

SECTION 2. WORLD HISTORY

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A BRIEF PRESENTATION OF THE SITUATION IN THE CITY OF ORADEA ON THE EVE OF THE OTTOMAN SIEGE IN 1598

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Although it lost its splendor acquired during the Renaissance, during the 16th century, Oradea was still a large and prosperous settlement, developed around the fortified fortress, built between the arms of Crișul and Peța rivers, but political and religious events would bring great changes in the destiny of the city. From an important Bishop`s See, it became a border point, so the fortress had to fulfill new functions, which is why, from the middle of the 16th century, a series of works aimed at strengthening the fortification were undertaken. Bihar County, in the conditions of hostilities between the territories controlled by the Austrians and the Hungarians, became a strategic place.

Its importance, but especially the danger represented by the Ottomans, determined the rethinking of the defensive system of the fortress in Oradea, resorting to a series of measures aimed at the most effective defense against a siege.

For the efficient remodeling of the defense structures, Italian specialists were brought in, who designed a pentagonal citadel with 5 bastions. In 1569–1570, during the reign of John Sigismund, the Craișorul bastion was built and work began on the Ciunt bastion, which was continued during the reign of Stephen, Christopher and Sigismund Báthory. Even now, in 1572, the Golden bastion was erected, and in 1584 the Red bastion, as well as two bastions, the Earth and the Gate. In the year 1581, Stephen Báthory ordered the Italian architect Dominico Ridolfini to rethink the purpose of the church in the fortress that used to serve for services, so that the lower part of the church will serve as an ammunition depot, and the upper part as a firing point for artillery [2, p. 21–22]. At the time of the

Ottoman siege in 1598, the fortress had 5 bastions, one of which was unfinished, built in a palanquin system. Marco Isolano, another Italian architect who stayed in the fortress during the siege of 1598 notes that even in then the bastions were empty, i.e. not filled with earth meant to increase its resistance. He also mentioned other architectural elements, namely a ditch with water, a cathedral, the palace with a courtyard [11, p. 53]. Gabriel Bethlen later ordered the reconstruction of one of these brick bastions, thus resulting in the fifth bastion, called Bethlen [8, p. 126]. Among the Italian architects who thought the defensive system able to cope with the new strategies and military armament were Pietro Ferrabosco, Ottavio Baldigara, Simoné della Genga [9, p. 108], Dominico Ridolfini.

Although the fortress was designed to have a capacity for 1000 soldiers in terms of defense, these troops were rarely on the premises [13, p. 18]. In the middle of the 16th century, the Roman Catholic bishop Zabardy Mátyás was concerned to have an army of 850 soldiers, 350 horsemen and 400 footmen. Of these, 200 horsemen and 300 footmen were maintained by the chapter and bishopric, and for the rest an annual sum was received from the king. Exclusively for guarding the fortress, he kept 25 guards, which cost 1300 forints per month. Defense equipment consisted of cannons, guns and gunpowder. We know for sure that the Golden and Red bastions were equipped with one cannon each [13, p. 19]. The papal diplomat Antonio Possevino provides us with important information related to some military aspects, from which we find out the usual number of defenders in the fortress, at the time when Géczy János (1576–1585) was the captain: “This captain (of Oradea) has usually about 800 men on horseback and as many on foot; all who are in that land and who have goods obey him, whether they are nobles, or lords (of the land), or commoners. He fights sometimes with the Turks, sometimes with the imperials, if they cross the borders, making plundering expeditions with their armies, and therefore always sends in one direction and another a company of horsemen to defend the country and stand guard...”

At the time of the establishment of the Christian League in 1593, the nobility of the Principality of Transylvania was divided into two groups, one anti-Ottoman, headed by Sigismund Báthory, and the second, of course pro-Ottoman, supported by Balthazar Báthory. The fact that a large part of the nobility was on Sigismund’s side caused discontent in Istanbul. When he tried to recapture Timișoara from the Ottomans in 1596, helped by Michael the Brave, who had sent him 4000 soldiers, an otherwise unsuccessful action, lead the sultan to take measures against him. This and in the conditions in which the Ottoman dominance in the area was visibly

beginning to falter due to the occupation of Budin's defense lines by the Habsburgs. The Ottoman response came in 1598 when, under the leadership of Satırcı Mehmed Pasha, an expedition was organized in Transylvania. At the end of the 16th century, the fortress of Oradea was therefore directly threatened by a fearsome enemy, who had occupied Arad and Cenad in the summer of 1598, directing his attention towards Oradea, which of course due to its strategic positioning was inevitable not to enter the visor of the Ottoman rulers. The 1598 expedition was as much one of conquest as of plunder.

The inhabitants of the city, who had embraced the reform in their great majority, were dissatisfied with the Transylvanian prince Sigismund Báthory, who did not respond positively to their request to remove the Jesuits from Oradea. However, after his abdication in favor of his wife, the problem was resolved in May 1598, the Jesuits being forced to settle in Seleus. This episode, although it seems a minor one, will not be forgotten by the locals, who will consider Sigismund Báthory a Catholicist, so that when only a few months later he is proclaimed prince again by the Diet of Turda in August 20, 1598, they refuse to take the oath to him, no longer trusting his intentions and capabilities to defend the fortress in the event of an Ottoman attack. Moreover, Sigismund also owed the garrison's pay for 1595–1597, an amount of 25,000 florins, which created a delicate situation, as the soldiers threatened to leave the fortress. Under these conditions, the inhabitants, faced with the imminent danger, will send a message on September the 1st to the Archduke of Austria asking for his protection. The support that Maximilian III gives is materialized by sending Nyári Pál, former captain of the fortress of Eger, who will arrive later, in 1599, and captain of the fortress of Oradea, following Király György [3, p. 104]. Also, the Viennese court commissions Toldi István to solve the garrison problem. Shortly after, a garrison commanded by general Melchior von Rödern was installed in the fortress consisting of 500 horsemen and 2000 pedestrians [3, p. 104–106].

Despite all the efforts made to strengthen and modernize the fortification, it still had vulnerable points, and the city of Oradea was necessarily walled, thus being directly exposed, the attackers having no serious obstacle to its conquest. The Jesuit Antonio Possevino stated about Oradea that it is a “proud city, although without walls, with a famous and large citadel surrounded by walls”.

We cannot say that the Ottoman and Tatar armies took the defenders of the Oradea fortress by surprise. It seems that the Ottoman camp was being monitored, with the aim of finding out the chieftain's intentions and

anticipating military action. On August 10, 1598, the captain of the fortress Király György sent a letter to the chamber councilors of Szepes County informing about some maneuvers by the Ottomans in the area of Pančevo (Serbia). The news had been brought to them by his man, who had just returned from the bloody Beckserek. According to the letter, it appears that the pasha assigned 2 beys to Beckserek, who were in the territory for about 3–4 weeks. The man was an eyewitness when the pasha sent a caesque and immediately after its arrival the two beys, together with their detachments set out for the pasha. It was believed that the pasha, together with the whole army, wanted to move from Pancevo to Belgrade. Király György considers it necessary to prevent the one who led the Christian army, Archduke Maximilian, through Greorgio Hoffman and Nicolao Orlay (Orlé Miklós) [7, p. 284–285]. The letter arrived on August 23 and the two advisers considered that the situation was serious and sent the message as quickly as possible to the archduke, at the same time asking him to ask the captain of the Oradea fortress to send more spies to the Ottoman camp to find out about their intentions. They also wanted to confirm the rumor if the Ottomans had started to build a bridge over the Danube [7, p. 286].

At the news that the Ottomans had started the expedition, two battalions of Silesian infantry and a company of 100 horsemen under Gottfried Rübisch were sent to the fortress of Oradea. Another 1500 pedestrians under the leadership of Melchior Rottwig were stationed near Oradea, at Episcopia.

On September 26, the Ottoman-Tatar armies arrive near Oradea. It is estimated that the forces of the besieging army amounted to about 50,000 soldiers.

Meanwhile, Rödern faces a rebellion of his own soldiers who demand a raise and even threaten him with death. From the report he sends to Maximilian, it follows that, seeing himself outnumbered and thus unable to defend the city, he resorted to an extreme solution, setting it on fire. Of course, after he calls Király György to the fortress with his 500 horsemen. The inhabitants flee, only 100 manage to take refuge in the fortress [3, p. 106]. Thus, the number of defenders rose to approximately 2000 [12, p. 45].

Saturgi Mehmed Pasha begins the attack. In five days, the city was conquered, after which the enemies moved on to the siege of the fortress which lasted between October 1 and November 5, 1598. The means of communication of those in the fortress with the outside were cut off. The Ottoman camp prepares for the siege starting on October, the 1st. They switch to digging tunnels under the fortress towers so they can be mined.

Two of the towers of the former episcopal cathedral inside the fortress are seriously damaged. Although from a letter addressed to Ieremia Movilă on October, the 4th, 1598 by Pancrațiu Sennyei, we deduce that the artillery of the besiegers is quite poorly equipped and they only had two cannons, they managed to cause great damage to the church towers in the fortress, but also to the walls of the enclosure and the other bastions.

Fortunately for the besieged, on October 24 it started to rain incessantly, Crișul and Peța came out of the womb causing floods, and the trenches dug by the Ottomans filled with water, thwarting their plans. The Ottomans were forced to give up, especially since disease had begun to haunt their camp. As a result of the news that Michael's army, consisting of 1500 Romanians, Serbs and others led by the Lecca aga is approaching, the siege is abandoned on November, the 3rd [3, p. 107, 11, p. 49].

About the events during the siege, the chronicler from Târgu Mureș, Francisc Nagy Szabó reveals to us: "In 1598 we suddenly heard that the emperor wanted to occupy Oradea through a move of his own, and that he did. After the harvest, large German and Hungarian forces came to Oradea, captained by Ioan Szelestei and Albert Kiraly. King Mattia besieges (the fortress) Buda, so that the Turks leave Oradea; but he did not leave Oradea, but destroyed it and stormed it several times; but those inside behaved bravely. At last, it began to rain so much that it rained for 40 days in one; the mountains in this country, as elsewhere, kept collapsing, which is still visible today, and the Turks did not resist the heavy rains, but left the siege of the fortress. But duke Mattia also left [the city of] Buda ..." [1, p. 51].

Thus, with all the preparations to face a fearsome enemy, providence and luck led the besiegers to give up the attempt to conquer the fortress of Oradea. But the Ottomans did not forget and returned better prepared in 1660, when they conquered the fortress and established the eyalet of Oradea until 1692.

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