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# THE TOPONYMS OF OTTOMAN NIŠ: THE NEW BARRACKS AT BUBANJ HILL

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*Abstract.* The paper deals with the history and analysis of the conditions which led to the construction of one of the last barracks built in Niš by the Ottomans, only a decade and a half before they lost this city in a war against the Principality of Serbia (1878). As the New Barracks were purpose-built as a long-term solution and strategically positioned at the foot of Bubanj Hill, the paper also highlights the importance which this Ottoman military complex had as a city toponym for the development of the urban physiognomy of Niš in the decades after 1878. Various sources were used in the research, including both Serbian and Ottoman archival material, in order to draw attention to, through the example of the New Barracks, the connection between Ottoman Westernization and Serbian Europeanization of Niš, focusing on the development of its infrastructure and institutions.

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The decades of the 19th century under Ottoman rule were a period during which the Turks sought to restore Niš to its former military importance, which it had held between the early 18th century and the Treaty of Belgrade (1739). The two uprisings staged by the Serbs in the early 19th century and Prince Miloš's annexation of six *nahiyas* to Serbia (1832–1833) were the main reasons the Sublime Porte focused more sharply on the region and invested in the strategic role Niš could play. Although in the 19th century decades separated the conflicts between the Ottomans and the Serbs living in the north (First and Second Serbian Uprisings of 1804–1817; Serbo-Turkish War of 1876–1878), the Ottomans continuously sought to reinforce Niš, though not always with the same intensity. One of the greatest projects they undertook in Niš for this purpose was the construction of a large military complex known as the New Barracks (*Yeni Kışla*) at Bubanj Hill.

### *The Reasons for the Construction of the New Barracks*

The reasons why the Ottoman authorities built the New Barracks in Niš can be categorized as local and external. Both are equally important, and their interrelation is best explained by the fact that the solution of the Ottomans' local military needs was a response to and accelerated by external circumstances, those that occurred in the neighboring Principality of Serbia in the early 1860s.

Taking advantage of the moment when the Great Powers, the Ottoman Empire, and Russia were exhausted after the Crimean War (1853–1856), Prince Michael of Serbia passed three laws at a parliament assembly in Kragujevac (August 6–20, 1861), which established Serbia's internal sovereignty and increased its military potential. The three laws included the National Assembly Act, the State Council Organization Act, and the National Army Act (Живановић, 1923, p. 69). The Sublime Porte viewed Prince Michael's actions as a direct threat to its interests in the Balkans. For that reason, it complained to the Great Powers and took measures to secure its borders and pressure Serbia to halt its military reforms. Among these measures were plans to secure the military garrisons in

Ottoman-controlled cities along the border with Serbia, including Vidin, Sjenica, Novi Pazar, and Zvornik. Niš was to be one of these locations, especially as the local authorities were concerned local Serbs might rebel as early as April that year.<sup>3</sup> However, the military forces in Niš faced significant challenges during this period.

As administrators of the largest city in Rumelia on the border with Serbia, the governors of Niš, like the viziers of Sarajevo, were tasked with monitoring the situation in Serbia and, if necessary, exerting pressure as directed by the Sublime Porte. One way to do this was to demonstrate military strength on the border with Serbia. However, in the early 1850s, Niš faced unfavorable conditions for this. The city struggled to accommodate its own garrison and lacked the extensive military infrastructure needed to receive and support additional troops.

Before relations with Serbia finally deteriorated in 1861, the Ottomans resorted to short-term and costly solutions, often counterproductive, to solve the problem of accommodating the garrison in Niš. The garrison, which included two artillery batteries, one cavalry battalion, and three infantry battalions, was stationed at Orda Kale, as the fortress of Niš was called; however, it is unclear how many facilities were actually utilized by the garrison. In 1851, the Grand Vizier's cabinet requested from the Ministry of Finance to expand the military barracks at the Niš fortress by constructing three additional buildings. This project was eventually abandoned as the building was repurposed as a much-needed military hospital (1860).<sup>4</sup> Certainly, if these military barracks are excluded, the garrison of Niš must have had at least one accommodation facility within the fortress. In 1857, Niš had two barracks for military reserve units (*redifs*), but archival sources do not reveal their location or capacity.<sup>5</sup>

Gunners and horsemen were accommodated in city inns and private houses around Niš, with the latter also keeping their horses with them (Göyünç, 1982, p. 280). Paying for private soldier accommodation was costly for the state, as innkeepers and landlords often charged excessively. The government spent 90,000 *kuruş* annually on this private accommodation.<sup>6</sup> Beyond the financial burden, this arrangement caused other problems as well. In peacetime, when officer supervision was weaker and soldiers had more leisure time, frequent conflicts arose between soldiers and their civilian landlords. These incidents

<sup>3</sup> BOA, A. MKT. MHM. 216/57. (Grand Vizier to the governor of Niš, April 28, 1861).

<sup>4</sup> BOA, A. MKT. MHM. 37/9 (Grand Vizier to the Ministry of Finance, September 28, 1851); BOA, A. MKT. MVL. 121/36 (State Council to the Ministry of Military Affairs, October 18, 1860). The barracks were located near the Su (Water) Gate in the southeast section of the Niš fortress, between the Stambol Gate in the south, and the Vidin Gate in the east.

<sup>5</sup> BOA, A. MKT. MVL. 94/12 (Grand Vizier to the governor of Niš, December 29, 1857).

<sup>6</sup> BOA, I. MVL. 461/20759 (Midhat Pasha, governor of Niš, to Grand Vizier, January 1, 1862).

negatively impacted relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in the city.<sup>7</sup> Soldiers often wandered around the city and its outskirts, got drunk, and started fights with the local population. In such cases, civil and military authorities acted jointly and strictly whenever soldiers were found guilty of incidents. For instance, a soldier named Ali from the Yahya Pasha District of Niš was caught stealing aba fabric from a store owned by a vendor named Petar. Although the soldier was quickly apprehended and the stolen goods returned, he was sentenced to three years in prison, in shackles, in 1856.<sup>8</sup> In 1860, two soldiers and two sergeants from the Niš garrison were prosecuted: the soldiers were caught trying to rape a Christian girl in the village of Matejevac, while the sergeants were found guilty of raping a woman from a respectable Christian *çorbacı* family in Berkovica. All four were sentenced to prison, to be continuously shackled, and received the physical punishment of *falaka*, a public whipping on the soles of their feet.<sup>9</sup> This demonstrated a strong urgency to separate soldiers from civilians to prevent conflicts from escalating.

The problem of accommodating the Niš garrison away from civilians was partially solved in 1861. Early that year, Lieutenant General Osman Pasha rented private land adjacent to the summer camp, where he housed the entire garrison.<sup>10</sup> Osman Pasha's pragmatic solution reduced the costs of private accommodation and helped to isolate the troops from civilian communities during the critical summer period. However, it was only a temporary solution that nonetheless cost money and the issue still needed to be addressed and resolved permanently.

### *Construction of the New Barracks*

The first step in this direction was an inspection of the future building site by Major General Salih Pasha in 1858. He visited the site, examined it, and calculated the requirements for constructing the needed facilities. His plan was to replace the dilapidated military barracks in the fortress with new ones and to house two battalions and a hospital at the same location. However, as the project required 5,300 *kesas* (~ 2,600,000 *kuruş*), it was not approved by the central government (Göyünç, 1982, p. 284).

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<sup>7</sup> ИАН, V, Мидхат-пашины мемоари [Midhat Pasha's Memoirs] (The document bears no archival signature number.)

<sup>8</sup> BOA, A. MKT. MVL. 81/85 (governor of Niš to the State Council, September 12, 1856).

<sup>9</sup> BOA, A.MKT.NZD. 314/28 (governor of Niš to the Ministry of Military Affairs, June 4, 1860); HR. MKT. 338/55 (report of the Special Envoy Suleyman to the Grand Vizier, June 12, 1860).

<sup>10</sup> BOA, I.DH. 468/31284 (Lieutenant General Osman Pasha to the Grand Vizier, February 7, 1861).

The following year, another attempt was made to address the need for additional facilities for horsemen and gunners. Plans included building a military barracks, a stable, and two sentries for the battalions securing the fortress of Niš and the bazaar, with an estimated cost of 861,000 *kuruş*.<sup>11</sup> The civilians raised about 354,000 *kuruş*, but there was a problem with fund allocation. Since Christians contributed a significant portion of this amount, Sultan Abdulmejid I's decree ordered that the State must reciprocate by building a Christian school,<sup>12</sup> which significantly reduced the funds available for the project. Things moved from a standstill when Ahmed Midhat Pasha (1861–1864), a reformer and skilled administrator, was appointed governor of Niš on the eve of the crisis with Serbia. The construction of the New Barracks became one of his major achievements during his tenure, permanently resolving the problem of military accommodation (Kanitz, 1875, p. 154).

The construction of the New Barracks was determined by two main factors: selecting the location and securing the funds. For the location, the authorities chose a piece of land at Bubanj Hill, on the left bank of the river Nišava. This area, located on the outskirts of Niš, lay south of the palisade on the left bank of the Nišava. This kilometer-long palisade served as a protective wall for the districts across from the fortress on the right bank of the river. By placing the barracks outside the palisade, the garrison was effectively separated from the city, minimizing contact and the potential for conflicts between soldiers and civilians.

Additionally, the chosen location for the new barracks was ideal from a military-strategic perspective. Not far from the barracks, in the southern part of the city palisade, was the Prokuplje Gate, through which the road connecting Niš with Leskovac and Prokuplje passed. Placing the barracks in this location was to facilitate the defense of the Prokuplje Gate. More importantly, its proximity to Bubanj Hill, an elevation of vital importance for defending Niš from attacks from the south, was strategically important. Bubanj Hill was connected further south to Čurlina Vineyards, Kurvingrad, Seličevica, and the Čečina Village Bridge—key points for the Ottoman defense during the Serbian siege in December 1877 (Мирчегић, 1994, p. 148). Regarding the cost of the land, the authorities acquired it unexpectedly easily and cheaply. Two Muslims from Niš donated their plots near the Prokuplje Gate, providing the garrison with 29 *dönüms* (27 hectares) of land.

As for the financial aspect, most of the previously donated funds were still available (287,000 *kuruş*). The construction of the New Barracks was estimated to cost 492,000 *kuruş*. The shortfall was to be covered by the soldiers' fine fund, public voluntary self-taxation introduced by Midhat Pasha, and additional private donations. The financial calculations were made by Engineer Captain

<sup>11</sup> BOA, A. MKT.UM. 370/20 (Grand Vizier to the governor of Niš, October 6, 1859).

<sup>12</sup> BOA, A. MKT.UM. 370/20 (Grand Vizier to the governor of Niš, October 6, 1859).

Ali Effendi (Göyünç, 1982, p. 285). Construction began in March 1862, after the project was approved by Fuad Pasha, the Grand Vizier.

Midhat Pasha's plan was to build facilities primarily for housing cavalry units, with the possibility of later expanding to accommodate gunners and infantry units if circumstances allowed. The built facilities included a stable, a mosque, a water tank, a laundry room, a warehouse, and a kitchen (Рањеловић, 2022, p. 385). The building had two floors. The ground floor had stone walls one meter thick, while the first floor had thinner brick walls. Each floor comprised twelve rooms and sixteen bedrooms of various sizes (Göyünç, 1982, p. 286). Initially, the New Barracks were supplied with water from the tank, but a water supply pipe was later installed to bring water from the nearby hills.

The works were completed by the end of the year, and on Wednesday, September 26, 1862, infantry and gunners moved into the barracks amid a cannon salute and great fanfare, greeted by commoners who watched the parade (Göyünç, 1982, p. 287).

### *The New Barracks Interesting Facts and the Niš Townsfolk*

According to sources, the construction of the new barracks encountered unexpected situations that did not go unnoticed by the residents of Niš. For instance, during the excavation of the foundations, workers uncovered remains of ancient infrastructure. Austrian scholar and traveler Felix Kanitz visited the construction site during his second trip to Niš (1864), and examined and documented the finds. He identified two Roman pillars with inscriptions. This discovery prompted Midhat Pasha to stop the works and order an investigation of the site. However, no additional artifacts were found, and construction resumed (Kanitz, 1875, p. 157).

From today's perspective, Midhat Pasha's approach to material traces of the past might be seen as notably considerate for his time. However, his conduct was not necessarily due to a genuine appreciation for the region's past. Instead, he was motivated by a desire to avoid offending or damaging local Christians if something significant to them was discovered.<sup>13</sup> For example, when an icon and a chalice were accidentally found in the ruins of the old Church of St. Nicholas in Niš in 1863, Midhat Pasha, who had converted the church into the Fethiye Mosque for the newly arrived Muslim refugees from Belgrade, ensured that these two Christian artifacts were handed over to the bishop of Niš.

Regarding ancient sites, a report from the Ottoman State Council in 1864 on the construction of the New Barracks in Niš mentions that old masonry

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<sup>13</sup> Kanitz learned about the ancient remains at the New Barracks from the writings of Kalinik, the bishop of Niš, who documented the Ottoman finds.

(*tarih taşları*) was used in the construction.<sup>14</sup> Midhat Pasha's extensive building activities around Niš were carried out in a pragmatic and economical manner. He opted to use existing ancient sites for construction and repurposed hewn stone from these locations. While this made the construction of public buildings cheaper and quicker, it also led to the destruction of many archaeological sites, particularly in Toplica and Gradište.<sup>15</sup>

One of the largest sites exploited in this manner was Vlaško Brdo, a city outpost from the Roman period located across from ancient Mediana and Brzi Brod. This site had remained almost intact until the 19th century, but Midhat Pasha chose to use its masonry for his projects (Каниц, 2007, pp. 174, 178). Pasha's pragmatic approach resulted in significant loss of the cultural and historical heritage of Niš and its surroundings, despite the presence of a quarry in the nearby Hum.

The residents of Niš composed a popular song to remind them of the construction of the New Barracks. The song was transcribed by Miloš Rašić, the son of Nikola Kole Rašić, a well-known Serbian patriot and anti-Ottoman dissident from Niš. The song recounts an alleged scandal that captured the attention of Niš's inhabitants during the construction of the New Barracks.

“Oh, why, why would you go inside the tent, my dear Sika,  
Embarrassing your father, your father Mihalaki, and your husband Sotiraki?  
Miralay called for me to serve him wine, to kiss my face...”<sup>16</sup>

Without delving into the artistic quality of the song, it is noteworthy that all the characters mentioned are historical figures. The song narrates an alleged affair involving Sika Čohadžić, the daughter of Mihalaki, a wealthy cloth merchant from the prominent Gümüşgerdan family of Plovdiv. The Gümüşgerdans amassed wealth and power through their dealings with the Empire, supplying its army with textiles (Güripek & Akar, 2021, p. 446). Sika was also the wife of Sotir Čohadžić, a member of the most respected Christian *çorbacı* family in Niš and one of the city's most prominent merchants.

In reality, the song targeted Sotir, not his wife. As Niš's inhabitants envied Sotir for his social status and reputation, the song served to ridicule him. During the fundraising for the New Barracks, Sika's father, Mihalaki, was one of the largest donors. Initially, the barracks were planned for cavalry use only. However, when the project was expanded to accommodate infantry and artillery as well, the total cost increased to 863,510 *kuruş* and the authorities needed additional funds. To cover this shortfall, they sought contributions from private donors, including Mihalaki Gümüşgerdan (Göyünç, 1982, p. 286).

<sup>14</sup> BOA, I. MVL. 513/23149 (State Council to Sultan, August 10, 1864).

<sup>15</sup> When Kanitz visited these places in 1864, there were almost no traces of ancient structures.

<sup>16</sup> HMH, B, p834.



Another interesting detail in the song is the reference to Sika's alleged lover, whom Miloš Rašić names as *Macar Miralay*, the Hungarian colonel. Most likely, this was Veli Bey (György Divicek), the cavalry colonel who designed the New Barracks stables. Veli Bey, of Hungarian origin, was the only convert among Ottoman officers in Niš during the construction of the New Barracks (Göyünç, 1982, p. 285).<sup>17</sup>

### *The New Barracks in Ottoman and Serbian Niš*

After the New Barracks were constructed, the situation in Niš improved considerably, with almost no more conflicts between civilians and soldiers. Niš could now accommodate additional troops to prepare for operations against Serbia. There were growing concerns among the Turks already in 1862, and following the Čukur Fountain incident in Belgrade, an additional six infantry battalions and two cavalry battalions were deployed in Niš (Đorđević, 1983, pp. 21, 23).

By the beginning of the Serbo-Turkish War of 1876–1878, Niš had become a well-equipped military center with several barracks and hospitals. This allowed the city to accommodate tens of thousands of soldiers preparing for the Serbian front. During the war, the strategic position of the New Barracks enabled the Ottomans to quickly deploy troops to positions on Bubanj Hill and south of it. However, the Serbian army neutralized this advantage by conquering Gorica Hill during the siege of Niš on January 10, 1878. This exposed many Ottoman positions in the southern part of Niš and the lower elevations in and around the city to the Serbian artillery. Faced with a *fait accompli*, the Ottoman authorities in Niš were forced to surrender, which they officially did on January 11, 1878 (Врховна команда српске војске, 1879, p. 50).

After the Berlin Congress in 1878, when Serbia annexed Niš and the New Territories (Novi Krajevi), the new Serbian administration acted swiftly to integrate these regions into its military system, aiming to enhance its political and military objectives. One of its operations was the organization and improvement of the military capacities in Niš and other parts of southern Central Serbia. To address these needs, cavalry and artillery barracks were built on the right bank

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<sup>17</sup> Divicek was born in 1822 in the village of Doba, located in northwestern Hungary. He began his military career as a corporal in the hussar regiments of the Austrian army. Like many of his compatriots, he participated in the Hungarian Revolution of 1848–1849, fighting under General György Kmeti. After the Revolution was suppressed, Kmeti defected to the Ottoman Empire and offered his services to the Sultan. Divicek followed suit, relocating to the Ottoman Empire to continue his military career. Like Kmeti (who became Ismail Pasha), Divicek converted to Islam and became Veli Bey. From 1854, he served in the Danube Army, which was deployed in Rumelia, including Niš. In 1864, he was promoted to the rank of cavalry colonel (Csorba, 1999, p. 18).

of the Nišava, while the New Barracks remained on the left bank. The defense posts on Bubanj Hill and the New Barracks provided sufficient security, allowing the Serbian authorities to build a railway station at the foot of Bubanj Hill in 1884, not far from the New Barracks (Алексић-Пејковић, 1984, p. 67). By the end of the 19th century, the area around Bubanj Hill had developed into a prominent military district and an important traffic hub. In 1900, engineering barracks were erected across from the New Barracks, becoming one of the largest military facilities in the Kingdom of Serbia (Андрејевић, 1996, p. 200). As a large-capacity building with 365 bedrooms and exceptional architectural and artistic value, the Engineering Barracks overshadowed its predecessor, the New Barracks.

Prior to the outbreak of the First World War, the New Barracks were renamed the Knjaz Mihailo Barracks and served as the headquarters of the 2nd Infantry Regiment of the same name.<sup>18</sup> During the First World War, with the Serbian government relocated to Niš, numerous military warehouses and medical missions of the Allies were stationed around the railway station and Bubanj Hill barracks. There is comparatively less historical data about the New Barracks/Knjaz Mihailo Barracks from the period after the First World War, likely due to its continued use by the army.

It is known that between the world wars, the barracks became the headquarters of the 16th Niš Infantry Regiment “Tsar Nicholai II,” and extensive construction at this time greatly changed and improved its facilities. The last traces of its oriental architecture were removed during this renovation. Even after Niš became part of Serbia, the barracks continued to influence the development of the city. The presence of explosives warehouses within the complex became a security concern once residential developments were permitted in the Bubanj Hill area (Велојић, 2014, p. 239).

## *Conclusion*

The most common Ottoman toponymic names of urban settlements (*mahalles*) in Serbia are Kovanluk/Kovanluci, Palilula, Beograd-kapija, Stambol-kapija, and Vidin-kapija.<sup>19</sup> There are also a number of city toponyms of military origin (*hisar, kale*); once common, they did not survive because these places did not evolve into residential districts with a tendency to expand. The smallest group of place names from the Ottoman period—also the most interesting ones, are derived from the names of buildings rather than places. As a rule, these buildings

<sup>18</sup> ЗССКН, А, 504/и.

<sup>19</sup> The Ottoman toponym *çifluk* (çiflık) has been preserved around Serbia. However, as it mainly refers to rural and not urban environments, it has been excluded from this context.

did not survive the transition from the Ottoman Empire to Serbia (1878), but they nonetheless continued to influence the use of the place directly related to the name. The New Barracks in Niš belongs to this group.<sup>20</sup>

In all aspects and stages of its construction, the New Barracks was a symbol of Ottoman society, which introduced the Tanzimat reforms to reorganize its systems according to the European model. The New Barracks were built to meet Ottoman military needs and the standards of modern European armies. Its location was not chosen arbitrarily but in accordance with principles of military science. Additionally, its positioning was influenced by the needs of civil society, and the way funds were raised for its construction reflects the emergence of a socially responsible citizenry that transcended ethnic and religious differences.

All of the above justifies addressing the New Barracks as a historical topic because it chronologically completes the reconstruction of urban development of Ottoman Niš and contributes to a better understanding of the local administration's politics under Ottoman rule.

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İrade Meclis-i Vala (I. MVL)

Sadaret Nezaret ve Devair Evrakı (A. MKT. NZD)

Sadaret Umum Vilayat Evrakı (A. MKT. UM)

Историјски архив Ниш (ИАН)

Збирка *Varia* (V)

Народни музеј Ниш (НМН)

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<sup>20</sup> This group also includes the first Ottoman *islahane* (orphanage and arts and crafts school) built in Niš in 1863. After 1878, the Serbian authorities replaced the neglected and dilapidated *islahane* with the first lyceum in Niš in 1922, next to the Stambol Kapija Elementary School, constructed in 1889.

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Топоними османског Ниша: нова касарна под Бубњем

Резиме

Рад представља истраживање о Новој касарни у Нишу, војном здању изграђеном у последњем веку османске управе над овим градом. У раду су анализирани околности због којих је и у којима је Нова касарна настала, као и значај који је имала за урбани развој савременог Ниша. На примеру Нове касарне доказано је да поједини урбани садржаји из османског периода историје наших градова не утичу само хипотетички на њихов савремени развој (кроз задржано топонимско име) већ и директно, онда када је било могуће утврдити континуитет њихове функционалности на прелазу из османске у савремену српску епоху. Како би

се боље сагледала тродимензионалност теме у урбанистичком и историјском контексту, српска и османска архивска грађа, која чини основну структуру рада, обogaћена је литературом различитог формата – нарaтивима, предањима и резултатима истраживања савремених домаћих и страних истраживача.

*Кључне речи:* Османско царство; Србија; брдо Бубањ; Мидхат-паша; војска; Ниш; војне баракe.



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