

ИЗКУСТВОВЕДСКИ ЧЕТЕНИЯ

Тематичен рецензиран годишник за изкуствознание в два тома

ART READINGS

Thematic Peer-reviewed Annual in Art Studies, Volumes I-II

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ИЗКУСТВОВЕДСКИ ЧЕТЕНИЯ
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2024.I. – Старо изкуство

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ART AND HISTORY

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Icons and Wars: Some Examples from the Russo-Turkish War 1877-1878¹

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Abstract: The article deals with only some aspects of the topic of travel and the fate of icons during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878. It comments on the importance of the presence of Emperor Alexander II near the theatre of hostilities, his and the heir to the throne's donations of bells, icons, entire iconostases and utensils to the churches of various towns and villages in Bulgaria. For the first time, several icons, which were presented as gifts during the war by church hierarchs and monasteries to the Commander-in-Chief of the Russian army, Nicholas Nikolayevich, are published.

Keywords: Russian icons in Bulgaria, Varna, Plevna, Gorna Studena, Samokov, Yambol

The Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878 became a real climax in the long-lasting confrontation of two mighty empires from which the modern Bulgarian state was eventually born. Of course, in such a bloody conflict the decisive role was played by the troops and their armaments, which were to achieve what the diplomats failed to negotiate. We should not forget, however, that at that time Russia had long claimed the role of patron of the Orthodox peoples living under Ottoman rule. Moreover, the imperial Orthodoxy cultivated by the Russian monarchs

¹ This publication is part of the project "RICONTRANS - Visual Culture, Piety and Propaganda. Transfer and Reception of Russian Religious Art in the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean (16th to Early 20th Century)", funded from the European Research Council under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No. 818791).

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Fig. 1. Emperor Alexander II with retinue in his camp in the village of Gorna Studena, 3 October 1877. Source www.lostbulgaria.com

played a crucial social role as the source of a particular identity that formed a solid basis of the state and nationhood. And if the Russian Empire did not hesitate to define and defend its political goals with the arguments of religion, it is no wonder that every regiment of the Russian army went to war with its portable church, which, of course, had its own priest and its own icons.

An important factor in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878 was the personal presence for several months of Emperor Alexander II (1855-1881) in the area of the main hostilities in Northern Bulgaria (**Fig. 1**). The mystical charm of the ruler, whom many still regarded as the earthly vicar of the Heavenly King, brought the troops and the local Bulgarian population to exaltation and instilled fear in the Turkish soldiers³.

It should be noted that Nicholas I (1825-1855), the father of Alexander II, was the first Russian ruler who spent several months in the lands of present-day northeastern Bulgaria during the Russo-Turkish War of 1828-1829, in order to raise the fighting spirit of the troops. Inasmuch as his presence in the theatre of combat was of rather symbolic

³ Rich in facts on the subject, though compilative in nature, is the so-called 'diary' of Alexander II's stay in Bulgaria in 1877, compiled by Leonid Chichagov (1856-1937), the future Metropolitan Serafimim: *Chichagov 1887*.

significance, since he was not acting as Commander-in-Chief of the field army, he found it necessary to devote attention to various public acts of piety which emphasized the humble gratitude of the emperor and his troops for the victories sent to them from above, and offered prayers for the souls of the dead.

According to the testimony of Count Alexander Benckendorff (1781-1844), immediately after the capture of Varna, on September 29, 1828, Nicholas I entered the ruined city on horseback and unexpectedly discovered among the ruins of the seaside quarters a church⁴ that had survived the bombardment, which apparently aroused mystical feelings in him and his entourage:

“By some miracle a Greek church had survived, though the very part of the town in which it was situated had suffered most from the fire of our fleet and land batteries. The emperor, standing in front of this church – very small, gloomy, and built in [a] courtyard – ordered a thanksgiving service to be held in it. There was something unspeakably poignant in this sacred service amidst death and ruin, in Muslim lands, in a crescent-moon oppressed Orthodox temple...

The next morning the emperor assembled all his free troops in front of Varna, and under the open sky, in the presence of the Turks, ordered a solemn prayer to be said, accompanied by a falling on bended knee. All the field artillery and all the guns of the ships roared in celebration of the conclusion of the long and bloody drama of the siege of Varna”⁵.

Nicholas’s son and successor, Alexander II, followed his father’s example and remained in Bulgarian lands during the decisive months of his Russo-Turkish War (between 3 July and early December 1877). His presence, surrounded by a large retinue (the “Imperial Main Headquarters”) in the area of active hostilities in northern Bulgaria, brought a sense of lack of clear subordination in the command of the army and somewhat undermined the prestige of the Commander-in-Chief Nicholas Nikolayevich the Elder (1831-1891), the Grand Prince and brother of the Emperor⁶. On the other hand, the appearance of Alexander II

4 Probably this was the church of St. Athanasius, where the metropolitans of Varna served in the 19th century: *Pletnyov, Rusev* 2012: 487-490; *Tenekedjiev* 2023: 219-227.

5 *Shil'der* 1896: 504-505. See also: *Frolova* 2014: 128.

6 For further details: *Frolova* 2019: 82-111.



Fig. 2. Emperor Nicholas I on horseback, ca. 1828-1829. Artist: Johann Friedrich Schröter, Leipzig. Engraver: Anton Paterno, Vienna. Photo credit Historical Museum – Samokov. Photo L. Nikolov



Fig. 3. Emperor Nicholas I on horseback. Mural by Nikola Obrazopisov after the engraving printed by Anton Paterno in Vienna. Samokov, second half of the 19th century. Photo credit Historical Museum – Samokov. Photo L. Nikolov

anywhere in the Bulgarian lands the Bulgarian lands caused great enthusiasm among the army and the local population and was accompanied by church processions with crosses, icons and chants, prayer services in churches or under the open sky near the battle positions.

There is no doubt that the sentiment of most Bulgarians towards the Russian Empire and its rulers was very strong. In the summer of 1877 the Russian war correspondent Vsevolod V. Krestovskiy (1839-1895) documented in the town of Svishtov the widespread custom among Bulgarians of keeping portraits of the Russian emperors Nicholas I and Alexander II, who were considered their true legitimate Orthodox tsars, in their home iconostases⁷.

Two specific examples can easily convince us that Krestovskiy has described a real phenomenon. In 1871, the Russian vice-consul in Plovdiv, Naiden Gerov (1823-1900), reported to his embassy in Istanbul that in Eski Zagra (now Stara Zagora) the Turkish authorities had detained four travelling icon dealers from Vladimir province who were selling

⁷ Krestovskiy 1879: 386-387; Kozhuharova 1986: 374-375; Makarova 2003: 30.

engravings depicting the Russian imperial family and the crossing of the Danube by Russian troops⁸.

An even more interesting example comes from the archive of the artist of the Samokov school of painting, Nikola Obrazopisov (1828-1915), where an unsigned engraving by the Leipzig artist Johann Friedrich Schröter (1770-1836) is preserved⁹, which depicts Nicholas I on horseback with the legend "Nicolaus I Kaiser von Russland"¹⁰ (**Fig. 2**). Obrazopisov painted a portrait of the Emperor on one of the walls of his house in Samokov based on this engraving (**Fig. 3**). The same engraving of Nicholas I, traded in Vienna right after the end of 1828-1829 Russo-Turkish war by the publisher and engraver Anton Paterno, seems to have been quite popular among the Bulgarians, as an ink copy of it is preserved in an album of drawings and engravings that belonged to the famous painter from Bansko Toma Vishanov-Molera (ca. 1750-ca. 1811) and his descendants¹¹.

With all this in mind, it is now time to focus on the role of icons and their circulation in wartime. An important element in the solemn meetings of the local Orthodox communities with the emperor and the commander-in-chief during the 1877-1878 Russo-Turkish war was the blessing by the local metropolitan (or other church hierarchs), who presented the monarch or the supreme military commander with an icon.

On the eve of the war against Turkey, when Alexander II was welcomed at the Ploiești station on 26 May 1877, the Emperor was greeted by representatives of the Bulgarian community in Romania. The head of the delegation, Panaret Rashev (1808-1887), Metropolitan of Pogoniana, who was Bulgarian and a member of the Synod of the Bulgarian Exarchate, read an address of thanks and blessed the monarch with an icon of St. Constantine and St. Helena, which was kissed by the emperor¹².

8 Nayden Gerov to Count Ignatiev, Plovdiv, 1 February 1871, published in: *Popruzhenko* 1932: 4-5. About similar cases in other parts of the Balkans: *Kostopoulos* 2021: 198-199.

9 Historical Museum – Samokov, Inv. Д № 688 – 39.

10 The identification of the engraving from Samokov was made indirectly. In the catalogue of prints that the publisher and engraver Anton Paterno offered in 1832 in his shop in Vienna, there is an engraving described as follows: "Nicolaus, Kaiser von Russland, zu Pferd, lithographiert von Schröter, in klein Folio": *Verlags-Catalog* 1832: 15.

11 Centre for Slavo-Byzantine Studies "Prof. Ivan Dujčev" – Sofia, D slavo 48, f. 19. Edition: *Vasiliev* 1969: 28 (Fig. 12), 71-72.

12 *Krestovskiy* 1879: 238-240; *Chichagov* 1887: 63-64.

A few weeks earlier, on May 3, 1877, the Commander-in-Chief of the Russian army, Nicholas Nikolayevich the Elder, who was in Ploiești, had visited Bucharest, where he had been received with honours by Prince Carol of Romania. The same day, in the building of the Russian consulate, the Grand Prince met with a delegation of the Bulgarians living in Romania. Metropolitan Panaret Rashev blessed Nicholas Nikolayevich with a large icon of St. Nicholas and presented him with a welcoming address¹³.

The small Russian (or Romanian in Russian style) icon of St. Nicholas, which accompanied the large one, presented to Nicholas Nikolayevich by Metropolitan Panaret, is nowadays kept in the Regional Military History Museum in Pleven (**Fig. 4**).

Several more icons, presented to the Commander-in-Chief Nicholas Nikolayevich during the Russo-Turkish War in 1877-1878 are kept in the funds of the same museum:

- an icon of Saint Nicholas with a Romanian inscription, on the back of which it is indicated that it was presented by the Old Believers in the city of Bucharest in 1877¹⁴ (**Fig. 5**);
- an icon of the Holy Great Martyr Panteleimon, on the back of which there is a factory inscription indicating that it was painted in the Russian monastery of St. Panteleimon on Mount Athos, and another which testifies that it was presented to Nicholas Nikolayevich on 17 July 1877 in Tarnovo by the Bulgarian Preobrazhenski (Transfiguration) Monastery located in the vicinity of the same town (**Fig. 6**);
- an icon of the Holy Great Martyr Panteleimon, donated to Nicholas Nikolayevich by the brotherhood of the Monastery of St. Panteleimon on Mount Athos (**Fig. 7**);
- a small icon of Saint Nicholas the New of Sofia in a silver setting was donated to Nicholas Nikolayevich by the Metropolitan of Sofia Meletios on 4 April 1878. (**Fig. 8**).

All these icons were presented to Bulgaria by the son of the late Commander-in-Chief, Grand Prince Nicholas Nikolayevich the Younger, on

¹³ *Krestovskiy* 1879: 139.

¹⁴ The Grand Prince received the delegation of this community (which belonged to the Russian sect of the eunuchs) at the Russian consulate in the Romanian capital on May 3, 1877, just before he met the delegation of the Bulgarians in Romania.



Fig. 4. Icon of St. Nicholas, presented to the Commander-in-Chief, Grand Prince Nicholas Nikolayevich the Elder, by the Metropolitan of Pogoniana and spiritual head of the Bulgarians in Romania, Panaret Rashev, at their meeting in Bucharest on 3 May 1877. Photo credit Regional Military History Museum – Pleven. Photo A. Nikolov



Fig. 5. Icon of Saint Nicholas with Romanian inscription, presented to the Commander-in-Chief, Grand Prince Nicholas Nikolayevich the Elder, by the community of the Russian Old Believers in the city of Bucharest at a meeting with their delegation on 3 May 1877. Photo credit Regional Military History Museum – Pleven. Photo A. Nikolov



Fig. 6. Icon of the Holy Great Martyr Panteleimon, painted in the Russian Monastery of St. Panteleimon on Mount Athos, and presented to the Commander-in-Chief, Grand Prince Nicholas Nikolayevich the Elder, on 17 July 1877 in Tarnovo by the brotherhood of the Transfiguration Monastery, located near the same town. Photo credit Regional Military History Museum – Pleven. Photo A. Nikolov



Fig. 7. Icon of the Holy Great Martyr Panteleimon, presented to the Commander-in-Chief, Grand Prince Nicholas Nikolayevich the Elder, by the brotherhood of the Russian monastery of St. Panteleimon on Mount Athos, 1878. Photo credit Regional Military History Museum – Pleven. Photo A. Nikolov



Fig. 8. Icon of St. Nicholas the New of Sofia, presented to the Commander-in-Chief, Grand Prince Nicholas Nikolayevich the Elder, by the Metropolitan of Sofia Meletios on 4 April 1878. Photo credit Regional Military History Museum – Pleven. Photo A. Nikolov

the occasion of the 25th anniversary of this Russo-Turkish War, which was celebrated very solemnly in 1902.

It has already been noted in historiography that the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878 became “a kind of Romanovs enterprise”: in an attempt to bolster the prestige of imperial power and the ruling family, Alexander II did something unprecedented by enlisting almost all the grand princes in this military enterprise¹⁵. Driven by a desire to perpetuate the memory of this unique historical moment among the newly liberated Bulgarians, the emperor felt it necessary that he and the members of his family make generous donations to the churches of those towns and villages where their headquarters had been stationed for longer.

It should be noted here that the emperor (like his father in 1828)¹⁶ was

¹⁵ Chernukha 2013: 32. See also: Frolova 2019: 92.

¹⁶ Soon after the capture of Varna in September 1828, probably on the orders of the Emperor, the Russian occupation authorities made a gesture of generosity to the Christians of Varna – the

unpleasantly surprised by the Turkish ban on Orthodox churches having and using bells. Thus, he presented sets of bells to the cathedral church of Holy Trinity in Svishtov, where he prayed the day, he crossed the Danube and first set foot on Bulgarian soil on 16 June 1877¹⁷; and to the churches in the villages where in one or another time resided the emperor together with his Imperial Main Headquarters – Byala (district of Ruse), Gorna Studena (municipality of Svishtov), Pordim (district of Pleven), Brestovitsa (district of Ruse), Gorno Aplanovo (district of Ruse) etc¹⁸.

Emperor Alexander II showed a special attitude to the poor and unsettled village church in Gorna Studena: on 19 August 1877 he personally attended the consecration of the temple and promised to donate an iconostasis – a vow that was fulfilled as soon as possible (**Fig. 9**)¹⁹.

Another iconostasis was sent by the Heir to the Throne, the Grand Prince Alexander Alexandrovich (commander of the Eastern detachment of the Russian army), to the church in Brestovitsa (**Fig. 10**), where the remains of Sergei Maximilianovich Romanovsky, Duke of Leichtenberg (1848-1877) – the nephew of Alexander II and member of the Russian imperial family, who was killed by the Turks on 12 October 1877 near the village of Ivanovo (district of Ruse) – had lain for some time before being taken to St Petersburg²⁰.

Finally, I would like to note that during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878 many Russian icons remained in Bulgaria thanks to the activities of the Russian regimental priests and their mobile churches. I will limit myself here to just a few examples.

cathedral church of St. Athanasius received a bell (and a few more a little later), which Metropolitan Philotheos gladly accepted, but did not decide to use it before the Russian church in the city was completed, housed in the building of a mosque, which in turn was a former church. Thus “it was not until December 6, 1828, that the bell began to ring at the church of St. Athanasius, for the first time after the conquest of Varna by the Turks”: *Dolzhenkov* 1829: 459.

17 *Ganchev* 1929: 66.

18 *Mutafov* 2021: 116, 132; *Belchev* 2017: 212-214; *Nikolov* 1998: 53-54.

19 *Chichagov* 1887: 267: “The church was full of Bulgarians and when the service began, unexpectedly for all present, the Emperor entered with his entourage. The people were moved to tears. The consecration took place in an unusually solemn atmosphere and to commemorate this day, His Majesty donated an iconostasis to the church, and the entourage collected by subscription a sum of money to bring from Russia church utensils, icons and other necessary accessories of worship”.

20 *Nikolov* 1998: 54-56.



Fig. 9. Iconostasis donated to the church in the village of Gorna Studena (Svishtov municipality) by Emperor Alexander II. Photo A. Nikolov



Fig. 10. Iconostasis donated by the heir to the throne, Grand Prince Alexander Alexandrovich (commander of the Eastern detachment of the Russian army) to the church in the village of Brestovitsa (district of Ruse). Photo S. Georgieva

In the Art Gallery “Dimitar Dobrovich” in Sliven there are two small Russian icons, which illustrate an interesting phenomenon – the artistic work of unknown soldiers of the 139th Morshansk Regiment, which in 1878-1879 was stationed in the vicinity of present-day Simonovgrad. One of the icons depicts St. Alexander Nevsky and bears the inscription “Painted in 1878 by lower ranks of the 139th Morshansk Infantry Regiment” (Fig. 11). The other depicts the Transfiguration of the Lord and is inscribed in a similar manner: “Painted in 1879 by the lower ranks of the 139th Morshansk Infantry Regiment”. The icons were probably created for the regiment’s marching church, which was dedicated to the Saintly martyrs Carpus and Papyrus. In 2022 an icon of St. Demetrius of Thessalonica, painted by the same anonymous soldiers after the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-1878, was presented by a private donator to the cathedral church of St. Nicholas in the town of Orenburg (Russia)²¹.

The activity of the Russian military priests in Bulgaria led to the construction of new churches, which were supplied with icons and utensils from Russia. In this context, we must explicitly mention the name of the monk from the Kiev Monastery of the Caves (Kievo-Pecherskaia Lavra) Parfeniy Pavlovich Getman (1824-1900), who in 1877-1878 was a priest in a military field hospital. On 1 August 1878 he wrote from Yambol to his correspondent in Kiev:

“Did I write you that I built a church? It is 22 arshins long [15.62 m], 7 arshins wide [4.97 m], 4 arshins high [2.84 m]. The chancel is of a whole piece of marble, the floor is also of marble, the iconostasis is planked, with proper decoration. There was a side donation, but I added 50 silver roubles from me, and the work is done. On the 4th of August the regional archpriest will consecrate this church in the name of St. Nicholas. Some of the icons have been purchased, and others I am begging from the Kiev Monastery of the Caves”²².

This temple did not survive for long, but in 1879 Father Getman founded another one dedicated to St. Alexander Nevsky. The construction of the church (around which a monastery soon emerged) was started by soldiers of the 30th Infantry Division on May 12, 1879 on the northern slope of one of the Bakadzhik hills, 14 km south-east of Yambol, near

21 *Maymakhova* 2022.

22 *N. N. O.* 1900: 934-935.



Fig. 11. Icon of St. Alexander Nevsky, painted in 1878 in Bulgaria by lower ranks of the 139th Morshansk Infantry Regiment of the Russian army. Photo credit Art Gallery “Dimitar Dobrovich” – Sliven. Photo A. Nikolov

the ruins of the former Ascension Monastery, burned by the Turks. The iconostasis was brought from the Kievan Cave Monastery²³.

In this short text we could highlight only some aspects of the topic of travel and the fate of icons during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878. As we have endeavoured to show, this problem cannot be considered in isolation – in major political and military upheavals, icons travelled and changed hands to serve various political, diplomatic or purely spiritual purposes. The events surrounding Bulgaria’s liberation from Ottoman rule favoured the widespread penetration of Russian icons into Bulgarian lands, a phenomenon that deserves more detailed study.

²³ Brandt 1903: 1048-1056; Nikolov 2021: 319-323.

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Icons and Wars: Some Examples from the Russo-Turkish War 1877-1878



Angel Nikolov

This article discusses the topic of the journey and fate of icons during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878. The personal involvement of Emperor Nicholas I in the war between Russia and the Ottoman Empire in 1828 (and especially in the events of the siege and capture of Varna) is discussed not only as a reason for the high reputation of the Russian ruler among the Bulgarians, but also as a reason for the popularity of images of this emperor and his son. The importance of Emperor Alexander II's presence in the theatre of battle, his and the heir to the throne's donations of bells, icons, entire iconostases and utensils to the churches of various towns and villages in Bulgaria are also commented on. For the first time, several icons that were presented during the war by church hierarchs and monasteries to the Commander-in-Chief of the Russian army Nicholas Nikolayevich are published – today these objects of art are kept in the Regional Military History Museum in Pleven.