

# THE SIEGE AND FALL OF NIKŠIĆ FORTRESS IN THE MONTENEGRIN-OTTOMAN CONFLICTS (1877)

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## Apstrakt

This article explores the significance of the siege and fall of the Nikšić Fortress during the Montenegrin–Ottoman War of 1876–1878. It aims to reconstruct, as faithfully as possible, the course of events and to define the role of Nikšić in the conflict between the Ottoman Empire and Montenegro. The primary focus is on the strategic, political, and symbolic importance of the town and its fortress. To that end, the study analyzes the military and political aspects of the 1877 siege of Nikšić, including the organization of Montenegrin and Ottoman troops, the tactics employed during the battles, and the impact of international circumstances on the outcome of the conflict. Special attention is given to the consequences of the fortress's fall for the subsequent course of the war and Montenegro's territorial expansion. The research draws on Montenegrin, Ottoman Turkish, and Bosnian archival documents, as well as contemporary memoirs and relevant historiographical literature. The study concludes that the conquest of Nikšić represented a pivotal moment in the consolidation of Montenegrin statehood and the incorporation of the western parts of present-day Montenegro, significantly strengthening Montenegro's international position. This work provides a broader perspective on the complex relations between Montenegro and the Ottoman Empire, while simultaneously shedding light on the local history of Nikšić as one of the key focal points of this conflict.

*Keywords:* Montenegro, Ottoman Turkish, Nikšić, Montenegrin-Turkish War, Nikšić Fortress.

## Introduction

The Nikšić Fortress, situated on an elevation overlooking the eponymous town, stands as one of the key symbols of Ottoman presence and power in the western part of present-day Montenegro. Its rich and complex history dates back to the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, when it was constructed in response to the strategic needs of the Ottoman Empire. This fortress played a significant role in controlling transport routes connecting the central and western parts of the Balkans, as well as in safeguarding Ottoman holdings in the region.<sup>1</sup> Situated in a strategically important location, the fortress quickly became not only a military stronghold but also an administrative center of Ottoman authority in the region, with its status fluctuating in accordance with decisions made by the central government in Istanbul. Below the fortress emerged a settlement (*kasaba*) that gradually acquired characteristics typical of Ottoman urban spaces. Its streets, bazaar, and residential buildings reflected Ottoman architecture and lifestyle, transforming Nikšić into a significant urban center in this part of the Balkans. During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the Nikšić Fortress witnessed frequent conflicts between the Ottoman Empire and Montenegrin forces, which sought to expand their territory. On several occasions, the fortress became the target of Montenegrin attacks. However, due to its robust construction and effective military organization, the Ottomans successfully defended it.<sup>2</sup> Despite this, the strengthening of Montenegro and the development of its military structures rendered Ottoman control increasingly precarious. By the 1830s, the fortress, in addition to its military function, retained its role as the administrative center of Ottoman authority in this part of the Balkans, although political changes and the growing aspirations of Montenegro further undermined its significance.

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<sup>1</sup> Details on the construction of the Nikšić fortress, see: Andrija Luburić, *Drobnjaci – pleme u Hercegovini*, Belgrade 1930; Petar Šobajić, *Nikšić-Onogošt*, Belgrade 1938; Hamdija Kreševljaković, *Kapetanije u Bosni i Hercegovini*, Sarajevo, 1954; Gligor Stanojević, *Crna Gora u doba vladike Danila*, Cetinje, 1955; Jovan Ivović, *Obnova tvrđave 1709-1713, Nikšić Newspapers*, No. 6,7,8, Nikšić, 1961; *Nikšić*, monografija, Zagreb, 1972; *Istorija Crne Gore*, Vol: 1, Book: 3, Titograd, 1975; Ejup Mušović, “Ferman o neferima tvrđava Onogošt i Banvir 1713. godine”, *Istorijski zapisi*, 3-4, Titograd, 1983; Veljko Šakotić, *Nikšić (Onogošt) u otporima i borbama 1597-1877*, Nikšić, 1983; Bogumil Hrabak, *Nikšić do početka XIX vijeka*, Belgrade, 1997; Veljko Šakotić, *Tri vijeka nikšićke tvrđave*, Nikšić, 2001; Slobodan Drobnjak-Sait S. Šabotić, *Muslimansko/Bošnjačko stanovništvo Onogoškog-Nikšićkog kraja 1477-2003*, Podgorica, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> S. Drobnjak – S. Š. Šabotić, *Muslimansko/Bošnjačko stanovništvo Onogoškog-Nikšićkog...*, 115-119.

The culmination of these conflicts occurred during the Montenegrin–Ottoman War of 1876–1878. The siege of the Nikšić Fortress in 1877 marked a decisive moment, as Montenegrin forces, after a prolonged struggle, succeeded in capturing the fortress. The fall of Nikšić not only symbolized a turning point in the history of the city but also signified a broader shift in relations between Montenegro and the Ottoman Empire, bringing Montenegro closer to its goal of full independence and territorial expansion.<sup>3</sup> Today, the remains of the Nikšić Fortress stand as a testament to its tumultuous past and complex role in Montenegrin history, serving as a reminder of the significance of this location in the struggle for dominance in the Balkans. The fortress remains a valuable monument of Ottoman military architecture and a witness to the historical conflicts that shaped modern Montenegro.

## Nikšić and the Nikšić Fortress in the Second Half of the 19th Century

### *Montenegro and Nikšić Until the Herzegovinian Uprising*

The reforms initiated in Bosnia in 1839 were not implemented as expected by the Porte. To carry them out more effectively, the Porte entrusted this task to Omer Pasha Latas. Determined in his intentions, Latas succeeded in establishing order in this vilayet by 1850, and in the following year he turned his attention to addressing the situation in the Sanjak of Herzegovina. Believing that Ali Pasha Rizvanbegović was one of the main leaders opposing the reforms, Latas organized his assassination, while exiling his son, Hafiz Pasha, along with thirty other prominent Bosniak leaders, to Istanbul. Latas then decided to relocate the vizier's center from Travnik to Sarajevo, thereby removing the last stronghold of opposition to the reforms that had been initiated.<sup>4</sup> In an effort to continue carrying out the entrusted task, Latas implemented an administrative–territorial reorganization in Herzegovina, abolishing the sanjaks and kadiliks, and instead establishing three kaymakamliks, which he further divided into

<sup>3</sup> The famous Serbian geographer Jovan Cvijić wrote in his work *The Balkan Peninsula and South Slavic Countries* that Nikšić was the most powerful Muslim town in the Balkans before 1877. According to academic Branko Pavićević, the importance of Nikšić for the entire Bosnian Vilayet could best be seen in the saying: *When Nikšić falls, the head of Bosnia falls*. See: *Istorija Crne Gore*, Book: 4, Vol: 2, Branko Pavićević, *Sazdanje crnogorske nacionalne države 1796-1878*, Podgorica, 2004, 269.

<sup>4</sup> Vasilj Popović, *Agrarno pitanje u Bosni i turski neredi za vrijeme reformnog režima Abdul Medžida (1839-1861)*, Belgrade, 1949, 99-105; Vasilj Popović *Istočno pitanje*, Sarajevo, 1965, 146-149. Abidin Temizer, "Omer Lutfi Pasha in Bosnia", *Historijska misao*, 4, zla, 2018, 130-131.

mudirliks. As part of the Sanjak of Herzegovina, Nikšić was assigned to the Mostar kaymakamlik.<sup>5</sup> Reforms were also carried out at the mudirlik level, and in the Nikšić mudirlik a regular army—the nizams—was introduced, while the captaincy of the Mušović family was abolished and authority passed into the hands of the military commander.<sup>6</sup>

Regarding further measures, Latas issued a decree on 19 March 1852 ordering the disarmament of the population of Herzegovina, particularly targeting Christians. This decree led to the outbreak of smaller armed conflicts, which, during the winter of 1852–1853, escalated into an uprising in southern Herzegovina, led by Luka Vukalović.<sup>7</sup> In November 1852, when Montenegrin Uskok groups, led by Luka Jovović, intercepted Toska Đulek-bey, the binbaşı of the Pandurs, who, with two hundred Albanians<sup>8</sup>, was heading toward Nikšić “to arrange matters there and spend the winter,” they succeeded in killing approximately forty of his Albanian soldiers. Following this incident, the Porte decided to make preparations to stabilize the situation in the territory of Montenegro. These preparations were further accelerated by the occupation of the Žabljak Fortress on Lake Skadar by Prince Danilo Petrović and the Montenegrin forces under his command. Latas was subsequently appointed commander of the campaign against Montenegro. In these events, Nikšić, together with its fortress, played a particularly important role, as it served as one of the main assembly points for the Ottoman army. The military strike carried out by Ottoman forces was decisive. In battles on multiple fronts, Ottoman troops managed to capture Rijeka Crnojevića and advance to within approximately ten kilometers of Cetinje. By the end of January 1853, an Ottoman advance toward Cetinje was expected; however, the campaign was halted due to the intervention of Russia, joined by Austria.<sup>9</sup> The peace treaty was signed in Podgorica, and according to its provisions, no territorial changes occurred between the conflicting sides.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Hazim Šabanović, *Bosanski pašaluk*, 232-233; Branko Pavićević, *Crna Gora u ratu 1862. godine...*, 57.

<sup>6</sup> Petar Šobajić, *Nikšić – Onogošt...*, 116.

<sup>7</sup> Vladimir Ćorović, *Luka Vukalović i hercegovački ustanci od 1852-1862*, Belgrade, 1923, 10, 24, 25; Vasilj Popović, *Agrarno pitanje u Bosni...*, 114.

<sup>8</sup> Vojvoda Anto Daković, *Memoari...*, p. 90. According to Vuk Popović, there were 160 people accompanying Đulek-beg, of whom 15 died during a clash with the Montenegrin Uskoks. See: Vuk Popović, *Kotorska pisma...* p. 66.

<sup>9</sup> Živko M. Andrijašević, *Istorija Crne Gore*, Belgrade, 2015, 157-158. Abidin Temizer, “Черпоропко-русские взаимоотношения и военные действия Османской Империи в уерпотории (1852-1853)“, *Россия и Балканы в течение последних 300 лет*, Турах, 2018, 152-155.

<sup>10</sup> Jagoš Jovanović, *Istorija Crne Gore*, Second, corrected and supplemented edition, Podgorica-Cetinje, 1995, 239.

Exhausted by these events, Montenegro was unable to participate on Russia's side against the Ottoman Empire during the Crimean War of 1853–1856. Prince Danilo, who was then governing Montenegro, was dissatisfied with Russia's limited intervention on Montenegro's behalf during Latas's campaign. As a result, he sought to secure an ally among Western European powers, whose support would lead to the recognition of Montenegro's independence and the demarcation of its borders with the Ottoman Empire.<sup>11</sup> In the context of prevailing international circumstances, the Great Powers at the Paris Congress of 1856 refused to recognize the independence of Montenegro. At the same time, the European powers participating in the congress assumed responsibility for the protection of Balkan Christians in their relations with the Porte, thereby limiting Russia's role in this regard. Dissatisfied with the decisions of the Paris Peace Congress, Prince Danilo intensified Montenegrin military activities against the Ottoman Empire along all border areas, particularly in the Sanjak of Herzegovina adjoining Montenegro. With the support of Prince Danilo, an uprising against Ottoman rule was once again raised in Herzegovina in 1857. Due to the open assistance provided to the insurgents, the Porte launched another military campaign against Montenegro. In early April 1858, the Ottoman army advanced into Grahovo and began constructing a fortress on Grahovac Hill. Determined to resist, the Montenegrins, under the command of Mirko Petrović, the prince's brother, launched a general assault on Ottoman forces at the end of April and achieved a decisive victory in early May 1858. The Battle of Grahovo represented, up to that point, the greatest victory of Montenegrin forces over the Ottoman army in the nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup>

Through this victory over Ottoman military forces, Prince Danilo accomplished his principal objective: drawing the attention of the Great Powers to the resolution of the Montenegrin Question. Border demarcation was carried out swiftly, resulting in a significant territorial expansion of Montenegro. The following regions were incorporated into its territory: Grahovo, Rudine, Nikšićka župa, most of Drobunjaci, Tušina, Uskoci, Gornje Lipovo, parts of Vasojevići, Kuči, and Dodoši. However, this expansion still did not constitute formal international recognition of Montenegro's independence. The accession of Prince Nikola Petrović to the throne, following the assassination of his

<sup>11</sup> Jagoš Jovanović, *Istorija Crne Gore...*, 270-273; Živko M. Andrijašević - Šerbo Rastoder, *Istorija Crne Gore od najstarijih vremena do 2003. godine*, Podgorica, 2006, 190-192.

<sup>12</sup> Jagoš Jovanović, *Istorija Crne Gore*, Book: 4, Vol: 1, p. 269; Branko Pavićević, *Sazdanje crnogorske nacionalne države 1796-1878*, Podgorica, 2004, 356-358.

uncle, Prince Danilo, marked the beginning of a new chapter in the history of Montenegro. The first years of his reign were characterized by the continuation of an energetic policy toward the Ottoman Empire. In the very first year of his rule, in 1861, and at his urging, a new uprising broke out in Herzegovina. According to confidential information from Russian intelligence agents, the deployment of Ottoman military forces in Herzegovina in mid-1861 amounted to a total of 25,200 nizams. These forces primarily consisted of border units positioned along the strategically important frontier with Montenegro.<sup>13</sup> At that time, there were 1,800 soldiers stationed in Nikšić under the command of Major Alija Efendi.

In an effort to influence the morale of Ottoman troops, Russian consuls in Mostar and Sarajevo reported instances of violent and undisciplined behavior among soldiers, attempting to portray them in the most unfavorable light before European public opinion.<sup>14</sup> During the fighting with insurgents in Herzegovina, the Ottoman army suffered a major defeat at Krnjice on 23–24 March 1862. This defeat provided the Porte with a pretext to launch a more decisive campaign against Montenegro, which escalated into a full-scale war known in Montenegrin historiography as the “Montenegrin–Ottoman War of 1862.”<sup>15</sup> Once again, Nikšić, with its strong citadel, played a crucial role in Ottoman military operations, as the border with Montenegro lay in close proximity to the city. With the diplomatic support of England, the Ottoman Empire dispatched substantial forces, commanded by Omer Pasha Latas, against Montenegro. The fighting lasted for five months, during which Latas’s forces advanced to within approximately eight kilometers of Cetinje. However, under pressure from Russia, France, and Austria, the Porte was compelled to order the withdrawal of its troops. Following the conclusion of peace at Rijeka Crnojevića, the borders between Montenegro and the Ottoman Empire remained unchanged from those established in 1858.<sup>16</sup> In the subsequent period, lasting until 1874, no major armed conflicts occurred between the Ottoman Empire and Montenegro. The number of soldiers stationed at the Nikšić Fortress did not decrease, while attention was directed toward the repair and maintenance of smaller fortifications directly

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<sup>13</sup> Ibrahim Tepić, *Osmanska vojska i policija u Bosanskom vilajetu od 50-tih do 70-tih godina XIX vijeka*, Godišnjak društva istoričara Bosne i Hercegovine, XXXVII, Sarajevo, 1988, 217.

<sup>14</sup> Ibrahim Tepić, *Osmanska vojska i policija*, 217-218.

<sup>15</sup> For more information about this war, see: Branko Pavićević, *Crna Gora u ratu 1862. godine*, Belgrade, 1963., Jagoš Jovanović, *Istorija Crne Gore...*, 280.

<sup>16</sup> Jagoš Jovanović, *Istorija Crne Gore...*, 280.

linked to the Nikšić garrison or forming part of the defensive belt along the Montenegrin border.

In October 1874, in Podgorica, and upon the suggestion of Marko Miljanov, the tribal leader of the Kuči, the zaptiye Jusuf Mučin Krnić was murdered by a cousin of the vojvoda (duke) Pero Ivanov Popović. This killing served as a pretext for a violent crackdown on Montenegrins present in Podgorica that day, which coincided with a market day. Seventeen Montenegrins were killed, and relations between Montenegro and the Ottoman Empire deteriorated sharply.<sup>17</sup> This incident became known in Montenegrin historiography as the “Podgorica Massacre,” while the foreign press referred to it as the “Podgorica Affair.” The Great Powers intervened to prevent the outbreak of war, and five Muslims from Podgorica were sentenced to death by an Ottoman court in Shkodra, based on evidence provided by a joint Montenegrin–Ottoman commission. According to reports in the British press, thirty-two individuals were sentenced to twenty-year prison terms for their involvement in the killings. Although the conflict was widely regarded as resolved, this event ultimately served as a prelude to the Eastern Crisis of 1875–1878.<sup>18</sup>

### *The Nikšić Fortress During the 1875–1878 Herzegovina Uprising*

The Herzegovina Uprising, which began in 1875, soon spread to Bosnia, the Sanjak of Novi Pazar, the Vasojevići region, and parts of Macedonia and Bulgaria, drawing Montenegro and Serbia into war against the Ottoman Empire in 1876, as well as Russia and Romania in 1877. This upheaval shook not only the Balkans but also Europe, triggering the Eastern Crisis. On 9 July 1875<sup>19</sup>, a clash known as the “Nevesinje Rifle” occurred. On the road from Mostar to Nevesinje, at a location known as Krekovi, a conflict broke out between approximately eighty Herzegovinians, led by Jovan Gutić, Kiko Stevanović, and others, and a detachment of zaptiyes and korduns from the Nevesinje garrison. This event marked the beginning of a general uprising in Herzegovina against Ottoman authority. The uprising in the Nevesinje district brought the Eastern Question to the forefront and significantly contributed to a fundamental reshaping of the political map of the Balkans.

<sup>17</sup> Živko M. Andrijašević - Šerbo Rastoder, *Istorija Crne Gore od najstarijih vremena...*, 204.

<sup>18</sup> *Istorija Crne Gore*, Book: 4, Vol: 2, 188.

<sup>19</sup> June 27th according to the old (Julian) calendar.

With regard to the Nikšić Fortress during the initial phase of the uprising in 1875, it should be noted that its military garrison consisted of only two companies of troops and one battery of mountain artillery.<sup>20</sup> Recognizing that these forces were insufficient to counter potential insurgent actions—particularly after the rebels succeeded in capturing twelve Ottoman towers on Krš and a fort at Ništice—the Ottoman military command in the Bosnian Vilayet decided to reinforce the garrison with additional troops. This decision became all the more urgent as the road connecting Mostar, Nevesinje, Gacko, and Nikšić had been cut off. On 9 September 1875, twenty companies of regular and irregular troops, led by Selim Pasha, Ali Pasha, and Derviš Salih Pasha, departed from Gacko toward Nikšić.<sup>21</sup> These Ottoman units failed to reach Nikšić due to clashes with insurgent forces; however, by mid-September, another detachment succeeded in delivering essential food supplies and ammunition to the Nikšić garrison.<sup>22</sup> In the spring of 1876, Nikšić once again found itself in a precarious position owing to shortages of food and ammunition.<sup>23</sup> On several occasions, assistance was dispatched to the threatened garrison by Müşir Ahmed Muhtar Pasha<sup>24</sup>, who recognized the strategic importance of both the Nikšić Fortress and the town itself. As the balance of war increasingly favored Montenegro, the principality officially declared war on the Ottoman Empire on 28 June 1876. The greatest victory achieved by Montenegrin forces during this phase of the conflict was the Battle of Vučji Do.<sup>25</sup> Following this success, the Montenegrin army effectively isolated Nikšić from other centers within the Sanjak of Herzegovina, and the continuation of its supply lines had to be regulated through a special agreement concluded by representatives of both the Montenegrin and Ottoman sides in Cetinje.<sup>26</sup> When Russia entered the war against the Ottoman Empire in April

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<sup>20</sup> S. Drobnjak – S. Š. Šabotić, *Muslimansko/Bošnjačko stanovništvo Onogoškog-Nikšićkog...*, 207.

<sup>21</sup> Dedaga Čengić, son of Smail-age Čengić. See: Slobodan Drobnjak - Sait Š. Šabotić, *Muslimansko/Bošnjačko stanovništvo Onogoškog-Nikšićkog ...*, 207-208.

<sup>22</sup> Slobodan Drobnjak - Sait Š. Šabotić, *Muslimansko/Bošnjačko stanovništvo Onogoškog-Nikšićkog ...*, 208.

<sup>23</sup> DACG, MID, f. 1, 1876, Document No. 19;1, No. 19;2 and No. 19;3. The documents are four dispatches from Duke Božo Petrović and Stanko Radonjić and discuss the supply of food to Nikšić during November 1876. It is interesting to note that the documents were written in French.

<sup>24</sup> See: *Prolaz Sulejman-paše kroz klanac Dugu i kroz Ostroški klanac 1877*, Istorijski zapisi, Book: 4-6, Cetinje 1950; Milo Vukčević, *Crna Gora i Hercegovina uoči rata 1874-1876*, Cetinje, 1950; Salih Sidki Hadžihuseinović Muvekkit, *Povijest Bosne*, Book: 2, Sarajevo, 1999.

<sup>25</sup> *Kratka istorija Crne Gore 1496-1918*, ed. Živko M. Andrijašević, Bar, 2000, 144-145.

<sup>26</sup> S. Drobnjak – S. Š. Šabotić, *Muslimansko/Bošnjačko stanovništvo Onogoškog-Nikšićkog...*, 215.

1877, the Porte introduced changes to its command structure, aiming to compel Montenegrin forces to surrender through a swift and unexpected operation. This strategy included the implementation of a partial blockade of Nikšić. At the same time, the Porte sought to redeploy forces from the Balkans to meet the demands of the war on the Danube front.<sup>27</sup>

## Nikšić and the Nikšić Fortress During 1877

### *The Condition of the Nikšić Fortress*

At the end of June and the beginning of July 1877, the war between the Ottoman Empire and Russia entered a decisive phase, forcing the Porte to redirect the majority of its forces to the Rumelian front. This shift significantly reduced the number of military units active in the Sanjak of Herzegovina. The altered distribution of forces presented Montenegro with an opportunity to launch an offensive against the belt of fortifications along its borders, which included:

- a) nine major fortresses (Trebinje, Gacko, Nikšić, Kolašin, Berane, Podgorica, Spuž, Žabljak, and Bar)
- b) ten smaller fortifications (Klobuk, Bileća, Klačina, Presjeka, Goransko, Medun, Lesendro, Vranjina, Grmožur, and Nehaj)
- c) thirty-three minor fortresses
- d) seventy-seven towers and blockhouses
- e) approximately one hundred watchtowers<sup>28</sup>

The Nikšić Fortress (*citadel, corps de place*), known as the Upper Town, was constructed along a meridional axis on the ridge of a steep, rocky hill rising 20–25 meters above the surrounding plain. The fortress measured 214 meters in length, with its widest central section spanning approximately 30 meters. At the southernmost point of the fortress stood the pentagonal, three-story Nebojša Tower, which housed one of the main ammunition storerooms in its basement.<sup>29</sup> To the north stood a lower, octagonal tower. At the center of the fortress stood the Kastel, the oldest structure within the complex. It comprised two gunpowder rooms, the keeper's quarters, and the azap (guard) quarters, as well as a deep, stone-vaulted cellar used for munitions storage.

<sup>27</sup> S. Drobnjak – S. Š. Šabotić, *Muslimansko/Bošnjačko stanovništvo Onogoškog-Nikšićkog...*, 216.

<sup>28</sup> Spiridon Gopčević, *Crnogorsko turski rat...*, 425.

<sup>29</sup> Sauervalodov dnevnik..., 40-41.

In the western section of the fortress, above Pop and closer to the Nebojša Tower, stood the Petkovača Tower, named after the Herzegovinian chieftain Petko Kovačević, who had been imprisoned there together with his two sons and several loyal followers.<sup>30</sup>

To the north, behind the octagonal tower and at the highest point of the fortress, was an artillery platform from which fourteen cannons could fire in all directions. The Lower Town, a fortified area situated beneath the hill, was constructed in the shape of a quadrangle enclosed by defensive walls which, together with the citadel, formed a single defensive complex. It possessed three walls, reinforced with towers at the corners and at midpoints; although narrower in layout, it was considerably wider than the Upper Town. At the corners of the eastern wall of the Lower Town stood the Proseni Tower and the octagonal Osa Tower, which contained a well and a millstone for grinding grain, while the central feature of this wall was the Great Gate. The three-story towers positioned at the corners and midpoints of the walls, as well as those within the citadel, were designed primarily for infantry defense.<sup>31</sup> The outer defensive system of the town consisted of a belt of infantry trenches, towers, and smaller fortifications constructed both in the immediate vicinity of the town and in its wider surroundings.

One of the strongest strongholds of the inner defensive line was the fort (Turkish: *tabya*) with the Čadalica Tower, built on a rocky hill of the same name south of the town. Owing to its dominance over a large part of the plain, it was, in terms of construction and armament, one of the key fortifications for the town's defense. The tower was constructed with thick stone walls, around which dry trenches were excavated. Between the trenches and the fortifications ran a protected corridor, covered with beams and thick planks, designed to prevent fragments of shells and collapsed masonry from falling onto the garrison. The Čadalica Tower was guarded by two companies (Turkish: *bölük*) of troops.

Husejn Ruhi Efendi Đozić<sup>32</sup>, the *naib* of Nikšić, who was present in the town during the siege and submitted a detailed report in Turkish to the mutasarrif

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<sup>30</sup> P. Šobajić, Nikšić – Onogošt..., 74-75; Maksim Šobajić, "Muhamedanizam hercegovački (reprint)", *Almanah*, 7-8..., 215-216.

<sup>31</sup> *Sauervaldov dnevnik...*, 41; P. Šobajić, *Nikšić – Onogošt...*, 75.

<sup>32</sup> Naib Husejn Ruhi Efendi Đozić had an interesting life and journey. He survived the siege of Nikšić and its transition into the Montenegrin Principality, and continued his life in Bosnia. For more details about him, see: Adib Đozić, "Hadži Husejn eff. Đozić Ruhi kadija iz Srebrenice i nikšićki naib", *Historijski pogledi*, 2, Tuzla, 2019, 7-32.

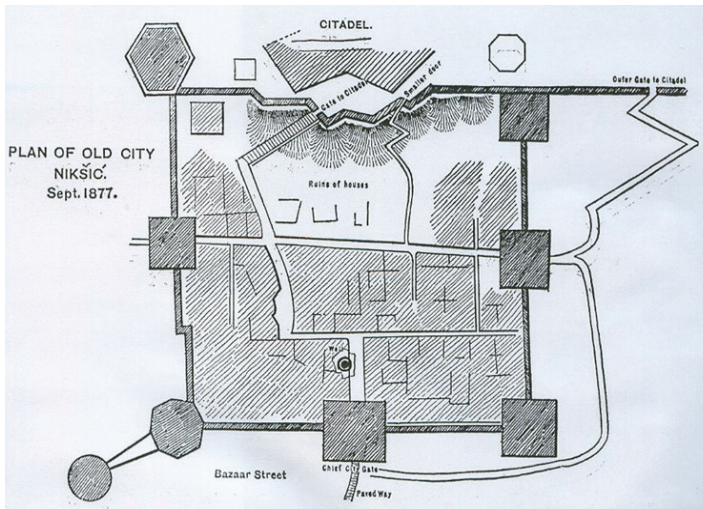
of Herzegovina on 11 September 1877, later forwarded to the Porte in Istanbul through the Bosnian Vilayet, referred to the fortification on Čađalica as the Maiden's Tower (Turkish: *Kız Kulesi*). In his report, Naib Đozić also mentions the Piper fortification, which was likely one of the smaller defensive works located in the neighborhood of the same name.<sup>33</sup> East of the town, alongside smaller towers in the neighborhoods of Petrova Glavica and Trebjesa, a system of rifle trenches was constructed. In the Rudno Field, toward the Bistrica River, there stood a strong fortification known as Zemljana tabija (Turkish: *Toprak tabyası*), which the local population referred to as Hasan Džida's Grave (Bosnian: *Hasan-Džidin grob*), after a nearby grave belonging to the Džidić family.

The bridge over the Zeta River (Dukla), north of the town, was protected by the Bridge Tower (Bosnian: *Na mostu*) or the For Most Tower (Turkish: *Köprübaşı kulesi*).<sup>34</sup> At the approach to the town from the direction of the bridge toward Dukla—that is, in front of the town gate—stood a tower referred to by Nikšić chroniclers under different names. According to some, it was known as the Nadir Tower, while others describe it as a blockhouse called Nadukla. This fortification was secured by half a *bölük* of troops. Husejn Ruhi Efendi further notes in his report that north of the town, “in front of the state granary,” there was a fortification known as Zelena Glavica (*Green Hill*). Based on data provided by Petar Šobajić, it may be inferred that the state granary was located along the road to Trebinje, opposite the hill of Đikanovača, making it likely that the Muslims of Nikšić referred to this fortified elevation by that name.<sup>35</sup> Husejn Ruhi also mentions the Montenegrin Tower (Turkish: *Karadağ kulesi*), situated on the edge of the town. This tower stood in a neighborhood inhabited by Montenegrin insurgents, whom the Muslims of Nikšić intended to relocate during the unrest and population movements in Montenegro and Herzegovina in 1805. Southwest of the town, immediately adjacent to the rampart, stood the fortified Mušović Tower, or Mušavija, as it was known locally, while west of the town, on the nearby hills above Popa, lay the Mušović trench.

<sup>33</sup> S. Gopčević, *Crnogorsko turski rat...*, 247; Vojvoda Gavro Vuković, *Opsada grada Nikšića 1877. godine...*, 8-9; H. Hadžibegić, *Opsada Nikšića 1877 prema izvještaju nikšićkog naiba...*, 50, 52, 55.

<sup>34</sup> H. Hadžibegić, *Opsada Nikšića prema izvještaju nikšićkog naiba...*, 58, 53; *Sauervaldov dnevnik...*, 39; P. Šobajić, *Nikšić-Onogošt...*, 114, 119; S. Gopčević, *Crnogorsko turski rat...*, 247.

<sup>35</sup> H. Hadžibegić, *Opsada Nikšića...*, 53; P. Šobajić, *Nikšić-Onogošt...*, 79-81.



*Attachment No. 1: Arthur Evans: Plan of the Old Foundation of Nikšić, 1877.*

To the northwest of the fortress stood the fortified hill Kobiljača (*Kobilja glava*), also known as the Devil's Fort (Bosnian: *Šejtan tabija*), which was defended by one company of troops. In addition to these fortifications, the Nikšić naib Đozić also mentions the fortification of Gradina, or Gredine, which is believed to have been located above the Ferizović neighborhood, on the northern side of the town, and was locally known as the Ferizović Trench. This trench, together with Čadalica and Zemljana tabija, constituted the core elements of the town's inner defensive system.

In addition to these major positions, Husejn Ruhi Đozić records the existence of approximately forty other towers within the town's neighborhoods. These structures were, in fact, residential buildings belonging to prominent Nikšić families, which, in times of emergency, were armed and prepared for defense.<sup>36</sup> West of the town, near Slano, there was a small outpost fortification known as Klačina, constructed of stone, enclosed by a robust defensive wall, and reinforced with a blockhouse. In the northern part of the Nikšić field, historical chroniclers record the presence of several towers, although they do not agree on their precise names. Some sources mention the towers Gornjepoljski vir, Rastovac, and Hodžina Poljana, while others additionally include Haptanica (or Avtanica), and still others refer to the tower Vidrovan. Despite these

<sup>36</sup> H. Hadžibegić, *Opsada Nikšića...*, 53-54, 59; S. Gopčević, *Cnogorsko turski rat...*, 246-247, 259, 263; P. Šobajić, *Nikšić-Onogošt...*, 77.

discrepancies, all chroniclers concur that there were only three towers, defended by approximately one hundred nizams and bashibozuks. During periods of relative peace<sup>37</sup>, these towers primarily functioned as watchtowers monitoring Montenegrin movements.

### The Defense of Nikšić

Various sources indicate differing figures for the number of participants in the defense of the town of Nikšić. According to some Ottoman sources, there were six hundred *muhafiz* (guards) stationed in the fortress<sup>38</sup>. According to other Ottoman documents, the number of defenders in 1877 reached nine hundred.<sup>39</sup> By contrast, Montenegrin sources claim that Nikšić and the surrounding fortifications were defended by two thousand fighters, including:

- a) the 1st Battalion of the 1st Regiment of the 3rd Army, consisting of eight hundred soldiers under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Nuri-aga;
- b) four detachments of the Bosnian Border Camp, comprising four hundred soldiers, together with approximately six hundred residents of Nikšić.

According to data from Ahmed Muhtar Pasha's Great Memorandum, the Muslim and Christian population of Nikšić numbered approximately three thousand five hundred inhabitants. During the siege, however, this figure rose to around four thousand, as Muslim families from nearby villages sought refuge within the fortress.<sup>40</sup> The Austrian historian of Montenegrin origin, Spiridon Gopčević, writes that the town and its outer fortifications were defended by five camps comprising two thousand soldiers: the Nikšić border camp with seven hundred soldiers, one nizam camp with six hundred soldiers, one redif camp with eight hundred soldiers, and two civilian camps with seven hundred men. By contrast, the Austrian military envoy Captain Sauervald, in his *Diary*, asserts that the Nikšić Fortress was defended by only seven hundred nizams and three hundred kordonaš soldiers, while three hundred Nikšić civilians defended the surrounding towers and entrenchments.<sup>41</sup> Regarding the

<sup>37</sup> S. Gopčević, *Crnogorsko turski rat...*, p. 247-248; V. Šakotić, *Nikšić (Onogošt) u otporima i borbama...*, 271.

<sup>38</sup> ATAŞE, Osmanlı-Rus Harbi (1877-1878) Koleksiyonu, K: 8, G: 8, B: 8-1, 10. 05. 1293 (22. 07. 1877).

<sup>39</sup> ATAŞE, OSK, K: 8, G: 8, B: 8-2, 10. 05. 1293 (22. 07. 1877).

<sup>40</sup> V. Šakotić, *Nikšić (Onogošt) u otporima i borbama...*, 271, 274

<sup>41</sup> S. Gopčević, *Crnogorsko turski rat...*, 247; Sauervaldov dnevnik..., 40-41.

Montenegrin side, its army managed to overcome technical difficulties, such as shortages of ammunition and food, with the assistance of Russia. By this time, the Montenegrin army numbered twenty-one thousand three hundred soldiers, organized into eleven brigades and equipped with thirty-five cannons.<sup>42</sup>

The Ottoman army in Herzegovina underwent significant changes at the beginning of the summer of 1877. Ali Pasha replaced Suleiman Pasha as commander of the army; however, on 18 July, he was summoned to Istanbul and succeeded by Ferih Salih Zeki Pasha, who commanded twenty-two battalions.<sup>43</sup> It was Suleiman Pasha who, during his passage through Nikšić, replaced the fortress garrison and once again entrusted command and the position of *mustahfiz* (fortress guardian) to Colonel (Miralay) Skender Bey. Skender Bey, originally of Hungarian origin, had emigrated in 1848, converted to Islam, and, owing to his abilities, rose to the rank of *ferik* (divisional general). Fluent in several languages, including Hungarian, German, and French, he was highly respected by his soldiers for his firm military demeanor and discipline.<sup>44</sup> News that the Russian army had crossed the Danube and advanced toward the Balkan Mountains prompted the Montenegrins to move toward the Nikšić Field on 27 June 1877.<sup>45</sup> Until 8 July, Montenegrin forces mowed the meadows of Slivlje, Ozrinići, and Studenci, which belonged to Muslim residents of Nikšić. On the same day, they attacked Ottoman soldiers and civilians guarding horses, water carriers, and livestock in Štedim. During this attack, Ahmed-aga was killed, one Ottoman soldier was wounded, and three horses were taken. On 10 July, the head of the Nikšić district, Jevto Nikolić, arrived in Ozrinići and, in a conversation with the border cavalymen Ethem and Adem, informed them that Prince Nikola intended to attack Nikšić. He further stated that, given the defeats suffered by the Ottoman army on the Balkan front against Russia, the Nikšić garrison had no alternative but to surrender in order to avoid unnecessary bloodshed.<sup>46</sup> This exchange served as a forewarning of the events the inhabitants of Nikšić were soon to face.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibrahim Halil Sedes, *1876-1877 Osmanlı-Karadağ Seferi*, Askeri Matbaa, İstanbul, 1936, 212-213.

<sup>43</sup> Genelkurmay ATASE Başkanlığı, *1877-1878 Osmanlı-Rus Savaşı Zaman Dizini*, Genelkurmay Askeri Tarih ve Stratejik Etüt Başkanlığı Yayınları, Ankara, 2004, 45; Vahit Cemil Urhan, *Karadağ'ın Bağımsizliğini Kazanması (1851-1878)*, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, 339.

<sup>44</sup> V. Šakotić, *Nikšić (Onogošt) u otporima i borbama...*, 273.

<sup>45</sup> The Montenegrins captured the fortresses of Duga, Piva, and Bileća with the aim of facilitating the conquest of Nikšić.

<sup>46</sup> H. Hadžibegić, *Opsada Nikšića...*, 51-52.

During the night of 11–12 July, a detachment under the command of Mašo Vrbica launched a surprise attack and, after a brief exchange of gunfire, seized the hill of Trebjesa, which had been held by a small Ottoman garrison.<sup>47</sup> Following artillery preparation, on 12 and 13 July, the towers of Vir, Rastovac, and Vidrovan, located in the Upper Field, were captured and set on fire, and their entire garrisons taken prisoner.<sup>48</sup> According to Spiridon Gopčević, one hundred and five Ottoman soldiers and officers were captured during this action, along with one hundred and thirty-six rifles, fifty-eight pistols, and thirty-eight sabers. An official Montenegrin report—likely written after the fall of Nikšić—states that following the capture of the Upper Field towers, the prisoners included two captains, four lieutenants, sixty lower-ranking soldiers from various branches of the military, and forty mustahfiz and bashibozuk soldiers, for a total of one hundred and six men. According to this report, all prisoners were released after the surrender of the town.

The detachment under the command of Lazar Sočica subsequently moved to seize what was described as “the strongest fortification in the Nikšić Field,” Klačina, but found it abandoned and set it on fire. The garrison of this fortification, upon learning of the fate of the Upper Field towers, set the position alight and retreated to Nikšić, taking with them the cannons, ammunition, and other essential equipment that could be transported.<sup>49</sup> On 14 July, the battalions commanded by vojvoda (duke) Petar Vukotić and Lazar Sočica seized the Uzdomir Hill and the areas to the northwest of the town, above the Zeta and Bistrica rivers. After “devastating fire,” they captured the Na Mostu and Nadir towers, which were destroyed, while their garrisons withdrew into the town with several wounded.<sup>50</sup>

The battalions of Vukotić, Sočica, and Pavlović arrived at Nikšić on 21 July, bringing with them twenty cannons.<sup>51</sup> On 11 July, the commander of Nikšić, Miralay Skender Bey, informed the Bosnian Vilayet, via telegram, and through it the Seraskerat (General Staff) in Istanbul, of the pressure exerted by Montenegrin and Herzegovinian battalions and of the “extraordinary

<sup>47</sup> *Glas Crnogorca*, No. 41, Cetinje, 14.07.1877, 1.

<sup>48</sup> *Glas Crnogorca*, No. 41, Cetinje, 14.07.1877, 1.

<sup>49</sup> G. Vuković, *Opsada grada Nikšića...*, 6; S. Gopčević, *Crnogorsko turski rat...*, 251–252; D. Vuksan, *Broj turskih zarobljenika u ratovima 1876–1878*, Zapisi, Book: XI, Cetinje, 1932, 274–275; V. Šakotić, *Nikšić (Onogošt) u otporima i borbama...*, 273.

<sup>50</sup> *Glas Crnogorca*, No. 41, Cetinje, 14.07.1877, 1.

<sup>51</sup> V.C. Urhan, *Karadağ'in...*, 340.

resistance shown thus far by the soldiers and inhabitants of Nikšić.”<sup>52</sup> In addition, Skender Bey dispatched spies to various parts of Herzegovina and Shkodra in an effort to secure assistance; however, the responses proved unfavorable. Many Muslim peasants from the surrounding countryside sought refuge in the town immediately after the fall of Trebjesa.<sup>53</sup> An attempt to evacuate the town’s inhabitants who were not essential to the defense to Gacko ended in failure, as Montenegrin and Herzegovinian forces returned them to Nikšić in order to further weaken the fortress’s defensive capacity. Prior to the siege, Montenegrin and Herzegovinian forces possessed limited experience in siege warfare; consequently, the complete encirclement of Nikšić was never fully achieved—a circumstance that the Ottoman garrison exploited to a considerable degree. Ottoman spies and couriers frequently ventured out at night into the surrounding areas, traveling as far as Duga, Gacko, and Mostar, and returning with relative ease. In this manner, approximately two hundred Nikšić bashibozuks, who had previously accompanied Suleiman Pasha as advance scouts on his march toward Spuž, managed to pass through the siege lines and return to Nikšić. These deficiencies in the siege were also exploited by individuals engaged in clandestine trade with certain inhabitants of the besieged town. As a consequence, it was decided after the capture of Nikšić that such individuals would not be granted a “military share” or “reward.” The infantry commander, Father Đoka Mijušković, was subsequently compelled to swear an oath before the High Court<sup>54</sup> in Cetinje in 1879 that neither he, his family, nor his trading partners had engaged in commerce with the “Turks” during the siege of Nikšić.<sup>55</sup>

### *Events Between 14 July and 9 September*

The bombardment of Nikšić on 14 July, carried out with artillery, failed to produce significant results, not only because of the limited firepower of the Montenegrin artillery but also due to the attempt to cover a broad perimeter around the fortress with cannon fire. Nevertheless, several buildings within the

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<sup>52</sup> VA, OIS, No. 210/1877.

<sup>53</sup> DACG, Senat – Vojna uprava / Military administration, 1877, Telegram No. 122 (After the capture of Trebjesa, artillery batteries were stationed there, as it was the most favourable position for bombing the city, as well as the strategically important towers and trenches).

<sup>54</sup> DACG, Veliki sud / High Court, s. n., 1879-1885.

<sup>55</sup> G. Vuković, *Opsada grada Nikšića...*, 10, 13; V. Šakotić, *Nikšić (Onogošt) u otporima i borbama...*, 284-285.

town sustained damage.<sup>56</sup> Infantry forces, however, proved considerably more effective, managing to seize Studenačke Glavice and to entrench themselves directly in front of the city walls. During the night of 14 July, the troops of Petar Vukotić advanced from the bridge at Dukla toward Rastoci, capturing Kamena Glavica (*Tašlik Tepesi*) and two additional hills, thereby approaching to within approximately one thousand paces of the fortification of Gradina, or Gredine. According to Ottoman historians, Prince Nikola ordered his forces to employ dynamite to destroy the water sources supplying Nikšić, causing both the garrison and the civilian population to endure severe hardship due to water shortages during the siege.<sup>57</sup>

On 15 and 16 July, the Governor of Bosnia, Ahmed Mahzar Pasha, dispatched two telegrams to Istanbul informing the Porte of the attack on Nikšić and of the imminent danger threatening not only the town but also the entire region of Herzegovina. In these telegrams, the governor reported—and explicitly warned—that conditions in besieged Nikšić were extremely grave and perilous. The available military forces, including reserves, were insufficient for effective defense, a fact he stated that he “observed with the utmost regret.” In addition to notifying the Porte, the Bosnian governor addressed the Herzegovinian mutasarrifate, urging the mobilization of the entire population for the defense of the homeland. In his assessment, the forces concentrated in the garrison were inadequate to save Nikšić, and if the enemy—God forbid—were to break through, other parts of Herzegovina, and possibly the town of Mostar, would likewise be endangered. Mahzar Pasha proposed that a demonstrative military operation, employing all available regular and auxiliary units, be launched from the directions of Shkodra, Novi Pazar, and Herzegovina in order to weaken the Montenegrin–Herzegovinian siege of Nikšić. At the conclusion of his telegram, the governor requested that the Seraskerat immediately issue urgent orders to Ali Saib Pasha and to the commanders in Bosnia, Herzegovina, and Novi Pazar to undertake concrete military measures.<sup>58</sup>

In its response, however, the Seraskerat merely praised the bravery and steadfast resistance of the Nikšić garrison and its population, expressing

<sup>56</sup> *Glas Crnogorca*, No. 42, Cetinje, 18.07.1877, 1; *Glas Crnogorca*, No. 43, Cetinje, 21.07.1877, 1; It is noteworthy that, prior to the bombardment, the town's commander was advised to evacuate the women and children to a section of the town that was expected to be exempt from the impending artillery fire.

<sup>57</sup> H. Hadžibegić, *Opsada Nikšića...*, 53; V. Šakotić, *Nikšić (Onogošt) u otporima i borbama...*, 289.

<sup>58</sup> V. Šakotić, *Nikšić (Onogošt) u otporima i borbama...*, 289-290.

confidence that, under the command of the dedicated and capable Miralay Skender Bey, they would overcome all difficulties and dangers. Despite this acknowledgment, no concrete military assistance was ultimately provided to the besieged town.<sup>59</sup> Taking advantage of gaps in the siege, a group of Nikšić Muslims, who had previously accompanied Sulejman Pasha to Spuž, arrived in Gacko on 17 July. From there, a telegram was sent to the Porte, signed by seventy “suffering inhabitants who had fallen into despair due to the pressure exerted by the Malisors gathered around Nikšić.” Salih Zeki Pasha, commander of the Ottoman forces in Herzegovina, advised them to continue to “demonstrate their loyalty and bravery” and, in groups of five or six, to return to Nikšić at night in order to “comfort and assist” their fellow citizens. This proposal was accepted by the Muslims who had left Nikšić. Through them, the necessary orders were transmitted to Skender Bey “to calm the population and prepare an effective defense of the town.”

Dissatisfied with the hesitation of commanders in neighboring areas, who had failed to undertake any military actions to weaken the siege of Nikšić<sup>60</sup>, Governor Ahmed Mahzar Pasha again addressed the Porte on 20 July, emphasizing that Nikšić remained “in a completely hopeless state” and warning that, unless offensive measures were urgently undertaken, “this important stronghold would be lost, thereby inevitably endangering the Bosnian region.”<sup>61</sup> On 20 July, marking the tenth anniversary of the death of his father, vojvoda Mirko Petrović, Prince Nikola ordered a ceasefire and the suspension of all military operations by his forces. Maksim Šobajić, a witness to and chronicler of the siege, recorded the following observation:

*“And on 20 July, there was peace and silence on both sides. Everything came to light, especially the unfortunate Muslims, our brothers, who emerged from their houses, cellars, and tunnels, eager for the sun and daylight, after ten days, to breathe fresh air. They wandered through the streets and ventured farther into the fields near Čađalica and the Bistrica—men, women, and children alike. Their suffering pained me as though they were my closest relatives, and I cursed that unfortunate human condition in which people torment and kill one another...”*<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> The commander of the Skadar Corps, Ali Saib-pasha, in his response emphasized that his forces were insufficient, while at the same time, the Herzegovinian army was weak, and the Novi Pazar part of the Ottoman army, moving toward Kolašin, achieved no results. See: ATASE, OSK, K: 6, G: 56, B: 56-1, 17.05.1293 (29.07.1877).

<sup>60</sup> *Glas Crnogorca*, No. 52, Cetinje, 22. avgusta 1877, 2.

<sup>61</sup> V. Šakotić, *Nikšić (Onogošt) u otporima i borbama...*, 291-293.

<sup>62</sup> Maksim Šobajić, *Brdska sloboda (rukopis u posjedu porodice Šobajić)*, 572; V. Šakotić, *Nikšić (Onogošt) u otporima i borbama...*, 293.

According to the writings of vojvoda Gavro Vuković, the well-known Montenegrin hero Pop Milo Jovović met an unusual death at the walls of the Nikšić Fortress at the end of July 1877. As the vojvoda relates, Pop Milo rode out to the northern side of the town, below the enemy trenches, and challenged the leaders of Nikšić to engage in single combat. However, no one responded to his challenge. A shot fired from the nearby Ferizović Trench struck Pop Milo, after which a young man ran forward and beheaded him. This event was described in a different manner by Nikšić's katib (scribe), Arif Efendi, who, following the surrender of Nikšić, arrived in Mostar on 10 August and recounted the incident to the Herzegovinian mutasarrif, Mustafa Hulusija. According to Arif Efendi, Pop Milo called for a one-on-one duel with any willing resident of Nikšić, "under the pledge of faith and oath that, as in earlier times, neither side would intervene." In response to this challenge, Bahtijar Mujković, a twenty-two-year-old hero from the Feriz neighborhood, stepped forward and, in full view of both sides, struck off Pop Milo Jovović's head with a single sword stroke. The Montenegrins then attempted to shoot Mujković, but without success.<sup>63</sup>

The Čađalica Tower, located outside the town, constituted a particularly strong fortification, especially since it housed both nizam troops and the main commander. The tower was stormed by Montenegrin forces led by Šako and Božo Petrović, who employed dynamite during the assault to seize it.<sup>64</sup> According to the attack plan, on the evening of 7 August, infantry and artillery fire was opened along the entire front around the town in order to keep Ottoman forces uncertain as to the location and direction of the main assault. After carefully crawling to the foot of Čađalica, the Montenegrins, on a prearranged signal, rushed up the steep and rocky slopes of Čađalica from three directions, carrying flaming bundles of straw and drawn knives, and advancing with shouts of attack. Taken by surprise by the sudden onslaught, the Čađalica garrison withdrew

<sup>63</sup> VA, OIS, Manuscripta turcica 4364/1877; Arthur J. Evans, *Illirian Letters*, Letter XVII, London, 1878, 179; G. Vuković, *Opsada grada Nikšića...*, 14-15; Salih Sidki Hadžihuseinović Muvekkit, *Povijest Bosne*, Book: 2, Sarajevo 1999, 1293. It is worth noting that Muvekkit, instead of using the term "Ferizović mahala," uses the term "Firzova mahala." Additionally, it is interesting to mention the following about this event: Aleksandar Viktorović Šćerbak (1848-1894), as a volunteer doctor, was a direct witness to the events during the siege of Nikšić. On page 152 of his book *Crna Gora i njena vojna s Turcima 1877-78* (translated by Dragan Bukovički), he writes: "During a walk through the camp, the Prince, noticing the priest Milo surrounded by his retinue, called him over and said, with a slight mocking tone: 'We don't hear much from you, priest, it seems that, as I see, you've become a grandmother.' The present company laughed. Priest Milo, without uttering a word, stepped aside." (See: Emir Mušović, *Mušovići na Bedemu - jadigar*, Prijepolje, 2019, 218).

<sup>64</sup> *Glas Crnogorca*, No. 49, Cetinje, 11.08.1877, 1.

without offering resistance and managed to retreat within the city walls, while being pursued by the attackers' gunfire.

Ottoman losses at Čadalica amounted to twenty-eight dead. Husejn Ruhi Efendi, in his report to the Bosnian vali, claimed that the attack occurred on 9 August, rather than on the 7th, and that four battalions, supported by three cannons, one of which was positioned near the Arslan-bey Mušović mill, took part in the assault on Čadalica. Another regular army unit defending the position resisted until one o'clock in the morning, after which it retreated to the Piper Tower due to a shortage of ammunition. This unit suffered eight to nine dead and wounded.<sup>65</sup> After the capture of Čadalica, according to reports published in *Glas Crnogorca*, Montenegrin artillery was installed on this elevation.<sup>66</sup> A few days later, reports reached the Montenegrin–Herzegovinian army indicating that Hafiz Ahmed Pasha, the commander of Novi Pazar, had advanced into the Lake region, and that camps were being assembled in Herzegovina under the command of Salih Zeki Pasha, with the intention of advancing toward Nikšić. Upon receiving information about Ottoman preparations to relieve the siege of Nikšić, Prince Nikola ordered the concentration of the main Montenegrin forces near Presjeka, while entrusting the immediate blockade of the town to Herzegovinian battalions. The battalions commanded by Lazar Sočica and Pero Pejović succeeded in inflicting significant losses on the forces of Hafiz Ahmed Pasha, which numbered several thousand redifs and bashibozuks, causing approximately six hundred dead and more than one hundred prisoners, and forcing them to withdraw across the Tara River.

Meanwhile, preparations by the Herzegovinian forces under the command of Salih Zeki Pasha and Husein Fevzi Pasha progressed very slowly. Only seven camps were mobilized, supported by four mountain guns and eight hundred auxiliary troops. The first division of this force was commanded by Miralay Salih, the second by Kaymakam Abdi Bey, while the auxiliary units were led by Veli Bey and Mustafa Bey. It was not until late August, when the Nikšić garrison had already resolved to surrender, that the vanguard of these forces reached the Ravno Tower. There, they were repelled by the forces of Petar Vukotić after a brief skirmish, forcing them to retreat toward Gacko.<sup>67</sup> As soon as the forward

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<sup>65</sup> G. Vuković, *Opsada grada Nikšića...*, 20-22; S. Gopčević, *Crnogorsko turski rat...*, 258; H. Hadžibegić, *Opsada Nikšića...*, 55.

<sup>66</sup> *Glas Crnogorca*, No. 49, Cetinje, 11.08.1877, 1.

<sup>67</sup> Sauervaldiv dnevnik..., 37; V. Šakotić, *Nikšić (Onogošt) u otporima i borbama...*, 297, 299.

elements of the Montenegrin army approached the city walls on 27 July, an artillery bombardment of Nikšić began. Since the resistance of the garrison was strong and determined—at that time, the town was defended by seven hundred nizams, three hundred kordun troops, and three hundred civilians<sup>68</sup>—and because Montenegrin artillery proved unable to breach the fortifications, Prince Nikola requested that the Russian tsar provide larger-caliber cannons.

The Austrian officer Captain Sauervald, in his *Diary*, describes the role of women during the siege and the attitudes of the opposing sides toward them. Sauervald notes that it was common to observe processions of Montenegrin women passing by the fortified Čadalica, bringing food to their husbands positioned on the front lines. On such occasions, the Ottoman garrison would temporarily cease fire until the procession had passed. Likewise, Montenegrin and Herzegovinian forces would also suspend their fire when Muslim women from the town, carrying food for their families, climbed the fortified hills.<sup>69</sup> Before opening fire with the newly arrived cannons on the town, on 21 August, Prince Nikola sent two prisoners to Miralay Skender Bey with an oral message stating that Russian cannons had arrived, “which would destroy everything around you,” and that he, in accordance with princely and military honor, guaranteed Skender Bey “complete freedom to take his army wherever he wished in Turkey,” emphasizing that this offer was made purely for humanitarian reasons. The prisoners, however, did not reach Skender Bey, as they were turned back by the townspeople with the message that they wished to enter into negotiations with the prince’s representatives.

Consequently, Milovan Bošković, the standard-bearer of Prince Nikola, was sent into the town carrying a letter from Petar Vukotić, addressed to his godfather Fetah Bey Mušović and to prominent Nikšić leaders: Hamid Aga Šajinagić, Juso Josin, Hasko Ibrić, Hasan Maraš, Paša Dervišević, and Mula Nuško. In the letter, Vukotić addresses his godfather Mušović and the respected leaders of Nikšić, praising their resistance up to that point and noting that “had you surrendered immediately, it would not have reflected well upon your reputation in Montenegro and Herzegovina.” However, since all the towers around the Polje had been taken and the defenders were now encircled within the town, he argued

<sup>68</sup> P. Šobajić, *Nikšić-Onogošt...*, 119; Jagoš Jovanović, *Stvaranje crnogorske države i razvoj crnogorske nacionalnosti*, Cetinje 1947, 320; H. Hadžibegić, “Opsada Nikšića 1877. prema izvještaju nikšićkog naiba”, *Istorijski zapisi*, 1-3, Cetinje 1949, 49-65.

<sup>69</sup> Sauervaldov dnevnik..., 33.

that further resistance was futile and that they should not expect the assistance for which they were waiting. Vukotić further stressed that “your lives and ours, as well as the lives of your unfortunate women and children, are clearly exposed to certain death.” He continued:

*“Trust me fully: if by noon tomorrow the seven of you do not come to the Lord at Vir to hear his words and intentions—whatever reply you believe you will give—you will regret it and be utterly lost. Godfather, for the sake of bread and salt, and you, esteemed acquaintances, for the sake of your faith, do not risk sending our lives and yours to the next world. Come by noon at the latest, for once blood is spilled, even the Lord, running ahead of us, could not outrun the evil that has come upon you.”*

He concludes: “If you dare to tell Skender Bey, tell him that if they leave the city, they may safely go, in God’s name, to Metohija, Spuž, or Risan with their army, their weapons, and everything belonging to the state in the city, except the cannons. We will assist them and provide suitable accommodation wherever they wish. As for you, the citizens, the Lord leaves it to you to decide: whoever wishes to remain in his house may do so, and whoever wishes to leave the city may go wherever he chooses. To make it easier for you to consult among yourselves, we will order tonight that, until noon tomorrow, no one on our side shall fire upon yours.”<sup>70</sup>

Since no Nikšić leaders appeared for negotiations or responded to the letter the following day, artillery fire from the newly arrived Russian cannons was opened on the city, causing extensive damage and spreading panic among the population. During this bombardment, the Zemljana tabija (*Hasan Džido’s tomb*) was also targeted, and its tower was destroyed. After the shelling, the besieged Nikšić garrison and its commanders recognized that the city walls could not withstand further bombardment. On the following day, 23 August, Skender Bey received an envoy from Prince Nikola delivering an invitation to a meeting at Uzdomir, to which the miralay promised to respond by 4:00 p.m. the next day. On 24 August, the miralay convened a meeting at the Hadži Murat Mosque with the commanders of the regular army—Hadži Nuri Aga, Emin Aga, and Husejn Ruhi—as well as prominent. The meeting was chaired by Skender Bey, who informed those present that an invitation from Prince Nikola had been received and announced that their ammunition reserves were nearly exhausted. The defenders of the city swore in the mosque, declaring: “We will not surrender;

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<sup>70</sup> Sauervalodov dnevnik..., 33.

we will fight to the end, even with stones,” and vowed not to capitulate until all had perished, so that their descendants would not curse them. It was agreed that Skender Bey and Hadži Nuri Aga would meet Prince Nikola and express their conditional willingness to surrender, while requesting a delay of one week in order to gain time, as they still believed that military assistance from neighboring regions might arrive.<sup>71</sup>

Vojvoda Gavro Vuković describes these events with great emotional intensity, emphasizing the gravity of the moment and the deep inner dilemma that gripped the defenders of the city. According to him, as women and children cried out in fear and the overwhelming power of the artillery became inescapable, the very notion of surrender was unthinkable. In this context, surrender was not merely a military act but one of profound spiritual and moral significance, from which even those contemplating it recoiled, fearing the curse of betrayal. Vuković underscores the force of moral oaths and the internal struggle that rendered the word “surrender” itself unspeakable, as it implied a shameful betrayal with grave consequences for both the individual and the nation.<sup>72</sup> Fearing deceit, Colonel Skender Bey agreed on 24 August to meet only at the bridge in Duklja. It was only after Prince Nikola, through one of his envoys, gave his word of safe conduct, that Skender Bey, accompanied by thirty prominent citizens, arrived at Uzdomir.

There, a unit of cavalry from the prince’s escort rendered military honors the Nikšić envoys, after which the prince formally received them. At the outset of the negotiations, Prince Nikola proposed that Nikšić surrender “after so much suffering and heroic resistance,” under the conditions outlined by Petar Vukotić in the previously sent letter. He emphasized that his army was prepared to launch an assault and seize the unfortified trenches, as well as the city itself. Skender Bey replied that he was certain he had fulfilled his military duty to the Padishah (sultan), that he had resisted bravely for a long time, and that he understood the necessity of surrender sooner or later, but that he could not take such a decision independently. The colonel requested a five-day postponement in order to inform the command in Mostar of the prince’s proposal. He emphasized that, should he surrender with his army, he could not do so without the consent of the city’s inhabitants, who had sworn in the mosque to fight to the death rather than lay down their weapons. He therefore asked the prince to consult the population on their views regarding the surrender of the city. In his address to

<sup>71</sup> H. Hadžibegić, *Opsada Nikšića...*, 56-57.

<sup>72</sup> Vojvoda Gavro Vuković, *Memoari...*, 425.

the citizens, Prince Nikola stressed that, despite great difficulty, he had managed to restrain his troops from storming the city, warning that, should an assault occur, everything would be destroyed and cut down “until no trace remained”. He urged them to surrender peacefully in order to preserve their lives and property, offering them freedom under his rule equal to that enjoyed by Montenegrins. He further assured them that, should war with the Ottoman Empire break out again, they would not be conscripted into his army.

Following the prince’s address, fully aware of the gravity of the situation, Hasko Ljuca requested an additional two days to decide how to proceed. Pressured by the citizens, the prince postponed the attack until the following day at 1:00 p.m., agreeing that, should the city’s surrender not be accepted by that time, three cannon shots would be fired from the fortress.<sup>73</sup> According to the report of Husejn Ruhi Efendi, the negotiations concerning the surrender of the city unfolded as follows: on 24 August, a Montenegrin envoy arrived in the city with the news that Prince Nikola was awaiting Skender Bey for negotiations.

After binbaša Hadži Nuri Aga and another negotiator, who was familiar with the prince, confirmed that he was indeed at the bridge in Duklja, Skender Bey, accompanied by his envoys, set out for the negotiations. They were followed by representatives of the citizens: Pašo Aga from the Podgorica neighborhood, Mula Nuško from the Feriz neighborhood, Salko Aga from the Gruda neighborhood, and Hasko Aga from the Kuća neighborhood. Husejn Ruhi Efendi does not mention representatives from other neighborhoods, although, according to the agreement reached in the Hadži Murat Mosque, one representative from each neighborhood was expected to attend the negotiations.

Prince Nikola informed the neighborhood representatives that there was no justification for further bloodshed and proposed surrender, promising them two thousand horses to transport all state property belonging to the army. He assured them that those who wished could remain, while those who did not were free to leave “with their belongings, honor, and personal integrity”. After persistent insistence by Skender Bey, the prince agreed to receive their response by the following day at 4:00 p.m. Upon returning to Nikšić, the representatives of the army and the citizens reconvened and resolved not to surrender.<sup>74</sup> On the following day, 25 August, at the agreed time, cannon shots were fired from the fortress, signaling the continuation of hostilities. That same night, Montenegrin

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<sup>73</sup> G. Vuković, *Opsada grada Nikšića...*, 30-33.

<sup>74</sup> H. Hadžibegić, *Opsada Nikšića prema izvještaju nikšićkog naiba...*, 57-58.

forces captured the trenches on Petrova Glavica and Zemljana tabija in Rudo Polje, while the remaining outer fortifications and trenches—Piper, Mušović Trench (Šanac Mušovića), Kobiljača, Gradina, Hercegovina, Đikanovača, and others—were taken the following day. The loss of these positions, the shortage of ammunition, the absence of the anticipated military assistance, the destruction and fires caused by artillery bombardment, and the widespread fear and confusion among the civilian population severely undermined the morale of both the army and the inhabitants, placing the defense of the city in an almost hopeless position.<sup>75</sup> Realizing that it was futile to continue waiting for the promised military assistance and that further resistance was pointless, in the early morning hours of 27 August, Skender Bey and the neighborhood representatives decided to send negotiators to Prince Nikola in order to agree upon the terms of the city's surrender. The negotiations on behalf of Montenegro were led by Petar Vukotić at his headquarters beneath Uzdomir. During this meeting, the Ottoman negotiators were advised by Vukotić:

*“I consider it my humane duty to warn you not to allow bloodshed in vain, but to surrender and save yourselves. I convey the prince’s message and give you my military word that the beg and his army will be granted complete freedom to go to Turkey or wherever they wish.”*<sup>76</sup>

The negotiations, which lasted from five to eight o’clock in the morning, resulted in the establishment of the following terms of surrender:

1. The unconditional surrender of the Ottoman garrison.
2. In recognition of the bravery of the defenders of Nikšić, following the lowering of the flag and a formal defile before the Montenegrin army, they were to be permitted to withdraw to Gacko, retaining their personal weapons.
3. The surrender of all cannons and military stockpiles.
4. The inhabitants of Nikšić who remained under the prince’s rule were guaranteed all rights enjoyed by Montenegrins. Those who chose to leave were permitted to depart unhindered with their movable property, escorted by Montenegrin guards to the border area of their choice.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>75</sup> G. Vuković, *Opsada grada Nikšića...*, 33-35; H. Hadžibegić, *Opsada Nikšića...*, 58-59; Sauervaldiv dnevnik...,39.

<sup>76</sup> Husejn Ruhi Efendija, “Opsada Nikšića”, *Istorijski zapisi*, Book: IV, 1-3, Cetinje, July-September 1949, 55.

<sup>77</sup> G. Vuković, *Opsada grada Nikšića...*, 36; H. Hadžibegić, *Opsada Nikšića...*, 59; Artur Evans, *Ilirska pisma...*, 133; Sauervaldiv dnevnik..., 39-40.

Realizing that all efforts to defend the city had become futile, the commander of the garrison, Miralay Skender Bey, decided to accept Prince Nikola's terms for the surrender of Nikšić. The Ottoman commander, accompanied by his entourage and bearing the keys to the city, proceeded to Duklja, beneath Uzdomir, to surrender the city to Prince Nikola. The Montenegrin prince greeted him with courtesy. On a cloth spread upon the stone, the Ottoman delegation was served coffee in the Oriental manner. Without explicitly referring to the act of surrender, Prince Nikola sought to preserve the dignity of the defeated. He then surprised the imperial officers and their commander with the words: "Valor deserves respect. To the heroes who defended the Emperor's city to the utmost, I present arms."<sup>78</sup> Montenegrin troops entered the city on 9 September 1877.<sup>79</sup> The news of the surrender of Nikšić was published two days later in *Glas Crnogorca*.<sup>80</sup> According to the records of Nikšić's naib, Husejn Ruhi Efendi Dozić, Prince Nikola stated:

*"In view of the sixteen thousand soldiers and eighteen cannons you have witnessed, your perseverance over forty-eight days—despite possessing only one thousand rifles among soldiers and civilians—has earned you recognition and praise from all. For this unprecedented heroism, I salute you. You are free, with your belongings and your weapons."*<sup>81</sup>

According to the historian Ejup Mušović, the keys to the city of Nikšić were handed over to Prince Nikola by the last Nikšić captain, Hamza Bey Mušović.<sup>82</sup> However, other interpretations suggest that the keys were surrendered by the military commander, Miralay Skender Bey Madžar. Accounts also differ regarding the location of the handover, with some historians arguing that it occurred near the city itself, south of Uzdomir, based on the artistic depiction by Mihailo Mila Vrbica, *"The Surrender of Nikšić in 1877"*. Confirmation for the interpretation that the keys to Nikšić were handed over in Zavrhi, in the northern area of Uzdomir, can be found in a report published in *Glas Crnogorca* in May 1886). The report notes that Prince Nikola visited Nikšić and "ordered

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<sup>78</sup> Kralj Nikola, *Memoari...*, 465.

<sup>79</sup> August 27th according to the Julian calendar.

<sup>80</sup> *Glas Crnogorca*, No. 54, Cetinje, 29.08.1877, 1-2.

<sup>81</sup> H. Hadžibegić, *Opsada Nikšića...*, 60, 61; It is interesting to note that, at the time of its surrender, the Nikšić fortress was armed with 21 cannons. (See: Vojvoda Ilija Plamenac, *Memoari...*, p. 137). Ejup Mušović, *Mušovići...*, 92.

<sup>82</sup> Compare: *Glas Crnogorca*, No. 20, Cetinje, 20.05.1886, 2; V. Šakotić, *Nikšić (Onogošt) u otporima i borbama...*, 308.

the drafting of a plan for the construction of a large cathedral church in Nikšić, erected as a monument to the glorious Bishop Danilo Petrović". It further states that another church was built in the same year beneath Uzdomir, as a memorial marking the site where, on 28 August 1877, the city of Nikšić was surrendered by the besieged Ottoman forces.<sup>83</sup> After the handover of the keys, the Ottoman military garrison withdrew to Gornje Polje, from where it continued its retreat toward Gacko on the following day, 28 August. The city's garrison, numbering one thousand five hundred and thirty soldiers and officers, was directed, lightly armed, via Duga toward Gacko, while the Montenegrin army assumed control of the surrendered city.<sup>84</sup>

### Casualties of the Warring Sides and Nikšić After the Surrender

The data concerning casualties on both sides during the forty-eight days of the siege and the battle for Nikšić vary considerably. The previously cited figures provided by Husejn Ruhi Efendi regarding the losses of the Montenegrin–Herzegovinian army, which suggest nearly three thousand killed and wounded, appear to have been substantially exaggerated, even though the Nikšić naib stated that the information had been obtained from the "prince's army." His intention was to underscore the bravery of the Ottoman garrison in Nikšić in a report that reached the Porte via the Herzegovinian mutasarrifate and the Bosnian vilayet.

By contrast, General Ibrahim Halil Sedes reports two hundred killed and four hundred wounded on the Ottoman side.<sup>85</sup> Other Ottoman sources likewise mention approximately two hundred fallen soldiers.<sup>86</sup> According to Spiridon Gopčević, Ottoman losses during the fighting around Nikšić amounted to three hundred fallen. The official Montenegrin report states only that one thousand five hundred and thirty-two senior and junior officers and soldiers were captured in Nikšić, but that they were immediately released, and that "the government had their entire baggage transported to Stolac at its own expense." According to data presented by Academician Branko Pavičević, a total of one

<sup>83</sup> Compare: *Glas Crnogorca*, No. 20, Cetinje, 20.05.1886, 2; V. Šakotić, *Nikšić (Onogošt) u otporima i borbama...*, 308.

<sup>84</sup> S. Gopčević, *Crnogorsko-turski rat...*, 259; G. Vuković, *Opsada grada Nikšića, Memoari...*, 35; Sauervaldiv dnevnik..., 40.

<sup>85</sup> Ibrahim Halil Sedes, *Osmanski vojni pohod na Crnu Goru 1876-1878*, ed. Šerbo Rastoder, translation: Sead Ibrić, Novi Pazar-Podgorica 2022, 232.

<sup>86</sup> Âli Fitri, *Hersek Seferi, 92-293 Osmanlı-Karadağ Seferi ve Hâl-i Hâzır Dârü'l-h rekâti, Dersaâdet: Mekteb-i Harbiyye Matbaası*, 1909.

hundred and eighty-seven people lost their lives during the siege, including forty fatalities, among whom were fifteen women who were killed or wounded. The total losses among the population of Nikšić, including both soldiers and civilians, were estimated at two hundred and seventy dead and wounded.<sup>87</sup> The Montenegrin and Herzegovinian battalions sustained approximately one hundred dead and wounded, and after the capture of the fortifications at Dugi and Goranska, this figure increased by an additional fifty-six dead and one hundred and fifty wounded.<sup>88</sup> The Ottoman consul in Dubrovnik, Daniš Efendi, citing official dispatches from Cetinje, informed the Herzegovinian mutasarrif Mustafa Hulusija on 28 August, and this information was subsequently relayed to the Bosnian vilayet, regarding the surrender of Nikšić. The consul reported that Hafiz Ahmed Pasha, who was stationed with his forces near the Tara, had stated that any further action toward Nikšić after the city's surrender would be both pointless and hazardous. Governor Ahmed Mahzar Pasha forwarded this information to the Porte but noted that he personally questioned its accuracy.<sup>89</sup>

Regarding the Ottoman account of the city's surrender to the Montenegrins, the commander of Nikšić, Colonel Skender Bey, wrote in a letter addressed to the commander of the Herzegovinian army, Salih Zeki Pasha:

*“After having fully expended all ammunition in fierce engagements fought day and night with cannons and rifles, and being pressed from all sides, on the twenty-seventh of this month, forty-eight days after the artillery bombardment began, Nikšić was compelled to surrender to the Montenegrins. In view of the extraordinary valor displayed by the imperial soldiers and the citizens during the siege, the Montenegrins agreed that the imperial soldiers, under arms, as well as the civilians with such belongings as they were able to carry, might withdraw to Herzegovina. Since two-thirds of the inhabitants are relocating with their children, the movement is slow, and they will reach Gacko on Tuesday, 30 August (11 September). I await the instructions of the High Command regarding the above matters and concerning myself and the imperial army.”<sup>90</sup>*

The fall of Nikšić and the subsequent passage of the army and refugees caused considerable unrest and confusion among the Muslim population

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<sup>87</sup> *Istorija Crne Gore*, Book: 4, Volume: 2, 269.

<sup>88</sup> S. Gopčević, *Crnogorsko turski rat...*, 261; Dušan Vuksan, *Broj turskih zarobljenika u ratovima 1876-1878*, Zapisi, knj. XI, Cetinje 1932, 274-275; Sauervaldov dnevnik..., 45.

<sup>89</sup> VA, OIS, No. 201/1877.

<sup>90</sup> Z. Ivanović, *Nikšić...*, 66; V. Šakotić, *Nikšić (Onogošt) u otporima i borbama...*, 312.

and the military garrisons in Gacko and Nevesinje, as evidenced by vilayet correspondence from the beginning of September 1877. Upon entering Nikšić, the Montenegrin army encountered a marketplace consisting of fifty to sixty semi-wooden, narrow and densely packed shops with shuttered fronts, all in poor condition. The marketplace was situated just below the town and was known as the “Crooked Marketplace” (*Kriva čaršija*). Prior to the town’s surrender, the shops in this area were owned by Muslim Bosniaks, Albanians, and Aromanians.<sup>91</sup> A vivid portrayal of Nikšić following its capture by the Montenegrin army and the departure of its Muslim inhabitants was provided by the English archaeologist and publicist Arthur Evans. During the forty-eight days of siege and armed conflict, the town suffered extensive destruction, as described by Evans, who entered Nikšić alongside the Montenegrin forces. In a report sent to the *Manchester Guardian* on the third day after his arrival, Evans wrote:

*“The town of Nikšić has been terribly ravaged by bombardment. There is scarcely a house that has not been struck by shells. Even today, it is not entirely safe to knock too hard on a friend’s door when visiting. In recent days, there was a dreadful storm, and during the night one could hear the crashing and breaking of walls and beams.”*

In his correspondence, Evans further observed that many houses below the fortifications had been burned or destroyed, while the town’s walls, towers, larger storage facilities, and public buildings sustained only minor damage. He attributed this outcome to the “small caliber of Montenegrin artillery during most of the siege”.<sup>92</sup> Evans described the departing Muslim population of the town as follows:

*“...It was truly moving to observe the long procession of Turkish refugees stretching out from the town. At times, there were as many as sixty people in a single group.”*

He added that some boys left a particularly sorrowful impression. The women were wrapped in long white sheets, with only their noses visible. The people, Evans noted, were too proud to display overt grief, even wearing their brightest festive clothing.<sup>93</sup> According to several sources, Prince Nikola attempted to reassure the inhabitants of Nikšić by promising peace, security,

<sup>91</sup> Bekica Šobajić, *Odzivi prijatnih uspomena*, Nikšić 1889, 16.

<sup>92</sup> A. Evans, *Ilirska pisma...*, 145.

<sup>93</sup> A. Evans, *Ilirska pisma*, 141-142.

and equality. However, fearing for their safety, the residents placed little trust in these assurances, and many “rushed across the fields, gathering horses, cows, and oxen, loading themselves and their animals, and fleeing with the army toward Herzegovina”.<sup>94</sup> Other Montenegrin leaders, including vojvoda Božo Petrović, argued that the inhabitants of Nikšić were essentially Turks and therefore should be expelled. They justified this position by asserting that “four thousand Muslims from Nikšić would never reconcile with the new situation and would always pose a threat to the newly established state”.<sup>95</sup> The emigration of the Bosniak and Albanian population from the regions of Nikšić, Kolašin, Žabljak, Spuž, Zeta, Podgorica, Bar, Mrkojevići, Zabojana, and Krajina, which became part of Montenegro following the Great Eastern Crisis of 1876–1878, resulted in a population decline from forty-three thousand to approximately twelve thousand. Migration routes were directed primarily toward Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Novi Pazar, Sandjak, and Albania.<sup>96</sup>

Despite repeated guarantees issued by Prince Nikola, the majority of the population departed from Nikšić, and by the beginning of September 1878, approximately two thousand two hundred people had emigrated to Herzegovina and Bosnia, with a smaller number relocating to Podgorica and Albania. Of the three thousand eight hundred former inhabitants of Nikšić, only about six hundred Muslims and Christians remained. Among those who stayed was the Mušović family, a respected lineage from which many prominent figures of Nikšić later emerged.<sup>97</sup> The Czech writer and journalist Josef Holeček met Hamza Bey Mušović in Cetinje in 1882, and he writes about him in his book:

*“Among the Perjanici (police authority), an interesting figure is Mušović Bey from Nikšić, a descendant of an ancient converted family that was always at odds with the surrounding population. This Mušović, after the last war, allied himself with Montenegro and carried out significant propaganda for it at the Berlin Congress of 1878 and in Herzegovina. He is a young, handsome man of suitable age, with a masculine expression on his face; every movement of his reveals strength and dexterity. He is loyal to the Prince with all his heart and soul, and he constantly accompanies him. He wears Montenegrin attire, except for the fez, which represents the modern Montenegrin Muslim.”*<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Vojvoda Gavro Vuković, *Memoari*, I..., 428.

<sup>95</sup> E. Mušović, *Mušovići...*, 94.

<sup>96</sup> Pavle A. Rovinski, *Crna Gora u prošlosti i sadašnjosti*, Volume: IV, Cetinje 1994, 183; Safet Bandžović, *Kamenj svjedok*, Novi Pazar 1999, 63.

<sup>97</sup> S. Gopčević, *Crnogorsko turski rat...*, 262; H. Hadžibegić, *Opsada Nikšića...*, 63.

<sup>98</sup> Josef Holeček, *Černá Hora v míru*, Prag, 1883.

After the capture of Nikšić, the main body of the Montenegrin army advanced toward Bileća, while part of the army, commanded by Petar Vukotić, was tasked with capturing the Ottoman fortresses in Duga, which were well fortified and stocked with ammunition and food for an extended period. The strongest fortress, Presjeka, was attacked on 5 September, and after a day of resistance, its garrison surrendered. The garrison consisted of Yüzbaşı Mursel Aga and seventy-three soldiers from the second battalion of the fourth regiment of the Third Army. Spiridon Gopčević claims that two hundred Janissaries were captured at that time. Following the orders of Prince Nikola, the members of the garrison were released and sent to Herzegovina. Upon arriving in Gacko, Yüzbaşı Mursel Aga was brought before a military court on the charge that he and his garrison had not offered sufficient resistance to the Montenegrin forces.

After the fall of Presjeka, the Hodžina Poljana fortress was captured, where twenty Janissaries were taken prisoner, although Gopčević claims that there were forty. The fortresses of Nozdra and Smederevo, also known as Zvijezda, were captured on 8 September after fierce resistance. In the Nozdra fortress, Kolağası Mustafa Efendi and ninety soldiers from the sixth and seventh companies of the aforementioned battalion and army were captured. In the Smederevo fortress, half of the garrison was killed, while the remaining half (sixteen soldiers) was taken prisoner. On the same day, after a brief bombardment, eighty regular soldiers from the Zlostup fortress surrendered. After the capture of the fortresses in the Duga Gorge, Petar Vukotić's forces were joined by Lazar Sočica and his battalions, and together they attacked Goransko and Crkvice. The defenders of Goransko, Binbaša Ragib Aga with four companies of the second battalion of the Third Army, resisted for two days, after which he and his forces surrendered on 12 September. The following day, without resistance, the small garrison (fourteen regular soldiers) of the fortress in Crkvičko Polje surrendered. The captured Janissaries from Duga, Goransko, and Crkvice were sent to Herzegovina together with their personal belongings.<sup>99</sup> Approximately a decade after the fall of Nikšić, the renowned Czech geographer Ludvík Kuba visited the town and left a valuable account of the appearance of post-siege Nikšić.<sup>100</sup>

<sup>99</sup> S. Gopčević, *Crnogorsko turski rat...*, 274-275; V. Šakotić, *Nikšić (Onogošt) u otporima i borbama...*, 314-315.

<sup>100</sup> "Pošto sam razgledao pravolinijske ulice novog grada koji je izgrađen nakon poslednjeg rata, a koji gradnjom podsjeća na neprijatnu Mirkovu varoš u Podgorici, ušao sam brzo u ruševine starog turskog Nikšića. Stare zanimljive muslimanske ruinirane zgrade djeluju na nas neodoljivom draži. Niski, crijepom pokriveni krovovi harema, dućana i kafana, drveni balkoni, mušebaci na

## Conclusion

Due to its geostrategic position, Nikšić played a pivotal role during the Ottoman period of its development, a role reflected in its military strength, economic importance, and relatively favorable social conditions. The military forces stationed at the Nikšić Fortress diligently carried out their duties, ensuring the security of transportation routes, the population, and the border with Montenegro. The size of the forces stationed within the fortress itself, as well as in the surrounding fortifications that formed successive defensive lines, varied over time, depending on changes in both broader imperial and local circumstances. The Nikšić Fortress stood as a symbol of Ottoman authority and resilience in this part of the Balkans, having successfully withstood numerous attacks by Montenegrin forces from its establishment until 1877, as convincingly demonstrated by numerous archival sources. With the strengthening of national aspirations and the involvement of the Great Powers in addressing the “Montenegrin Question,” Montenegro effectively achieved independence from Ottoman rule following its victory over Ottoman forces at the Battle of Grahovo in 1858. From this point onward, the gradual decline of Ottoman authority in Nikšić began, culminating during the Eastern Crisis.

The siege and fall of the Nikšić Fortress in September 1877 therefore represent a turning point within the context of the Montenegrin–Ottoman conflict and the broader process of the liberation of Montenegrin territories from Ottoman rule between 1875 and 1878. Lasting forty-eight days, the siege of Nikšić demonstrated the martial dignity, perseverance, and determination of its Muslim population to remain loyal to their faith and ancestral hearths, despite the city finding itself in a “hopeless position,” as described by the governor of the Bosnian vilayet, Ahmed Mahzar Paša. Furthermore, these forty-eight days of warfare underscored the strategic importance of Nikšić to the Montenegrin side and their determination to break the resistance of the Nikšić gazis at that critical point on the front.

Despite the intensity and bloodshed of the battles, even under such critical historical circumstances, both sides demonstrated an awareness of dignity and human honor. This is exemplified by figures such as vojvoda Petar Vukotić and

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*četvrtastim prozorima, isturení i ponegdje ukrašeni zidovi, dotrajale kamene zgrade, opustjela vrata bez vratnica, sve pola porušeno, pola sačuvano, pola zaraslo u travu, pola u mahovinu. To je otprilike stara varoš Nikšić”. See: Ludvig Kuba, *Nikšić, Ostrog, Danilovgrad, Spuž, Na Cerne Hore*, (translation: Savo Orović), Praha, 1892, 396.*

the Mušović family, as well as by the mutual ceasefires observed when women brought food to soldiers at the front lines. However, while the siege represents a heroic episode, it also gave rise to the later formation of historical myths, such as those surrounding the death of priest Milo Jovović. The Montenegrin–Ottoman conflict, after which Nikšić became an integral part of the Principality of Montenegro, thus symbolizes a turning point not only in the history of Nikšić but also in the affirmation of Montenegro as a political and military actor in the Balkans. From the perspective of military tactics and operational practice, the siege demonstrated a high degree of organization, perseverance, and adaptability on the part of the Montenegrin forces. These qualities enabled them to bring about the fall of a fortress that had symbolized the final bastion of Ottoman authority in this part of Montenegro, despite facing a capable adversary and exceptional circumstances. The fall of the fortress resulted not only from Montenegrin military strategy but also from a broader political context, including the support of the Great Powers, particularly Russia, which supplied large-caliber artillery that proved decisive in overcoming the stubborn resistance of the Ottoman defenders.

The casualties sustained by both sides testify not only to their respective objectives but also to the hesitation of the Ottoman central authority in undertaking more decisive action on the Balkan front during the events of 1875–1878. Despite the technical superiority of Ottoman artillery, shortages of supplies and external support, combined with the prolonged pressure of the siege, led to the exhaustion of the defenders' resources, which ultimately could not withstand the determination of the Montenegrin army. By sealing off access routes to the fortress, Montenegrin forces succeeded in compelling its surrender.

The substantial spoils acquired by the Montenegrin side after the fall of the Nikšić Fortress—particularly in artillery—serve as clear evidence of the strategic advantage they had attained. Ultimately, the capture of the fortress significantly strengthened Montenegro's position in negotiations for international recognition at the Berlin Congress. The mass withdrawal of both the Ottoman military and civilian population marked the end of one historical era and the beginning of a new cultural, economic, and political phase in Nikšić's development. At the same time, the fall of the fortress formed part of a broader process of de-Ottomanization of the Balkans, situating the Montenegrin–Ottoman conflict within a complex regional and European historical framework. The 1877 siege of Nikšić thus stands as a pivotal moment in Montenegro's history, confirming the exceptional strategic importance of

the city for the political and military objectives of the Montenegrin state in the nineteenth century.

Nikšić's position along key transportation and communication routes made it a primary target of Montenegro's liberation efforts during the wars against the Ottoman Empire. Its conquest represented not merely territorial expansion but also a decisive step in the consolidation of Montenegrin statehood and the strengthening of its international standing. The siege itself remains a testament to the courage and determination of both sides. While the Montenegrin army, under Prince Nikola Petrović, displayed remarkable endurance in achieving its objectives despite considerable losses, the Ottoman garrison likewise demonstrated discipline, organization, and resolve in defending the fortress.

Lasting nearly two months, the siege culminated in the capture of the city, marking a decisive stage in Montenegro's struggle for independence. The event endures as a symbol of sacrifice and perseverance and offers invaluable insight into the broader political and military dynamics of the Balkans in the second half of the nineteenth century. In this sense, the siege of Nikšić not only secured a more favorable territorial position for Montenegro but also laid the groundwork for its recognition at the Berlin Congress of 1878, thereby formalizing its independence. The 1877 siege of Nikšić thus remains one of the most consequential episodes in Montenegrin history, encapsulating both the determination of the Montenegrin state and the profound challenges inherent in the pursuit of international recognition.

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## THE SIEGE AND FALL OF NIKŠIĆ FORTRESS IN THE MONTENEGRIN-OTTOMAN CONFLICTS (1877)

### Summary

This article explores the significance of the siege and fall of the Nikšić Fortress during the Montenegrin–Ottoman War of 1876–1878. It aims to reconstruct as accurately as possible and define the role of Nikšić in the conflict between the Ottoman Empire and Montenegro. The primary focus is on the strategic, political, and symbolic significance of this town and its fortress. To that end, the study analyzes the military and political aspects of the 1877 siege of Nikšić, including the organization of Montenegrin and Ottoman troops, the tactics employed during the battles, and the impact of international factors in shaping the outcome of the conflict. Special attention is given to the consequences of the fortress's fall for the subsequent course of the war and Montenegro's territorial expansion. The research draws on Montenegrin, Ottoman-Turkish, and Bosnian archival documents, as well as contemporary memoirs and relevant historiographical literature. The study concludes that the conquest of Nikšić represented a pivotal turning point in the process of consolidating Montenegrin statehood and conquering the western parts of present-day Montenegro, thereby significantly strengthening its international position. This work provides a broader perspective on the complex relations between Montenegro and the Ottoman Empire, while simultaneously shedding light on the local history of Nikšić as one of the key focal points of this conflict.

*Keywords: Montenegro, Ottoman Empire, Nikšić, Montenegrin–Ottoman War, Nikšić Fortress*