

Jarosław Rubacha

University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn

THE RUSSIAN-TURKISH WAR OF 1877–1878 IN THE
BALKANS AND THE PARTICIPATION IN IT
OF THE POLES FROM CONGRESS POLAND
(ON THE 140TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE EVENTS)

WOJNA ROSYJSKO-TURECKA 1877–1878
NA BAŁKANACH I UDZIAŁ W NIEJ POLAKÓW
Z KONGRESÓWKI (W 140 ROCZNICĘ WYDARZEŃ)

Out of the ten armed conflicts between Russia and Turkey, which the two countries fought since the second half of the 17th century, undoubtedly the greatest importance for the whole Black Sea basin, but also in the broader context for the whole of Europe, had the last one of them – the war of 1877–1878. Not only did it become a key element of the so-called eastern crisis developing since the second half of the 19th century, but also consolidated and expanded a large number of subjects of dispute in both regional and pan-European dimension, which stimulated the political situation on the Old Continent until the outbreak of World War I. This war was also – which is often forgotten nowadays – a part of the history of the Polish nation, through the participation of thousands of Poles in the ranks of the Russian army, drafted in the Kingdom of Poland, and especially its southern governorates – Radom, Kielce, Piotrków, Siedlce, Lublin, Warsaw and in the general-governorate of Kiev.

The causes of the outbreak of the war should be linked to the ongoing processes in which the leading European states, also known as the Great Powers, entered the industrial era as early as in the middle of the nineteenth century. At the same time, pursuing to secure the resources of raw materials for the emerging industry and, to a lesser extent, outlets for the manufactured goods, they made efforts to expand the colonial empires and the spheres of influence. In the case of Russia, which at the end of the 18th century acquired the fertile Ukrainian lands, it became a matter of priority to provide a convenient and safe trade route for exporting grain, which was the main export commodity, to Western Europe. On this route, leading through the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea, however, strategically important straits – the Bosphorus and Dardanelles were located in the territory of Turkey. Being fully aware of their role for the Russian economy, the Tsar as early as in the first half of the 19th century took steps to take control of the Black Sea Straits, and this issue became the *credo* of Russian foreign policy for several following decades. On the other hand, the Sublime Porte, using the diplomatic and sometimes also military support of the western powers, tried to

prevent the Russians from fulfilling their plans. The effective blocking of the possibility of fulfilling the Russian plans prompted the tsarist authorities in the mid-nineteenth century to work out a new ideological concept called Pan-Slavism. According to its assumptions, Russia was to head the federation of Slavic States, which was to stem the tide of Pan-Germanism and, in a broader context, of any western influence in Central and South-Eastern Europe¹. It was also assumed that the strengthening of the Russian influence in the Balkans would enable achieving the expected objectives without taking direct control over the Black Sea Straits. Thus, the so-called eastern issue gained, apart from military-political, also an ideological dimension. At the same time, the Russian government waited for the right time to implement those assumptions. The opportunity arose in 1875, in connection with the growing tension in Europe triggered by the outbreak of the anti-Ottoman uprising in Bosnia and Herzegovina², and a year later the conflict between Serbia and Montenegro with Turkey.

Those developments in the Balkans and the spread of the insurrection to the Bulgarian lands in April 1876³, which brought the threat of a lasting destabilization on a pan-European level, prompted the Great Powers to hasty consultations on the possibility of resolving the conflict. They took place at the turn of 1876 and 1877 in Constantinople. Already the first deliberations on this issue showed that Russia, implementing the assumptions of its foreign policy, rigidly considers the need to implement fundamental changes on the Balkan Peninsula in terms of improving the life of local Christians, and recognizes as a matter of priority the issue of the reactivation of Bulgarian statehood within the borders covering all areas inhabited by Bulgarian population⁴. Although this concept provoked opposition of the other powers, they agreed to sign in the mid-January of 1877 the final protocol in which they obliged Turkey to introduce far-reaching changes in its European possessions. This document, however, was rejected by Turkey⁵, which became the direct cause of the declaration of war by Russia on 24 April 1877⁶.

¹ C. Morris, *One Hundred Years of Conflict between the Nations of Europe: the Causes and Issues of the Great War*. Philadelphia 1914, pp. 70–83.

² К. Янчулев, *Руско-турската война 1877–1878 г.* Военно-издателски фонд, София 1941, p. 3.

³ More on this subject, i.a. W.E. Gladstone, *Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East*. Lovell, Adam, Wesson & Company, New York–Montreal 1876; А.А. Улунян, *Апрельское восстание 1876 года в Болгарии и Россия*. Наука, Москва 1978; A. Zawilski, *O wolność Bułgarii*. Wydawnictwo MON, Warszawa 1979, pp. 179–224; Z. Stojanow, *Zapiski z powstań bułgarskich*. Wydawnictwo MON, Warszawa 1971, pp. 241–444.

⁴ T. von Sosnosky, *Die Balkanpolitik Österreich-Ungarns seit 1866*, Vol. 1. Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, Stuttgart–Berlin 1914, p. 157.

⁵ T.T. Jeż [Z. Miłkowski], *Kwestya wschodnia w nowej fazie*. Ateneum 1878, Vol. III, Issue 4, pp. 8, 11.

⁶ J. Rubacha, A. Malinowski, *Historia Bułgarii 1870–1915. Materiały źródłowe z komentarzami*, Vol. 3. Neriton, Warszawa 2009, pp. 16–17; C. Morris, op. cit., p. 377;

Russians began the preparations for the war as early as in the autumn of 1876, when in the wake of increasing tensions, the first mobilization was launched – in four southern military districts: Caucasus, Kyiv, Odessa and Kharkov, whose military units were to constitute the core of the forces which were to be involved in the possible campaign against Turkey⁷. The main striking force was the so-called Danube Army, consisting of about 260 thousand soldiers⁸ and 690 guns directed at the Balkan war theatre, which was to be supported by the cooperating with it Serbian, Montenegrin and Romanian armies⁹ and the Bulgarian Voluntary Corps. Tsar Alexander II's younger brother, Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich, was appointed the chief commander of this unit. To oppose those forces, Turks had an army of about 280 thousand people, from whom they intended to use 190 thousand soldiers to directly confront Russians. The rest of the soldiers secured the Serbian and Montenegrin fronts and were the garrisons of Bulgarian fortresses located in the Bulgarian lands¹⁰.

Russians began war operations on 22 June 1877 with two infantry regiments from the XIV Corps, forming the so-called Lower Danube Group under the command of General Apollon Zimmerman¹¹, crossing the Danube between Brăila and Galați. Their task was to distract the Turks from the location of the main army forces landing operation, for which the area of Zimnicea was designated. This action began with the crossing of the 14th Infantry Division subdivisions under the command of Gen. Mikhail Dragomirov and several smaller units at night between 26 and 27 June 1877. Despite the fierce resistance of the Turks defending the banks, those units succeeded in creating a bridgehead to which thirty infantry battalions and artillery sub-units were transferred, and in the following days all invasion forces¹².

In early July 1877, the Russian Command divided the units concentrated near Svishtov into three groupings¹³. The first, called Eastern¹⁴, commanded by Grand Duke Alexander Alexandrovich, was tasked with blocking the forces of the

A. Wirth, *Geschichte der Türken*. Franck'sche Verlagshandlung, Stuttgart 1912, p. 73; B. Brodecki, *Szypka i Plwena 1877*. Wydawnictwo MON, Warszawa 1986, p. 38.

⁷ К. Янчулев, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

⁸ It was composed of: VIII, IX, XI and XII Corps (six Bulgarian volunteer battalions were part of the XII Corps) and VII and X Corps designated for protecting the Black Sea coast. IV and XIII Corps and XIV Corps operating in Dobrogea were the reserve.

⁹ Romanian forces formed two corps, a total of about 75 thousand soldiers and 240 guns.

¹⁰ Ц. Генов, *Освободителната война 1877–1878*. Наука и изкуство, София 1978, pp. 65–68.

¹¹ *История на Добруджа*, Vol. 3. Българска Академия на Науките, София 1988, p. 267.

¹² К. Янчулев, *op. cit.*, pp. 19–22; B. Brodecki, *op. cit.*, p. 43–53.

¹³ Г. Георгиев, *Освободителната война 1877–1878*. ДИ „П. Берон“, София 1986, pp. 58–59; К. Янчулев, *op. cit.*, pp. 18–19, 24–25; A. Zawilski, *op. cit.*, p. 242; B. Brodecki, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

¹⁴ It consisted of XII and XIII Corps; about 75 thousand soldiers in total.

Ottoman Eastern Danube Army under Mehmed Ali Pasha which gathered between the fortresses of Ruse, Shumen, Varna, Silistra, and then with launching an attack eastward and capturing Ruse. Those actions were to be supported by the 14th Corps¹⁵ coming from the north-east. The second grouping, Western¹⁶, under the command of Gen. Nikolai Kridener, was to attack Nikopol defended by 10 thousand Turks, and after capturing it, the grouping was to head towards Pleven and take over the passes in the western part of the Balkan Mountains. The weakest grouping¹⁷, called Frontal, under the command of Gen. Iosif Gurko, was to charge along the Yantra River on Veliko Tarnovo, and after capturing it, the grouping was to take over the passes in the middle of the Balkan Mountains and lead a quick attack towards Edirne.

Carrying out the appointed tasks, on 8 July, the western grouping started marching on Nikopol and attacked it a week later, using the support of heavy artillery from the northern bank of the Danube. After two days of heavy fighting, on 17 July 1877, the fortress was seized¹⁸, which opened the Russian troops the way to Pleven. This small town was not only an important transportation hub with the roads to Sofia and Veliko Tarnovo, and through the mountain passes also to Plovdiv, but also, thanks to its favourable geographical location, was a convenient place to defend. The Turks were aware of the important role that Pleven could play in the entire campaign so as early as on 13 July they sent there a portion of the units of the Western Army commanded by Osman Pasha, which were concentrated in the vicinity of Vidin and until then had been conducting military activity against Serbs and Montenegrins in the west¹⁹. Despite gaining information about the Turkish troops' movements, the Russian grouping command delayed the decision to start the march, explaining that with the necessity for the units to rest after seizing the Nikopol fortress. It was only clear pressure from the commander-in-chief, Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich, which prompted Gen. N. Kridener to send the 5th Infantry Division under the command of Gen. Youri Schilder-Schuldner and several smaller sub-units (about 9,000 soldiers in total) towards Pleven. However, those forces were too small and set off too late to effectively stop the Turks' fast march. Osman Pasha captured Pleven as early as on 19 July, and his troops on the same day fired on the Russians approaching the city. Despite

¹⁵ Carrying out this task, between July and December 1877, the sub-units of the grouping fought a number of skirmishes with the Turks, i.a. at Ezerche, Katselovo, Gorsko Albanovo, Kamen, Mechka and Trastenik; Ц. Генов, *op. cit.*, pp. 223–230; К. Янчулев, *op. cit.*, pp. 72–76; А. Zawilski, *op. cit.*, pp. 257–258.

¹⁶ It consisted of IX Corps, Caucasian Cossack Brigade and the 34th Cossack regiment, about 35 thousand soldiers in total.

¹⁷ The grouping had only about 9 thousand people and consisted of, among others: two Dragoons Brigades, Don Cossack Brigade, the 4th rifle brigade, six voluntary Bulgarian battalions and several smaller units.

¹⁸ А. Wirth, *op. cit.*, p. 74; А. Zawilski, *op. cit.*, p. 254; В. Brodecki, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

¹⁹ К. Янчулев, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

a considerable disproportion of forces, on 20 July, Gen. Y. Schilder-Schuldner ordered his subordinate units to attack the Turkish positions. Despite initial successes, the attack failed and the Russian subdivisions were forced to retreat²⁰. It gave the Turks time to bring in reinforcements, to reform their units into the Western Army, and to prepare the positions for further fighting.

Meanwhile, the failure of the attack on Pleven prompted the Russian command to regroup and significantly strengthen their forces. Gen. N. Kridener, urged by the general command of the Danube Army, designated for the next attack all available units of the IX Corps and over 180 guns of different calibre. The date of the attack was set for 30 July. Despite the numerical superiority in men and artillery²¹ on the Russian side this time, the attack failed once again, and the attackers suffered heavy losses, which exceeded 7,300 dead and wounded²². Such a state of affairs forced the Russian command to stop further attempts to capture Pleven and to wait for the reinforcements which were to arrive from inland Russia.

At the same time, the eastern grouping moving east, quickly captured the town of Byala and the area along the lower course of the Yantra River²³. It made it easier for Gen. I. Gurko's grouping, which in the first days of July started marching south, to act. As early as on 7 July 1877, the grouping captured Veliko Tarnovo²⁴ which had been abandoned by the Turks, and more importantly took control of the undamaged bridges on the Yantra River²⁵. After deploying the troops in the city, the grouping began preparations for crossing the Balkan Mountains. However, the reconnaissance revealed that strong Turkish troops had taken control of all the main passes, which called into question the possibility of carrying out the tasks which the small Russian forces had been assigned. Thanks to the help of the local Bulgarian population, who pointed out a non-defended isthmus near Gurkovo, the Russians eventually managed to cross the mountains, capture the city of Kazanlak and on 17 June 1877 reach from the south the fortified Shipka Pass²⁶. At that time, the general command sent from the north to that region two infantry regiments²⁷ from the 9th Infantry Division, which, after concentrating in Gabrovo, formed a mixed grouping under the command of Gen. Walerian Derożyński, called the Gabrovo grouping. Its task was to divert the Turks from the main offensive which was being prepared from the south. The assault on the Turkish positions in Shipka

²⁰ A. Zawilski, op. cit., p. 255; O.K. [A. Novikova], *Skobeleff and Slavonic Cause*. Longmans, Greene & Co, London 1883, p. 43, K. Янчулев, op. cit., pp. 36–40; B. Brodecki, op. cit., pp. 89–91.

²¹ Osman Pasha had only 58 guns.

²² A. Wirth, op. cit., p. 74; O.K. [A. Novikova], op. cit., pp. 44–45; K. Янчулев, op. cit., pp. 40–45; A. Zawilski, op. cit., pp. 255–256; B. Brodecki, op. cit., pp. 95–106.

²³ K. Янчулев, op. cit., p. 33.

²⁴ B. Brodecki, op. cit., p. 59; A. Zawilski, op. cit., p. 244–245; A. Wirth, op. cit., p. 73.

²⁵ K. Янчулев, op. cit., p. 25.

²⁶ B. Brodecki, op. cit., pp. 61–65.

²⁷ The 36th and the 30th infantry regiments.

Pass began on 18 July from both sides simultaneously. The Turkish troops put up fierce resistance against the Russians, but confronted with the enemy's tactical advantage, as early as in the night of 18 to 19 July 1877 retreated to the west²⁸. As a result, the road to Edirne was open to the central grouping. On 19 July, the Russians captured Kazanlak after a short battle, and four days later the cavalry units commanded by Fr. Eugen Leuchtenberg entered Stara Zagora²⁹.

Despite those successes, the general command on 22 July ordered Gen. I Gurko to suspend the operation, and the reason for that decision was the failure of the western grouping operations at Plevna, which made it impossible to transfer larger forces to the south. Therefore, Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich included into the grouping only the infantry brigade under the command of Gen. Ignacy Borejsz from the 9th infantry division and ordered him to take defensive positions against the expected operations of the Turkish army from the side of Trace.

Those assumptions were definitely justified. In the second half of July 1877, the units of the army under the command of Suleiman Pasha, transferred from the Montenegrin front, started to arrive at the port of Alexandroupoli on the Aegean Sea. This army was ready for combat action at the end of the month. According to the plans of the Turkish command, it was to drive away Gen. I. Gurko's troops to the northern side of the Balkan Mountains and, having crossed that mountain range, contact Osman Pasha and Mehmed Ali Pasha and attack the Russians from three directions simultaneously. After all the units landed, Suleiman Pasha's Army on 29 July 1877 began a march towards Stara Zagora³⁰, which they reached two days later. As early as on 31 July, the Turks beat back the avant-garde troops of the Russian cavalry and then launched an attack on the city defended mainly by volunteer Bulgarian battalions and using their numerical superiority forced the defenders to retreat. Although at that time the main forces of Gen. I. Gurko defeated the Ottoman units³¹ stationing near Nova Zagora, who were planning to join Suleiman Pasha's army, they had to withdraw in order to secure the Balkan passes. At the same time, the staff of the Danube Army decided to disband the frontal grouping and send its units to Veliko Tarnovo³².

Meanwhile, Suleiman Pasha, who had the main responsibility of conducting war operations, reached the southern slopes of the Balkan Mountains. As a result of the reconnaissance, it was found that the extreme mountain passes – in the west, in the vicinity of Troyan, and in the east, near the town of Tvarditsa, were strongly fortified by the Russians. Thus, the best chance of success was to launch an attack

²⁸ A. Zawilski, *op. cit.*, pp. 247–248; O.K. [A. Novikova], *op. cit.*, p. 41; К. Янчулев, *op. cit.*, pp. 28–30; B. Brodecki, *op. cit.*, pp. 67–68.

²⁹ К. Янчулев, *op. cit.*, pp. 27, 47–50; B. Brodecki, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

³⁰ Г. Георгиев, *op. cit.*, p. 55. During this march, the Turkish army committed numerous crimes against the Bulgarian civilian population.

³¹ A. Zawilski, *op. cit.*, p. 250; К. Янчулев, *op. cit.*, p. 50–51; B. Brodecki, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

³² К. Янчулев, *op. cit.*, p. 56; B. Brodecki, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

in the centre, towards Shipka Pass. It was where the Russian command, not expecting the attack, had deployed only the 36th infantry regiment from the Gabrovo grouping and six Bulgarian battalions, withdrawn from Stara Zagora. In total, the troops deployed in the passes, re-formed into the so-called Shipka grouping under the command of Gen. Nikolai Stoletov, consisted of about 5,500 soldiers and 27 guns³³. It was to this section where Suleiman Pasha directed the attack of a separate part of his army consisting of over 27,000 people. The attack began on 21 August 1877³⁴. Despite several assaults repeated on that day, the attackers did not manage to break the Russian lines. The situation of the defenders, however, was very serious, and it did not improve much even when on 21 August, in the afternoon, the subdivisions of the 35th infantry regiment appeared on the battlefield. The disproportion of the forces was still enormous, and the Turks, after occupying the surrounding slopes, started constant artillery fire of Russian positions. The assault was resumed on the 23 August, and heavy strikes on both flanks almost led to the break of the line. The critical situation was brought under control thanks to the heroic attitude of the officers – Col. Aleksander Lipiński, Col. Fiodor Depreradovich, Capt. Ivan Polikarpov, who organized counterattacks at the most endangered sections. At the same time, in the afternoon, the first reinforcements – a company from the 4th Rifle Division commanded by Gen. Adam Kwieciński, subdivisions of the 2nd Brigade of the 14th Infantry Division under the command of Gen. Michail Pietrushevski and companies formed of the civilian inhabitants of Gabrovo³⁵ – started arriving at the positions on the pass. As a result, it was possible to stabilize the situation on the entire front line, and within the next two days launch a counterattack which forced the Turks to retreat to the foothills of the Balkan Mountains³⁶. This undoubted success was, however, offset by heavy losses. During the fighting more than 3,000 Russians were killed and wounded, including the widely respected and well-liked commander of the Gabrovo grouping – Gen. W. Derożyński, and the Bulgarian units lost nearly 500 soldiers³⁷. However, the end of the battle of Shipka Pass did not mean the end of fighting in this area. The withdrawn Turkish units still had the possibility to fire at the Russian positions from heavy artillery, and since September the Russians also had to struggle with worsening weather conditions. The temperature reaching minus 20°C and abundant snowfall at the turn of 1877 and 1878 not only severely

³³ A. Zawilski, *op. cit.*, p. 259; B. Brodecki, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

³⁴ Ц. Генюв, *op. cit.*, pp. 132–147; К. Янчулев, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

³⁵ On 25 August 1877, the 53rd, 54th and 56th infantry regiments were sent to the positions at the pass to replace the withdrawn Bulgarian battalions, and in October additionally the 24th Infantry Division.

³⁶ B. Brodecki, *op. cit.*, pp. 121–139; A. Zawilski, *op. cit.*, pp. 260–275; К. Янчулев, *op. cit.*, pp. 64–68.

³⁷ Ц. Генюв, *op. cit.*, p. 143. The Turkish losses were even heavier and amounted to nearly 7,000 killed and wounded.

hampered providing supplies to the troops, but also caused mass illnesses³⁸. Cases of freezing were also common. It is estimated that during that period almost 11 thousand soldiers went missing, got sick or froze.

During the battle of Shipka Pass, significant events took place also on the right flank of the Russian army. The information about a strong Turkish army attempting to cross the Balkan Mountains reached the camp in Pleven and prompted Osman Pasha to try to break the Russian positions. On 31 August 1877, in the heavily undulating and forested area between the towns of Pelishat and Zgalevo, the Russian positions attacked the Turkish troops consisting of almost 11,000 soldiers but despite the initial successes, which were the result of a surprise effect, at the end of the day the control over the situation was regained, and the attackers were forced to retreat. The Russian command was deeply concerned about the high activity of the Turks in this section. Therefore, as early as in the first days of August, they decided to finally destroy the West Army defending itself in Pleven³⁹. This time, however, it was decided to significantly increase the number of units which were to take part in the assault and to improve the strategic situation. Hence, as early as on 3 September 1877, after a three-day battle, a separated grouping under the command of Fr. Alexander Imeretinsky captured the heavily fortified town of Lovech⁴⁰, breaking one of the main Turkish supply lines, and the main forces began preparations for the attack.

Powerful forces, consisting of more than 60 thousand Russians and 23 thousand Romanians, which were to be supported by artillery consisting of almost 430 guns, were appointed to accomplish that task. The assault, preceded by five-day artillery preparations, began on 11 September 1877. As early as on the first day, the joined Russian-Romanian forces managed to reach the Turkish lines, and in some places also get deep into the positions, but the defenders stoutly resisted, launching strong counterattacks. Therefore, the attempts to force the Turks to retreat undertaken within the next three days ended in complete failure. Moreover, the attackers suffered very heavy losses, amounting to more than 15,500 killed and wounded, including about 3,000 Romanians⁴¹.

³⁸ According to B. Brodecki (op cit., p. 144): "Diseases were spreading at an alarming rate. Particularly the soldiers from the 24th division suffered from them. On 17 December, in three regiments of that division only two cases of injuries were reported, but as many as 140 soldiers were ill. Over the next three days, the number of ill soldiers increased to 620. On 22 December, there was 1 injured soldier per 885 ill soldiers".

³⁹ This decision was greatly influenced by the fact that on 22 August 1877, the mixed grouping commanded by Gen. Alexander Imertynsky captured the town of Lovech, and taking control of this important transportation hub made supplying Osman Pasha's army and sending reinforcements to Pleven much more difficult.

⁴⁰ O.K. [A. Novikova], op. cit., 48–49; K. Янчулев, op. cit., pp. 76–80; B. Brodecki, op. cit., pp. 151–153.

⁴¹ A. Wirth, op. cit., p. 74; K. Янчулев, op. cit., pp. 82–91; O.K. [A. Novikova], op. cit., pp. 60–82; B. Brodecki, op. cit., pp. 159–176; A. Zawilski, op. cit., pp. 287–288.

The third attempt to capture Pleven which ended in failure was widely noticed all over Europe and significantly affected the morale not only of the soldiers, but also the Russian commanders. It was even rumoured that the Russians were planning to retreat to the north bank of the Danube. In an effort to counter the defeatist propaganda, Tsar Alexander II, who was staying in the camp near Pleven, decided to include into the command of the Western Grouping a veteran and hero of the Crimean War – Gen. Eduard Totleben⁴². Having arrived at Pleven, he reorganized the staff and proceeded to build a system of fortifications around the city. At the same time, the high command sent there reinforcements in the form of guards units, thanks to which the forces of the Western Grouping increased to 160 thousand soldiers. According to Gen. E. Totleben, the highest priority task was to close the encirclement around Osman Pasha's army, and especially to take control of the road from Pleven to Sofia. In order to do so, the decision was made to create a separate corps of about 50,000 people under the command of Gen. I. Gurko, who on 24 October 1877 gained the Turkish positions at Gorni Dabnik, and four days later captured the heavily fortified town of Telish. As a result, the road connection with Sofia was broken and the Turkish Western Army was fully encircled⁴³.

Although Osman Pasha's situation became very difficult, until the beginning of December he consistently rejected the offers of capitulation submitted by Russians, and on 10 December 1877 he attempted to break the Russian lines and withdraw to the west⁴⁴. Despite the fact that the Russian command had information on the ongoing preparations and even the direction and date of the action, they did not undertake further preparations. Therefore, the Turkish assault on Dolna Mitropoliya almost ended with success. In the first phase of the battle, they managed to break the Russian fortifications on the length of three kilometres, and it was only hasty transfer of the reserves to the endangered section which enabled warding off the danger and the Turkish units had to retreat. Recognizing the hopelessness of the situation, Osman Pasha surrendered on that same day⁴⁵.

The fall of Pleven was a turning point in the war. Trying to build on the success, the Russian army units were sent towards the Balkan passes with the task of crossing them as soon as possible. At the same time, in mid-December 1877, Serbia and Montenegro resumed military action against the Turks. The Serbian army, divided into three parts, undertook, together with the Montenegrins, operations in the west, blocked the Turkish troops at Vidin, and, correlating the

⁴² К. Янчулев, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

⁴³ Ц. Генов, *op. cit.*, pp. 170–175; B. Brodecki, *op. cit.*, pp. 182–186.

⁴⁴ Such attempts had been undertaken several times by the Turks also in mid-November 1877; O.K. [A. Novikova], *op. cit.*, p. 91.

⁴⁵ B. Brodecki, *op. cit.*, p. 193; A. Wirth, *op. cit.*, p. 74; O.K. [A. Novikova], *op. cit.*, p. 101; A. Zawilski, *op. cit.*, pp. 292–295.

actions with the Russians, headed for Sofia⁴⁶. The last corps captured the town of Bela Palanka on 24 December 1877 and four days later entered Piroto.

At that time Gen. I. Gurko's group reached the pass in the western part of the Balkan Mountains. In spite of difficult conditions caused by snowfall and frost, the group attempted to cross them. A separated unit under the command of Gen. N. Kridener was created from the forces of the grouping and its task was to block the possible Turkish troops movements in Sofia Valley, and the rest was divided into three columns. On the right flank, the column commanded by Gen. Nicolai Velyaminov was to move on the Vrachesh-Zhelyava axis and the left-wing column commanded by Gen. Victor Dandaville – along the Etropole-Zlatitsa-Bunovo line. At that time, the main forces, which constituted the central column, commanded by Gen. Vasilij Kataley, were supposed to cross Churek Pass and encircle the Turks. Despite initial problems, the whole operation ended in success. As early as on 27 December, the sub-units of the central column reached the southern slopes of the Balkan Mountains, and on 4 January 1878 the Russians entered Sofia⁴⁷.

Other Russian units were also tasked with crossing the mountains. Executing those orders, Gen. Pavel Karcov's group, operating east of Gen. Gurko's grouping, crossed Troyan Pass and on 8 January captured Karlovo. At that time, the southern grouping⁴⁸ commanded by Gen. Fyodor Radetzky started crossing the mountains near Shipka Pass with the task of breaking the Turkish forces which were blocking the way south, and which were concentrated in a fortified camp near Sheynovo⁴⁹. The Russian forces were divided also there into three columns. The right one, under the command of Gen. Mikhail Skobelev, was tasked with forcing Khimitliyski Pass and bypassing the Turks from the west; the left one, commanded by Gen. Nikolai Svyatopolk-Mirsky, was to cross Tryavna Pass, and the central one, under the personal command of Gen. F. Radetzky, was to attack from the north through Shipka Pass⁵⁰. Due to difficult weather conditions though, on the planned date – 8 January – at the battlefield near Sheynovo only Gen. N. Svyatopolk-Mirsky's sub-units appeared. Without waiting for the arrival of the remaining columns, they started the offensive, but it was stopped. Only on the following day, the correlated attack of all the units broke the defense lines and forced the Turks to surrender. As a result, the road to the south, towards Trace and Constantinople was open for the Russian army⁵¹.

⁴⁶ A. Wirth, *op. cit.*, pp. 74–75.

⁴⁷ К. Янчулев, *op. cit.*, pp. 98–101; A. Wirth, *op. cit.*, p. 75; O.K. [A. Novikova], *op. cit.*, p. 150; A. Zawilski, *op. cit.*, p. 308; B. Brodecki, *op. cit.*, pp. 198–202.

⁴⁸ The grouping was formed in late August 1877 to secure Shipka Pass. By the end of the year it had about 54,000 soldiers.

⁴⁹ Ц. Генов, *op. cit.*, pp. 199–207; A. Zawilski, *op. cit.*, pp. 310–312.

⁵⁰ O.K. [A. Novikova], *op. cit.*, pp. 148–149, 155–159.

⁵¹ К. Янчулев, *op. cit.*, pp. 101–104; O.K. [A. Novikova], *op. cit.*, pp. 163–167; B. Brodecki, *op. cit.*, pp. 203–205.

Such a state of affairs prompted the Turkish authorities to attempt to end the war, but the request for a ceasefire made on 9 January 1885 was rejected. Trying to make use of the successes achieved so far, the Russians captured Samkov on 10 January, defeated the remnants of Suleiman Pasha's army at Plovdiv on 16 January, and four days later they entered Edirne⁵². The fast march of the Russian army towards the Turkish capital caused serious concern in Europe, especially in Great Britain and Austro-Hungary. The threat of military intervention of the Great Powers in defense of Turkey⁵³ prompted the tsarist authorities to stop the offensive. On 31 January 1878, a ceasefire agreement was signed in Edirne⁵⁴, and the war officially ended with a peace treaty signed on 3 March in Yeşilköy (San Stefano)⁵⁵.

In the events of the war, as was already mentioned above, took part also the Poles from Congress Poland, officers and soldiers in the ranks of the Russian army. Although this fact does not raise any reservations, it remains essential to establish how large the group was. The attempt to answer this question seems to be even more important because there have been occasionally different opinions on this subject in the publications from over the last one hundred years⁵⁶, and this issue has not been subject to extensive research. Such a state of affairs results largely from the fact that there are no documents whatsoever which would present the ethnic composition of the Russian army in 1877 and 1878. Hence, all the numbers may be estimated only.

According to Stanisław Wiech's calculations⁵⁷, at the beginning of 1876 in the ranks of the Russian army served nearly 70 thousand recruits who were born in the

⁵² Ц. Генов, op. cit., pp. 230–235; C. Morris, op. cit., p. 378.

⁵³ L. Widerszal, *Ruchy wolnościowe na Bałkanach*. Państwowe Zakłady Wydawnictw Szkolnych, Warszawa 1947, p. 67; A. Wirth, op. cit., p. 75.

⁵⁴ A. Zawilski, op. cit., p. 315; O.K. [A. Novikova], op. cit., p. 169; B. Brodecki, op. cit., p. 206.

⁵⁵ A. Wirth, op. cit., p. 75. The text of the document in: J. Rubacha, A. Malinowski, A. Giza, *Historia Bułgarii 1870–1915. Materiały źródłowe z komentarzami*, Vol. 1. Neriton, Warszawa 2006, pp. 21–32.

⁵⁶ According to Jan Grzegorzewski: "Nearly half of the Russian army of Grand Duke Nikolai at that time was composed of Poles, as both soldiers and officers"; J. Grzegorzewski, *Rok przewrotów (Bułgaria 1885/6)*. Stanisław Sułkowski, Lwów 1900, p. 44; however, contemporary researchers (M. Klimecki, *Polacy w walce o niepodległość Bułgarii (1877–1878)*, [In:] *Polska–Bułgaria przez wieki XVII–XX*. Ed. W. Balcerak. IH Polska Akademia Nauk, Warszawa 1991, pp. 40–41; J. Wojtasik, *Idea walki zbrojnej o niepodległość Polski 1864–1907*. Wydawnictwo MON, Warszawa 1987, p. 41; M. Tanty, *Wojna rosyjsko-turecka 1877/1878 (geneza – przebieg – rezultaty)*, [In:] *Wojna wyzwolenicza 1877–1878*. Ed. A. Koseski. Bułgarski Ośrodek Informacji i Kultury, Warszawa 1978, p. 20) estimate that there were about 35–50 thousand soldiers.

⁵⁷ S. Wiech, J. Legieć, *Udział żołnierzy polskich – poborowych z Królestwa Polskiego w walkach o wyzwolenie Bułgarii i echa wojny rosyjsko-tureckiej 1877–1878 r. na ziemiach polskich*. Българска Академия на Науките, Известия на Института за исторически изследвания 2015, Vol. 32.

Kingdom of Poland, which constituted about 9% of its composition; in the troops of the line – infantry and cavalry – the percentage was slightly higher and amounted to approximately 11–12%. Assuming that half of the tsarist forces participated in military operations, the number of Poles participating in them can be estimated at about 30–35 thousand. The reservists drafted during the mobilization must be added to this number. Thus, the total number of Poles in the ranks of the Russian army on the Balkan Peninsula should be estimated at 50–55 thousand soldiers⁵⁸.

The recruits from the Kingdom of Poland who were obliged to serve in the army were drafted, above all, apart from Warsaw, to Caucasus, Kharkiv, Odessa and Kiev Military Districts, i.e. to those which were mobilized as early as in the autumn of 1876. This means that Poles took part in all the events of the war. Taking into account the combat trail of particular units of the Russian army, it can be stated, i.a. that the inhabitants of Warsaw Governorate, drafted mostly to the 9th Infantry Division took part in the siege of Pleven and then in the battle of Sheynovo, the recruits from Kielce Governorate, fighting in the 31st Infantry Division also besieged Pleven and then participated in the liberation of Sofia; the 3rd Guard Infantry Division recruited in the Congress Poland also went through a similar combat trail⁵⁹. There is no information though, on their attitudes and commitment to fight. Such a state of affairs, however, allows presuming that they fought no worse than the representatives of other nations. Had it been otherwise, perhaps war chroniclers would have criticized them, as was the case with the allied Romanian army⁶⁰. Nonetheless, it is difficult to estimate how many soldiers of Polish origin fell in the Balkans. Based on the Russian statistical data, according to which 15–20% of the soldiers from the Russian army were killed, died and went missing during the war, it can be estimated at about 8–10 thousand soldiers⁶¹.

A separate issue is the participation of officers of Polish origin in the war. The estimates in this aspect are very different, ranging from 9–10% to over 30%⁶², and a more detailed analysis involves substantial problems. It results from the fact that many officers of Polish origin during the war with Turkey of 1877–1878 came from mixed families and were Orthodox. Among them a large group, over the years of service, lost their sense of Polishness, the knowledge of the Polish

⁵⁸ Ibidem, p. 82. By contrast, Zbigniew Klein (*Udział Polaków w kampanii rosyjskiej na Bałkanach 1877–1878 r.* Studia z Dziejów Rosji i Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej 2003, Vol. 38, pp. 19–23 and idem, *Polskie ślady w budowie nowożytnej Bułgarii 1877–1914*. Łowicz 1999, p. 58) estimates the number of Poles in the Russian army in 1877–1878 at 150–200 thousand.

⁵⁹ S. Wiech, J. Legieć, op. cit., pp. 84–85.

⁶⁰ B. Brodecki, op. cit., p. 91; Z. Klejn, *Udział Polaków w kampanii rosyjskiej na Bałkanach 1877–1878 r.* IH Polska Akademia Nauk, Studia z Dziejów Rosji i Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej 2003, Vol. 38, pp. 11–12.

⁶¹ S. Wiech, J. Legieć, op. cit., p. 86.

⁶² B. Brodecki, op. cit., p. 214; Z. Klejn, *Udział Polaków...*, p.19.

language and often even the awareness of their Polish origin. According to official data, in 1876, nearly 23 thousand officers, of whom about 2,500 declared being Catholic, served in the ranks of the Russian army, and because almost all of them are considered to have Polish roots, the number of Poles in the officer corps of the units sent to the Balkan war theater, can be estimated at around 1,000 people⁶³. They can be found at all levels of command.

The highest military rank – the chief of staff of the Danube Army – was held by Gen. Artur Niepokojczycki, who did not hide his Polish origin and whose family came from near Slutsk. He started his military career with completing a course at Page Corps and then the Imperial Military Academy in St. Petersburg. In the 1940s he fought in the Caucasus, Chechnya and Dagestan, and in Hungary during the suppression of the Spring of Nations. During the Crimean War he led the siege of Silistra defended by Michał Czajkowski, then was appointed the chief of staff of the Southern Army and of the armies and the navies in Crimea⁶⁴. However, the assessment of his actions during the Russian-Turkish war of 1877–1878, is critical. He was accused of bureaucracy, inefficiency, lack of competence, and even corruption⁶⁵. Zbigniew Klejn argues though that all those accusations were a matter of ambition and were made by officials and military circles reluctant towards Niepokojczycki⁶⁶. His deputy was Gen. Kazimierz Lewicki, a lecturer at the Nicholas General Staff Academy and a helper of the chief of staff of the Guards and the Petersburg Military District, who was equally severely criticized already during the war⁶⁷. As in the case of Gen. Niepokojczycki, he was accused of incompetence, conceit, impudence and careerism for similar reasons. Nonetheless, it was he who was firmly opposed to withdrawing the army to the left bank of the Danube after the third failed assault on Pleven and found support for his standpoint with both the Minister of War Dmitry Milyutin and Tsar Alexander II himself⁶⁸.

Among the general corps of the Danube Army, already mentioned Z. Klejn identified 14 Polish sounding surnames. Gen. Marcin Kruszewski was included in the army staff, Gen. Mikołaj Massalski was the chief of artillery, Gen. Konstanty Biskupski was the chief of staff of the 11th Corps engaged in the battles at Pleven, Gen. Dymitr Nagłowski was the chief of staff of Gen. J. Gurko's grouping, Gen. Walerian Derożyński⁶⁹ was the commander of the Gabrovo grouping, Gen. Włodzimierz Dobrowolski distinguished himself during the battles at Pleven, Gen. Elias Radziszewski at Samkov, Gen. Adam Kwieciński at Shipka, Gen. Aleksander Dąbrowski at Elena. There were also Poles among the commanders of

⁶³ S. Wiech, *J. Legieć*, op. cit., p. 87.

⁶⁴ Z. Klejn, *Udział Polaków...*, p. 6.

⁶⁵ B. Brodecki, op. cit., p. 214; Z. Klejn, *Udział Polaków...*, p. 18.

⁶⁶ Z. Klejn, *Polskie ślady w budowie nowożytnej Bułgarii 1877–1914*. Mazowiecka Wyższa Szkoła Humanistyczno-Pedagogiczna w Łowiczu, Łowicz 1999, pp. 60–61.

⁶⁷ B. Brodecki, op. cit., p. 214; Z. Klejn, *Udział Polaków...*, pp. 18–19.

⁶⁸ Z. Klejn, *Polskie ślady...*, p. 61.

⁶⁹ His Polish origin is questioned by B. Brodecki; B. Brodecki, op. cit., p. 215.

sub-units of the line. Among them worth mentioning are: Col. Ignacy Borejsza, the hero of the battles at Shipka Pass and Col. Kazimierz Elżanowski, who distinguished himself during the battles of Lovech. Both of them, in recognition of their merits, were promoted to generals. During the battles of Shipka also the following soldiers covered themselves in glory: Col. Aleksander Lipiński - the commander of the 35th infantry regiment, Col. Władysław Dobrzyński, Col. Lewandowski, Col. Bieniecki, Lt. Col. Władysław Kobylański, Lt. Col. Drozdowski, during the battles at Nikopol – Lt. Col. Maciejewski, at Pleven – Col. Molski, at Kazanlak – Col. Edward Żyrzyński – the commander of the 34th infantry regiment and during the assault on Sofia - Col. Aleksander Puzyrewski. There is a long list of lower rank officers but it is impossible to mention them here. Together with the Russian army, also several dozen Polish doctors, veterinarians and pharmacists came to the Balkan front, and a large number of Poles also fought in the Bulgarian volunteer battalions, to which they had been drafted during the formation phase. It is calculated that over 30 officers and at least several dozen non-coms and soldiers, i.a. from the 46th and 47th infantry regiments served in them⁷⁰.

The Russian-Turkish War of 1877–1878 is one of the most important events in the history of contemporary Europe, and the reminiscences of its consequences can be observed directly or indirectly in many areas also in modern times. Poles were also involved in the conflict, in the ranks of the Russian army, probably unaware of the importance of the reality which they created. Moreover, many Poles paid the highest price in the struggle for “our freedom and yours”. Hence, their contribution to implementing that ideal, so popular in Poland, undoubtedly deserves to be commemorated.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Balcerak W. (Ed.) 1991.** *Polska-Bulgaria przez wieki XVII–XX*. IH Polska Akademia Nauk, Warszawa
- Brodecki B. 1986.** *Szypka i Plwena 1877*. Wydawnictwo MON, Warszawa.
- Генов Ц. 1978.** *Освободителната война 1877–1878*. Наука и изкуство, София [Genov C. 1978. *Osvoboditelnata vojna 1877–1878*. Nauka i izkustvo, Sofia].
- Георгиев Г. 1986.** *Освободителната война 1877–1878*. ДИ „П. Берон”, София [Georgiev G. 1986. *Osvoboditelnata vojna 1877–1878*. ДИ „P. Beron”, Sofia].
- Gladstone W.E. 1876.** *Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East*. Lovell, Adam, Wesson & Company, New York–Montreal.

⁷⁰ Z. Klejn, *Polskie ślady...*, pp. 62–68; Idem, *Udział Polaków...*, pp. 13, 19; B. Brodecki, op. cit., pp. 215–217.

- Grzegorzewski J. 1900.** *Rok przewrotów (Bułgaria 1885/6)*. Stanisław Sułkowski, Lwów.
- История на Добруджа. 1988.** Vol. 3. Българска Академия на Науките, София [Istoriâna Dobrudža. 1988. Vol. 3. B"lgarska Akademiâ na Naukite, Sofia].
- Янчулев К. 1941.** *Руско-турската война 1877–1878 г.* Военно-издателски фонд, София [Ânčulev K. 1941. Rusko-turskata vojna 1877–1878 g. Voенno-izdatelski fond, Sofia].
- Jež T.T. [Z. Milkowski] 1878.** *Kwestya wschodnia w nowej fazie*. Ateneum, Vol. III, Issue 4.
- Klejn Z. 1999.** *Polskie ślady w budowie nowożytnej Bułgarii 1877–1914*. Mazowiecka Wyższa Szkoła Humanistyczno-Pedagogiczna w Łowiczu, Łowicz.
- Klejn Z. 2003.** *Udział Polaków w kampanii rosyjskiej na Bałkanach 1877–1878 r.* IH Polska Akademia Nauk, Studia z Dziejów Rosji i Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej, Vol. 38.
- Koseski A. (Ed.) 1978.** *Wojna wyzwoleńcza 1877–1878*. Bułgarski Ośrodek Informacji i Kultury, Warszawa.
- Morris C. 1914.** *One Hundred Years of Conflict between the Nations of Europe: the Causes and Issues of the Great War*. Philadelphia.
- O.K. [A. Novikova] 1883.** *Skobelev and Slavonic Cause*. Longmans, Greene & Co, London.
- Rubacha J., Malinowski A. 2009.** *Historia Bułgarii 1870–1915. Materiały źródłowe z komentarzami*, Vol. 3. Neriton, Warszawa.
- Rubacha J., Malinowski A., Giza A. 2006.** *Historia Bułgarii 1870–1915. Materiały źródłowe z komentarzami*, Vol. 1. Neriton, Warszawa.
- Sosnosky T. von. 1914.** *Die Balkanpolitik Österreich-Ungarns seit 1866*, Vol. 1. Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, Stuttgart–Berlin.
- Stojanow Z. 1971.** *Zapiski z powstań bułgarskich*. Wydawnictwo MON, Warszawa.
- Улунян А.А. 1978.** *Апрельское восстание 1876 года в Болгарии и Россия*. Наука, Москва [Ulunân A.A. 1978. Aprel'skoe vosstanie 1876 goda v Bolgarii i Rossiâ. Nauka, Moskva].
- Wiech S., Legieć J. 2015.** *Udział żołnierzy polskich – poborowych z Królestwa Polskiego w walkach o wyzwolenie Bułgarii i echa wojny rosyjsko-tureckiej 1877–1878 r. na ziemiach polskich*. Българска Академия на Науките, Известия на Института за исторически изследвания [B"lgarska Akademiâ na Naukite, Izvestiâ na Instituta za istoričeski izsledvaniâ], Vol. 32.
- Widerszal L. 1947.** *Ruchy wolnościowe na Bałkanach*. Państwowe Zakłady Wydawnictw Szkolnych, Warszawa.
- Wirth A. 1912.** *Geschichte der Türken*. Franck'sche Verlagshandlung, Stuttgart.
- Wojtasik J. 1987.** *Idea walki zbrojnej o niepodległość Polski 1864–1907*. Wydawnictwo MON, Warszawa.
- Zawilski A. 1979.** *O wolność Bułgarii*. Wydawnictwo MON, Warszawa.

SUMMARY

The Russian-Turkish war of 1877–1878 was undoubtedly the most important of all ten conflicts between the two states in modern history. As a consequence of it, not only the political map of South-East Europe changed fundamentally, but also the processes whose reminiscences can be observed until the present day were initiated.

In a campaign launched in June 1877, the Russian army successfully crushed the Turkish forces in the Balkans, and such events as the siege of Pleven or the defense of Shipka made a significant mark on the military history of Europe. In those events, in the ranks of the tsarist forces, took part several tens of thousands of Poles, the inhabitants of the Kingdom of Poland and the former Eastern Borderlands, who paid the highest price implementing the ideal of fighting “for our freedom and yours”.

STRESZCZENIE

Wojna rosyjsko-turecka z lat 1877–1878 była niewątpliwie najważniejszym spośród wszystkich dziesięciu konfliktów między oboma państwami w dziejach nowożytnych. W jej następstwie nie tylko w sposób zasadniczy zmieniła się mapa polityczna Europy Południowo-Wschodniej, lecz także zapoczątkowane zostały procesy, których reminiscencje obserwować możemy do dziś.

W ramach rozpoczętej w czerwcu 1877 r. kampanii armia rosyjska, nie bez problemów, rozbiła siły tureckie na Bałkanach, a wydarzenia takie jak oblężenie Plewenu czy obrona Szypki, na trwałe zapisały się w historii militarnej Europy. W wydarzeniach tych w szeregach carskich sił zbrojnych wzięło udział także kilkadziesiąt tysięcy Polaków – mieszkańców Królestwa Polskiego i dawnych kresów Rzeczypospolitej, którzy złożyli potężną daninę krwi, realizując ideę walki „za naszą i waszą wolność”.

Key words: Russia, Turkey, Poles, Russian-Turkish war of 1877–1878

Słowa kluczowe: Rosja, Turcja, Polacy, wojna rosyjsko-turecka 1877–1878