Allied campaign in the Balkans and the Crimea. The paper, however, pays special attention to the Consul's "Sanitary Memorandum", as it reflects the scope of interest and range of knowledge of the average British diplomat at the time.

Keywords: Raglan, Fonblanque, Crimean War, Sanitary report, diplomatic relations, Serbia, Great Britain

The Crimean War (1853–1856) was the greatest war of the nineteenth century. It ended the domination of the conservative "Holy Alliance" in Europe by pitting Russia against France, Great Britain, the Ottoman Empire and Piedmont. The Crimean War marked the beginning of Russia's confrontation with the "West", intermittently continuing into the present day. Moreover, this Great War of the nineteenth century finally established the balance of influence in the Balkans and made an alliance between Russia and Austria permanently impossible.

Even though it was waged in the territory of the Balkans only in its initial phase, the Crimean War marked a great change in Russia's policy towards the Balkan Christians. After 1856, St. Petersburg increasingly supported national, and even democratic, movements in the region. After the Congress of Paris, Great Britain and France entered the interior of the Balkans for the first time, as together with the other Great Powers they had become international protectors of the autonomous status of the Danubian principalities – Wallachia and Moldavia, and Serbia.¹

Although the Principality of Serbia was not involved in the war, by maintaining neutrality (which according to its international status it was not entitled to do), it saw its international status fundamentally change. As Serbia stayed out of the war, she attracted little attention from the Great Powers, notably Great Britain and France, and especially after 1854 when the theatre of war was transferred to the Crimea, the White Sea and the

¹ W. Baumgart, *The Crimean War* (London 1999); A. J. P. Taylor, *Struggle for Mastery in Europe* (London 1994[?]); J. Ristić, *Srbija i Krimska vojna* [Serbia and the Crimean War] (Belgrade 1931).

Pacific.² A very important place in the archives of Lord Raglan,³ Commander-in-Chief of the British armed forces in the Crimea, is occupied by his correspondence with Thomas Fonblanque,⁴ British Consul-General in Belgrade, which is the material that has been largely neglected.

In the course of one year Fonblanque sent eleven letters to Raglan.⁵ He advised him on the political situation in the Balkans, and also on military and health issues, which were particularly important for the British army as it was involved in a war in Eastern Europe for the first time. Fon-

² Č. Antić, *Neutrality as Independence: Great Britain, Serbia and the Crimean War* (Belgrade 2007); B. Lory, *La Serbie et la Guerre de Crimée*, in *Ilija Garašanin (1812–1874)*, proceedings of the international conference held 9–10 December 1987, in commemoration of 175 years of Garašanin's birth (Belgrade: Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 1991).

³ Lord Raglan (Fitzroy James Henry Somerset, Lord Raglan 1788–1855) was the Commander-in-Chief of British troops in the Crimea during the war between Russia and the allied forces of France, Great Britain and the Ottoman Empire. Raglan had fought in the Napoleonic wars. In the 1820s and 1830s, he had taken part in several missions to St. Petersburg and Constantinople. He was a Member of Parliament. Although he had never led troops in a war, he was entrusted with the command of the British forces at Varna and the Crimea. Despite the victorious battles of Alma and Inkerman (after a one-year siege), the public blamed Raglan for the sufferings endured by the British soldiers in the Crimea. Immediately after the abortive general attack on Sevastopol on 28 June 1855, Raglan succumbed to dysentery. Cf. Ch. Hibbert, *The Destruction of Lord Raglan* (London 1963).

⁴ Thomas de Grenier de Fonblanque (1792–1860) was the Consul General of Great Britain at Belgrade from 1841 to 1858/60. This short-tempered and often obstinate British diplomat was Lord Raglan's peer, had also fought in great wars in his youth and later embarked on a diplomatic career, but apart from that, Fonblanque was no match for Raglan in terms of either origin or career. After two short-term positions in Europe and the USA, Fonblanque was sent to Belgrade in 1841, and served there until he was retired in 1860. In spite of his desperately prolonged stay in Belgrade, Fonblanque had never lost hope that he would progress his career and do some extraordinary things. Regardless of his contempt for Serbia and local politicians and the fact that he had never believed in the long survival of the Ottoman Empire, Fonblanque tirelessly concocted plans for reforming the Ottoman Empire (its federalization, the establishment of a Serbian vice realm, the introduction of the parliamentary system or economic reform). During the Crimean War, he endeavoured to help the war effort of his diplomacy harbouring expectations that surpassed the abilities of a deft diplomat and diligent civil servant inspired by a patriotic feeling. Fonblanque's correspondence from that period clearly shows his expectations that his providing helpful service to important Foreign Office diplomats (e.g. Hamilton Seymour or Earl Clarendon) would finally earn him promotion or at least transfer from Belgrade.

⁵ Letters are kept in London, National Army Museum, Department Archives, Photographs, Film and Sounds, Fonblanque to Raglan, Rev. Ref. 6807/279–305 [hereafter NAM].

blanque's letters to Raglan went further than regular diplomatic reports to the Foreign Office.

Although Fonblanque stayed in the Balkans for more than a decade, this British diplomat is remembered as a representative of the traditional British, and Western, perception of the Orient. His reports to Raglan can be described as a religious, political and ethnical sketch of the Balkans and Ottoman Empire. But rather than being a meticulous analysis of the situation in the countries where British troops were to wage a war for two whole years, they reflect the viewpoint of members of the diplomatic elite and one particular civilization. Among the documents created by Fonblanque, the *Sanitary Report* attracts special attention as it illustrates perfectly a British diplomat's understanding and expectations with regard to the Balkans, and the East as a whole.

Initially Fonblanque sent copies of his reports to the Foreign Secretary, Clarendon. On 20 April 1854, he wrote to his superiors about the prospects of importing horses and cattle for the British army. He claimed that horses could only be purchased in Habsburg Transylvania, which became viable only after relations between Vienna and St. Petersburg cooled. He expected a better outcome for the purchase of pigs and sheep from Serbia, claiming the pigs were "of the best quality" and estimating the possible annual import at 20,000–30,000 pigs and 20,000 sheep. Although he believed pork was detrimental to the health of soldiers (especially during the summer), he urged the authorities to close the deal as soon as possible, since shipping to Constantinople could take four to five weeks. This report was forwarded to Lord Raglan.

In the report of 25 April 1854, the first he addressed directly to the British General, Fonblanque rated Ottoman troops very low, claiming that they could only have success in defence. On the last day of April 1854, he described the situation on the borders of the Ottoman Empire, expressing his opinion that for the first time in a long time it was clear that the Austrian army's dispositions were not directed towards the Ottoman Empire. Fonblanque's correct judgement was based on his belief that Austrian units could march into Ottoman provinces only with the Western allies' consent.⁶

On 27 May, the British Consul General at Belgrade reported on the withdrawal of the Austrian army from the Serbian border and the concentration of about one hundred thousand troops on the Carpathian border of Wallachia and Moldavia. On the same day, he stated his assessment of Serbian weaponry, which, in his view, was not intended for defending the Principality, but rather for waging a war for Austria's South-Slavic areas. He

⁶ Fonblanque to Raglan, Belgrade, 30 April 1854, NAM, Rev. Ref. 6807/279-305.

reiterated his mistrust of the Serbian government, due to Serbia's connections with Russia and their war preparations, estimating that the Serbian army could count on between one hundred and one hundred and fifty cannons. Fonblanque believed, however, that the Serbs would not be able to use more than just one tenth of their arsenal, for which he blamed the French engineer⁷ charged with conducting the Serbian armament programme.⁸ He also reproached the French for having appointed an inexperienced representative to Belgrade.

At the end of June, Fonblanque passed the report of a Moldavian informer from the town of Jassy on to Raglan. The news from Moldavia was incomplete (since the Russians used to shoot suspicious persons on sight) but very favourable: the Russian troops were in bad shape and utterly demoralized. The British Consul General's further estimation was that the Austrian troops under Archduke Albrecht's command were capable of repulsing a possible Russian attack in Transylvania.⁹

On the same day Fonblanque sent another report to the Commander-in-Chief of the British forces in the Crimea. It was a report on the numerical strength of Russian troops, and it was based on the exaggerated figures reported by Colonel Radosavljević, the Austrian Consul General in Serbia. The British Consul General believed that instead of "Eastern exaggeration" one should rather expect the Russian command to hide the number of its troops. He expected to get some news from the British diplomatic agent in Bosnia, Calhune, who was about to travel to Vidin.¹⁰

During the retreat of the Russian army, Fonblanque became Raglan's important source for the situation in Wallachia and Moldavia. On 28 June 1854 he reported that the Council of Boyars in Bucharest had requested an explanation from the Russian command as to whether the mobilization order for the Wallachian militia was to remain in force and whether its units were to cross into Bessarabia if the Russians were to retreat. The Russian commander was not authorized to answer, although it was certain that the Russian troops were in retreat (heavy artillery and the wounded were heading north using three hundred wagons) and harassed by the Ottoman cavalry.¹¹

Once the Russian army withdrew from the Danubian Principalities, Fonblanque's reports lost importance. In the summer of 1854 the British

⁷ Charles Loubry.

⁸ Fonblanque to Raglan, Belgrade, 27 May 1854, No 28.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 22 June 1854.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Fonblanque to Raglan, 28 June 1854.

army disembarked in the Crimea. In the course of the following year, until Raglan's death, Fonblanque sent five reports. The first three were only regular notifications he had sent to the Foreign Office.¹²

In a letter to Raglan dated 21 April 1855, Fonblanque warned the British commander of the risks involved with Montenegrins and other Orthodox joining General Beatson's volunteer units. Namely, he was convinced that once they were paid and armed they would go over to the Russian side. He only trusted Roman Catholics and Bosnian Muslims, and believed that the only method for differentiating between these very similar ethnic groups was to subject them to a religious instruction test.¹³

Fonblanque believed that neither the population of the Serbian Principality nor the Bulgarians¹⁴ would be willing to take part in a war against Russia: the former because of their sympathies for Russia and their leisurely way of life, and the latter because of their Russophile attitude and general backwardness.

In his last report to Raglan, written in June 1855, Fonblanque warned that the volunteers arriving in great numbers in the Crimea through his consulate had not been subjected to the test. He specifically referred to some Prussian subjects who had come to him via the Prussian consulate and whom he had found suspicious and directed to the command authorities where they were supposed to be examined.¹⁵

* * *

The "Sanitary memorandum"¹⁶ highlights the less obvious problems that the army expedition was facing in the Balkans and the Crimea, and was probably the most significant report that Fonblanque sent to the British Commander-in-Chief in the East. The memorandum was quite short and divided into three segments relating to nutrition, bathing and medical treat-

¹² Fonblanque to Raglan, 14 June 1854; Fonblanque to Raglan, 27 November 1854, No 63; Fonblanque to Raglan, 18 January 1855 (Fonblanque to Radcliffe, 18 January 1855).

¹³ It was in 1853 that Władysław (Ladislav) Czartoryski tried to organize a Serbian volunteer unit to support the Ottoman war effort on the Danubian front.

¹⁴ "The Bulgarians are a more pastoral branch of Servian family" (ibid.).

¹⁵ Fonblanque to Raglan, 18 June 1855.

¹⁶ Sanitary reports and memoranda became especially visible in Great Britain after the adoption of social laws in the 1830s. Chadwick's report on the sanitary conditions was particularly important. E. Chadwick, *Report on the sanitary condition of the labouring population of Great Britain. A supplementary report on the results of a special inquiry into the practice of interment in towns. Made at the request of Her Majesty's principal secretary of state for the Home department*, London 1843.

ment. Fonblanque was a professional soldier of his time, and had no specialist medical education or training, but he nevertheless stated his opinion and knowledge on health issues in the region. This long-serving consul in Serbia, who at the beginning of the Russian occupation of Wallachia and Moldavia reported to the Foreign Office on the Russian army's poor nutrition and the weakness of Russian soldiers' skulls (!), sought to express his knowledge and understanding of the region in his report, hopeful that he would impress the influential Lord Raglan.

It was only Raglan's death that stopped the diligent Fonblanque in his enthusiastic struggle to contribute to the British war effort by sending reports and offering advice. One of his letters was written on 18 June, only ten days before Lord Raglan's demise. Fonblanque's reports certainly did not help the British army in the faraway Crimea in any significant way, but they did address very important topics. By the end of the war, the British expedition, part of the victorious army, had lost more than 21,000 men. More than seventy-five percent of the lives were lost to infection!¹⁷

¹⁷ At the end of the war 2,755 British soldiers were killed, while 2,019 died of wounds. A total of 16,323 deaths were caused by infection. J. Sweetman, *Crimean War, Essential Histories 2* (Osprey Publishing, 2001); *The Encyclopaedia of Military History* (Macdonald and Jane's, 1970), 829; Baumgart, *The Crimean War*, 215–216.

*Appendix***Sanitary memorandum**Dietetic-Precautions for officers- and Remarks on Bathing.-

Ices and sherbets should be taken with caution. When heated by exercise, a (Turkish) cup of black-coffee is a safe restorative.

Avoid eating pork, unless in winter and at no time allow lard to be used in frying or broiling. Where butter cannot be procured, oil is the best substitute.

Never drink porter or any other kind of beer, after wine. - The German precept "Wein nach Bier", - "Lass es seyn," is peculiarly applicable to a hot climate where there is miasma.

The coldest fruits in Turkey are strawberries, currants, peaches, apricots, gooseberries and melons (excepting water-melons), oranges, grapes, figs, raspberries and mulberries may be eaten without danger: - but cherries and all kinds of plumes, apples and pears are safest en compote. Cucumber salads are almost certainly hurtful.

Fish has a worse character than it deserves, as a cause of Indigestion.

Bathing-

Turkish Baths are debilitating always and frequently dangerous, - as they induce pleurisies inflammations of the lungs etc. Even among commercial - men, who have been for long years in the East we constantly hear of fatal results from this cause.

Cold Bathing incomparably the best preservative against every variety of marsh-fever, but it should be suspended when there is any sense of distension about the stomach and abdomen, headache, pain in limbs, and when the nails look bluish on pressure.- of course it is understood that persons who have found, in other places, cold bathing produced shivering, discoloration of the skin,- any indication, in short, of revulsion not being immediate - they will abstain from it wholly, and bathe in tepid water.

Curative means

Unless as a consequence of some great imprudence or excess, it is rare that another Foreigner is visited with Danubian fever, in any severe form of it, unless he has been exposed for more than a year to the cause of the endemic. Slight cases of Fever are very often cured by lying in bed, under an equable temperature, for a day or two, taking cooling drinks, little food and no medicine.

With robust people, Epsom and Carlsbad Salts frequently cure intermittents, without luisiane.

When luisiane has been given with some success, it should be repeated eleven days after the last paroxysm as there is nearly always a tendency for the fever to return at a later date, though it is not always of the same type as before. The most important objective is to guard against the degeneration of intermittents into remittents, especially where large bodies of troops have been in movement.

A week after the French Troops quitted the Town of Braunsberg, on their retreat through Prussia in 1813, nine tenths of its adult population had died of Typhus, and in Semlin during the Hungarian War eight Austrian medical officers fell victim by attending military patients whose fevers had become malignant (although they were rarely so in the first stages). In the worst forms of Danubian Fever our medical officers will observe that the brain is attacked without any advance warning symptoms whatsoever. It might easily be mistaken for an apoplectic seizure. In the early treatment of such cases, calomel¹⁸ offers the only hope of recovery, but hope should not be strong. There is one variety of fever (located at Roustchouk and Nicopoli, I believe) which has an interval of twenty-days between bouts, followed by two paroxysms the day after. If the third attack cannot be prevented the patients have never been known to survive it and many die soon after the first and second attacks.

It may reasonably be hoped that dropsy – as a consequence of the Danubian Endemics – will be of much less frequent occurrence with the British Troops than it is with the Austrian Military; firstly because our diet is better than theirs', and secondly, as the German Physicians have a prejudice against the use of calomel as a treatment for liver disease in its incipient stages.

Thos. De Gr. De Fonblanque
Belgrade, 27 June 1854

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¹⁸ Mercury(I) chloride, Hg₂Cl₂.