

**THE BRITISH PARLIAMENT AND THE ISSUE OF SOUTHERN BESSARABIA
(APRIL-AUGUST 1878)**

*Eugen-Tudor Sclifos**

10.52846/AUCSI.2024.2.03

Abstract

The Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878 was a new episode in the Oriental question. Thanks to the contribution of the army of Romania, the Ottoman Empire suffers defeat. In the february of 1878 the Treaty of San Stefano is signed, but Romania is asked to cede Southern Bessarabia to the Russian Empire, and as compensation it receives Dobrogea. The British Parliament discussed the question of Southern Bessarabia before the congress of Berlin and after the signing of the treaty. Prior to the congress, on 30 may, 1878, Russia signed a secret agreement with Great Britain, which recognized the annexation of Southern Bessarabia. Some British politicians have criticized the agreement. After the signing of the Treaty of Berlin, the British Parliament criticized the fact that Great Britain allowed the South of Bessarabia to be annexed by Russia, and Romania plundered by a territory.

Key words: *Great Britain, Parliament, Southern Bessarabia, Russia, Dobrogea.*

The XIX century is remembered by Romanians as the century of national achievements, from the unification of the Principality of Moldavia and Wallachia, managed by Alexandru Ioan Cuza in 1859, to the gaining of Romania's state independence in 1877. The mentioned century was also one of national disillusionment. In 1812, the territory between the Prut and the Dniester was annexed to the Russian Empire following the Treaty of Bucharest. In 1856, after the end of a new episode of the Eastern issue, the Great Powers decided that the south of Bessarabia should be returned to the Principality of Moldavia, so that it would return to the possession of Tsar Alexander II's Empire in 1878 (Jelavich, 1969: 199).

In the given case, we will refer to the attitude of the London Parliament on the issue of southern Bessarabia in the period April-August 1878. To begin with, it is worth briefly presenting the attitude of Great Britain on the issue of southern Bessarabia prior to this moment, namely after the end of the Crimean war of 1853-1856. It should be noted that both the Romanian (Sclifos, 2018: 139) and the British historiography (Mosse, 1963: 86-131) show the indisputable merit of Albion's diplomacy in supporting the retrocession of southern Bessarabia to the Principality of Moldavia. In 1856, a complicated situation had arisen, and Great Britain remained consistent with the point of

*Coordinating scientific researcher, PhD, Institute of History of the State University of Moldova (Chișinău), Phone: +37368051401, Email: tudor.sclifos@gmail.com.

view set forth during the Paris Congress (February-March 1856). It did not admit any deviation from the clauses of the Treaty of Paris of March 18/30, 1856, where in Article 20 it was explicitly stated: "It [the boundary line] shall start from the Black Sea, one kilometer east of the Burna Sola (Burnaz) lake, it shall reach perpendicularly the Ackerman highway, follow this highway to Valul lui Traian, pass south of Bolgrad, go up along the Ialpug river to Sărătica and shall end at Katamori on the Prut". The conflict that arose regarding the city of Bolgrad, which the Russian diplomats claimed was the seat of the Bulgarian cities and wanted to keep it, is known. We also mention the names of some diplomats and politicians who supported the cause of Bessarabia, such as Prime Minister Henry John Temple, known as Lord Palmerston, and Lord Cowley, the British ambassador in Paris.

Finally, thanks to the coercive means used by Great Britain (the presence of British ships in the Black Sea), the problem of southern Bessarabia was solved in 1857, and this territory reunited the Principality of Moldavia. Owing to a prompt attitude on the part of Great Britain, Russia was not allowed to keep the city of Bolgrad, implicitly meaning its removal from the Danube.

From the moment the south of Bessarabia entered the Romanian national patrimony, the Russian diplomacy will skillfully try to regain possession of this territory. During the meeting in Reichstadt (July 1876) between the emperors Alexander II and Franz Joseph, in which the foreign ministers, Gorceakov and Andrassy took part, a verbal agreement was reached whereby in the event of victory against the Ottoman Empire, Russia would receive southern Bessarabia (Harris, 1928: 400). This high-level meeting „sealed” the fate of southern Bessarabia. Neither the assurances received during the Livadia meeting nor the signing of the Russo-Romanian convention of April 4/16, 1877 prevented the Russian Empire from obtaining southern Bessarabia (Govora, 1981: 35-37).

After the proclamation of Romania's state independence on May 9, 1877, Prince Carol wanted the Romanian army to participate in military operations against the Ottoman Empire. This matter was discussed during the meeting in Ploiești on May 26, which was attended by Prince Carol, Emperor Alexander II, Chancellor Gorceakov and Grand Duke Nicholas. The Russian Chancellor criticized Romania for declaring war on the Ottoman Empire and proclaiming independence from it. Regarding Bessarabia, Gorceakov spoke in clear terms that Emperor Alexander II, "did not want to die without laying the ripped Treaty of Paris on his father's grave" (Damean, 2005: 42).

Due to the heroic intervention of the Romanian army, the Russian Empire won the war against the Ottoman Empire. Already towards the end of 1877, there were clear signals that the Russian Empire would demand the retrocession of southern Bessarabia, and Romania would receive Dobrogea as a „reward” (Durandin, 1979: 61).

Next, we will refer to the echoes of the Bessarabian problem in the London Parliament during 1878. The interventions of some English parliamentarians will refer to Russia's desire to ask its ally Romania for the south of Bessarabia; the context of the secret understanding between Russia and Great Britain of May 1878; the criticism of the British diplomats towards the manner of approaching the problem at the Berlin Congress.

One of the most discussed issues in the British Parliament was the one regarding the peace conditions imposed by Russia on the Ottoman Empire and the signing of the Treaty of San Stefano in February 1878. In particular, we will refer to the remarks regarding the ceding of southern Bessarabia to the Russian Empire. It was found that the House of Commons discussed the veracity of the information in some of its meetings, so the problem of southern Bessarabia would not be raised in a new congress. In the April 2nd session of the House of Commons, under the rubric Questions there appeared: *Cession of Bessarabia*, to which the Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs Robert Bourke² had to answer. The question came from Evelyn Ashley³. The British parliamentarian asked if the information received from the "unknown source" in Vienna was confirmed about Chancellor Gorceakov's intention not to allow the issue of Bessarabia to be discussed at the Peace Congress (Hansard Debates, 1878: 413). Moreover, the Romanian government had already been notified of this fact. Bourke replied that a telegram had been sent to the British ambassador in Vienna, Henry Elliott⁴. We have a first instant when the British Parliament reports on the issue of southern Bessarabia.

In the April 3rd session of the House of Commons, H. Drummond Wolff took up the subject of the source admitting that Gorceakov would not allow the question of the retrocession of southern Bessarabia to be debated in congress. The question addressed to Bourke was whether the source of this information had been known. Bourke replied that the British ambassador in Vienna had sent a reply to this request (Hansard Debates, 1878: 476). Consequently, the reliable source from whom the information came was none other than the Romania's diplomatic agent in Vienna, Ion (Iancu) Bălăceanu⁵, also author of some valuable memoirs (Bălăceanu, 2019).

¹ Robert Bourke, Baron Connemara (1827-1902), conservative politician and British colonial administrator. Undersecretary of State for Foreign Affairs (1874-1880; 1885-1886).

² Evelyn Ashley (1836-1907), British liberal politician, private secretary to Lord Palmerston.

³ Henry George Elliot (1817-1907), British diplomat, Ambassador to Constantinople, representative of Great Britain at the Constantinople Conference 1876-1877. From 1877 ambassador to Vienna.

⁴ Ion (Iancu) Bălăceanu (1828-1914), politician, Romanian diplomat. In 1850, he held the position of prefect of the Bucharest Police; Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1876; diplomatic agent in Paris, minister plenipotentiary in Vienna (1878-1882), Rome (1882-1884), Paris (1884-1885), Constantinople (1886-1888), London (1893-1910).

In the April 4th meeting of the House of Commons, final clarifications were made on the veracity of Chancellor Gorceakov's declarations regarding the Bessarabia issue. The same Drummond Wolff addressed the question to the British Under-Secretary R. Bourke. After being informed in advance, Bourke stated that Gorceakov made this statement to the Romanian diplomatic agent in Petersburg (Iancu Ghika). In turn, it was sent to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bucharest, then sent further to the diplomatic agent in Vienna, who was ultimately the trusted person being referred to (Hansard Debates, 1878: 527). These interpellations show the importance of the Bessarabian question for the British Parliament, being one of European interest.

In the April 8th sitting of the House of Lords, Gladstone⁵ made some remarks on the Oriental question and the opening of a new European forum. In his view, every article of the February Treaty between the Ottoman Empire and the Russian Empire had to be presented to the Congress (Hansard Debates, 1878: 734). Obviously, the allusion was to the issue of Bessarabia, which the Russian diplomats were trying to exclude from the agenda. Gladstone also referred to the intention of the Petersburg Cabinet to renounce any discussion of southern Bessarabia. He was disappointed by this attitude of Russia, but considered that it was premature to analyze this matter in details, or what the possible attitude of Europe would be (Hansard Debates, 1878: 787). Later he would become a fierce defender of Romania's rights over Bessarabia. Moreover, he would publicly accuse the British government of „assisting” the Russian Empire in the spoliation of Romania. Thus, Romania would be deprived of this part of Bessarabia, which „for 20 years enjoyed freedom and a popular government” replaced now by a despotic one (Constantinesco, 1998: 150).

During the same meeting, Lord Beaconsfield⁶ delivered an impassioned speech, who, regarding the Bessarabian problem, declared: „the clause of the Treaty of Paris that includes the cession of Bessarabia to Romania was one of the clauses that concerned Lord Palmerston and which he considered the most important. This clause implies freedom of navigation on the Danube; and this is why Lord Palmerson thought that it affected a matter of European interest, and not merely a matter of local interest. This clause was inserted in the original preliminaries of the treaty of Paris, but Russia tried to evade it, while Lord Palmerston defended it with such energy that the congress was almost dissolved by the efforts of Russia to obtain its exclusion” (Ardeleanu, 2008, 147). We note the favorable attitude of Beaconsfield towards the Romanians, and in that era the support of the Cabinet from St. James was counted on to avoid the territorial spoliation of Romania.

⁵ William Ewart Gladstone (1809-1898), British politician. Leader of the Liberal Party; Prime Minister in the periods 1868-1874, 1880-1885, 1892-1894.

⁶ Benjamin Disraeli, Lord of Beaconsfield (1804-1881), British politician. Prime Minister of Great Britain in the periods February-December 1868 and February 1874-April 1880.

In the same sitting of the House of Lords on April 8th, the subject of the Treaty of San Stefano and the question of Bessarabia were discussed at length by Lord Selborne⁸. The latter showed his bewilderment at the trenchant position of Russian diplomacy that the issue of Bessarabia should not appear on the discussion agenda of the future congress. In his view, precisely this issue was undeniably the most important, one of European interest (Hansard Debates, 1878: 813). Moreover, in the view of the British politician, Romania's right over Bessarabia was stipulated by the Paris Treaty of 1856, where it was recognized that it is a matter of European interest. It was indirectly alluding to the fact that in 1856 the Great Powers decided to remove Russia from all access to the Danube and to liberalize navigation on this important river of Europe. Another aspect highlighted by Selborne is the „concession” made between the government of Petersburg and Bucharest in April 1877. In reality it is about the Russo-Romanian convention, which stipulated that in exchange for the passage of Russian troops through Romania, Russia would guarantee the territorial integrity of Romania (Hansard Debates, 1878: 814). The British parliamentarian criticized the fact that Russia resorted to coercive means on its ally Romania, and did not consider this issue to be withdrawn from the negotiation table.

Lord Salisbury's circular dated April 1, 1878 and addressed to British diplomats in European capitals, so as to be delivered to foreign ministers, was of particular importance. It proposed to amend the Treaty of San Stefano. The main stake was that Russia would not be the main beneficiary of the treaty clauses, to protect British interests, and to improve the conditions of the subjects of the Ottoman Empire. The British diplomat expressed concern that „the cession of Bessarabia imposed on Romania, the expansion of Bulgaria to the Black Sea, and the annexation of the port of Batum, would ensure the Russian government's predominance over everything that surrounds the Black Sea” (Rădulescu-Zoner, 1982: 11). Chancellor Gorceakov replied on April 9, asking the government of St. James to make concrete proposals to be added to the annex to the treaty. Consequently, negotiations between London and Petersburg proceeded, and as a result, the secret agreement of May 30, 1878 was signed. The main negotiators were Lord Salisbury (Seton-Watson, 1950: 504-515; Gwendolyn, 1921: 254) and the Russian ambassador in London, Peter Shuvalov (Weeks, 1979: 1055). At the same time, the head of the Liberal Party, Gladstone, argued that Romania had to be supported against Russia's claims. Thus, the House of Commons proposed the following text: „England was ready to back any joint action, which could be combined in order to oppose an act of open perfidy and spoliation of Russia towards Romania (Ardeleanu, 2008: 147).

Although assurances were received that Romania would be supported by Great Britain, this did not happen. An „agreement” was reached between Britain and Russia, and the main clause inserted was that the question of

⁷ Roundell Palmer, Earl of Sealborne (1812-1895), British Liberal politician.

Bessarabia could not be debated at the Congress of Berlin. Basically, Great Britain recognized the re-annexation of southern Bessarabia to the Russian Empire (Jelavich, 1984: 282) but also of the port of Batumi (Jelavich, 1970: 44-66). This was another instant in which the territory of Bessarabia was used as an „exchange currency” between the Great Powers.

Although „behind the curtains” the Russo-British „consent” was foreshadowed, numerous discussions had been initiated on this subject in the Parliament in London. The English parliamentarians were interested in the progress of the negotiations between the two states, and later after the signing of the agreement, explanations would be asked, while the issue of Bessarabia gained a great resonance in the debates that followed. These discussions took place both before and after the opening of the Congress in Berlin. The subsequent appearance of this agreement in the newspaper „The Globe”⁹ scandalized the public opinion and some English parliamentarians. Salisbury will be accused of allowing the spoliation of Romania by its „ally” in the war, the Russian Empire.

During the May 27 meeting of the House of Lords, Viscount Cardwell¹⁰ asked Salisbury if he could bring to the fore details of the progress of the negotiations with the Russian Empire. Thus, some clarifications were required in view of the approach of the Congress in Berlin. Lord Salisbury limited himself to declaring that he could not go into details about the negotiations with Russia. However, the British diplomat signaled that some important changes had been made, indirectly hinting that both states would be satisfied with the arrangements made. The one who brought the issue of Bessarabia to the fore was the Earl of Redesdale, who referred to the news, making a “sensation” in the British newspapers, that Russia was insisting on the cession of Bessarabia. He considered this matter an extremely important one which deserved the attention of the whole of Europe¹¹. The Earl of Redesdale This moment clearly shows that politicians were preoccupied with the negotiations between Great Britain and Russia, waiting to report a „diplomatic success” against the „failure” of Paris in 1856. A common fact of the two congresses was the existence of the same issue of southern Bessarabia. At the time of 1878, the „slicing” of this issue was tacitly preconfigured in the interests of Russia from the very beginning,

⁸ This deal was „leaked” to the press by British Foreign Office official Charles Thomas Marvin for £40.

⁹ Edward Cardwell (1813-1886), British liberal politician. Secretary of State for War (1868-1874).

¹⁰ The Earl of Redesdale declared that the question of Bessarabia was an important one: „Now it seems to me that this question is of such intense importance, not only with reference to the Treaty of San Stefano, but as regards international law and all previous treaties, and the request is in itself so imposing that not only this country, but every civilized country in the world, should protest against it.” (Hansard Debates, 1878: 722).

without the „diplomatic struggle” that took place in 1856 between the great powers for southern Bessarabia to become part of Moldavia.

We can deduce from these discussions that there were voices that considered the issue of Bessarabia an important one and that this „portion of land” should not be ceded to Russia in such an easy manner. These preliminary discussions in the Parliament before the Berlin congress, as well as the others that were to follow, show that the Bessarabian issue was quite visible on the agenda of the British parliamentarians, which indicates that this matter was not completely ignored at that time of sad memory for the Romanian nation.

During the session of the House of Lords of June 3rd, Earl Grey asked the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Salisbury if there was truth in the assessment of the periodical „The Globe”, which headlined in its last issue that Great Britain had reached an agreement with Russia regarding the establishment of the preliminaries of peace¹². Lord Salisbury’s reply, in an ambiguous manner, hinted that this news was not genuine. The British parliamentarian Grey did not trust the sincerity of the Secretary of State and gave a fitting reply. In his view, he had not imagined that Great Britain had decided to support Russia’s claim to re-annex the three counties of southern Bessarabia. These assessments were presented without knowing the progress of the negotiations, but we note that he was aware of the “pulse” of this matter of vital importance for Romania. In his reply Grey, who did not believe what Salisbury said, did not imagine that Great Britain had decided to support Russia’s request to receive the three counties in southern Bessarabia. Earl Grey declared that it would be „monstrous” for Her Majesty’s Government to agree to such a stipulation, and especially to continue to support this position of Russia. As can be seen, in this exchange of replies, there were voices that supported the south of Bessarabia to remain part of Romania, just as in 1856 there was unanimity of opinion, in this regard, on the part of the British government and parliament. At that time, even at the risk of breaking the alliance with France, Great Britain adopted a position of strength in the matter of southern Bessarabia, so that this territory would return to the Principality of Moldavia, as stipulated in the Treaty of Paris. It can be noted that there was no unanimity of opinion on the issue of Bessarabia in 1878. As can be seen, there were strong voices supporting Russia in its efforts to take back southern Bessarabia. Salisbury at that time still did not want to make public the negotiations with Shuvalov, but on the other hand, Shuvalov had shown apathy and indifference, appreciating that Russia’s demands were not „exaggerated” and did not see why Britain could not accept a “minimum program” requested by the Petersburg Cabinet. This moment clearly

¹¹ In the secret negotiations that took place between Salisbury and Shuvalov, the latter had requested that the south of Bessarabia return to the composition of the Russian Empire, something to which the British Secretary of State subscribed. This constituted for Russia one of the basic points for the establishment of the preliminaries of peace.

illustrates that there was dissension between the two Chambers on the issue of Bessarabia, something that would become even more evident on the way during the tough exchanges of replies.

After the signing of the Berlin Treaty on July 1/3, the British Parliament continued the debates regarding its consequences, being analyzed both the “good deeds” and the “lawlessness” sanctioned by the European forum. In the meeting of August 14th of the House of Commons, George Campbell drew attention to the „injustice” done to Romania at the Berlin congress, clearly referring to the issue of the three counties in the south of Bessarabia (Hansard Debates, 1878: 1061) He added that King Carol should not agree to this „theft” of territory, which is an integral part of Romania. The treaty of April 16, 1877, between Romania and Russia, was discussed, and among the most important clauses was the one regarding the observance of Romania’s territorial integrity.

In this context, Russia did not keep its „word of honor” and did exactly the opposite. It is not known at what moment Russia showed its intentions of taking the three counties from the south of Bessarabia, which had returned to the composition of the Principality of Moldavia by the Paris treaty of 1856, either at the beginning of the war or at its end, but it is certain that Russia waited for the Berlin Congress to legitimize this fact. The British parliamentary showed in a sure manner that Russia sought Romania’s „friendship” only to fulfill its goals in Eastern Europe, especially to obtain the south of Bessarabia, lost as a result of the Crimean War, this issue being, according to the expression of Russian diplomats, a matter of „honor”.

E. Jenkins, who was in opposition, „surprisingly” sided with Russia, which had amputated southern Bessarabia from Romania’s territory. The explanations, given by him at first glance but also having been thoroughly analyzed, were „abnormal” when he referred to the fact that from 1812 to 1856 the whole of Bessarabia had belonged to Russia (Hansard Debates, 1878: 2007). However, he forgot to mention the fact that Bessarabia was an integral part of Moldavia before 1812, and that Russia fraudulently annexed it, a territory that did not belong to the Russian Empire. E. Jenkins was trying to convince the audience that it was not something „dishonorable” for Russia to fight for a territory that belonged to it. Referring also to the time of 1856, he considered that the great powers asked Russia to cede only the part of Bessarabia, in order to facilitate free navigation on the Danube. Concluding his assessments on the issue of southern Bessarabia, he declared, referring to the memorandum of Tsar Alexander II sent to the British military attaché, that the surrender of the territory lost by it in 1856 was one of the basic conditions that would be the basis of the peace preliminaries for which Russia insisted. Consequently, he approved that Russia acted in an „honorable” manner to regain its lost territory (Hansard Debates, 1878: 2007).

The last voice to succinctly express his point of view on the matter of southern Bessarabia was Morgan Lloyd of the House of Commons. He backed

neither Russia nor Romania in particular, but rather criticized the way the Petersburg Cabinet „behaved” towards its ally. He believed that Russia was entitled to demand a territory, which had been its integral part since 1812. Even this representative in the British parliament did not refer to the Bessarabian territory as an integral part of Moldavia, which indicates superficiality in assessments, without a preliminary analysis. Despite these assessments, Morgan Lloyd admits that Russia acted „dishonorably” towards its ally Romania, to which it guaranteed its territorial integrity.

These discussions initiated in the two Houses of Parliament show unequivocally that there was no unanimous opinion regarding the cession of southern Bessarabia to the Russian Empire in Great Britain. Obviously, by the agreement of March 30 with the Russian Empire, Great Britain was getting Cyprus, showing that the interests of the small powers are being sacrificed. Ultimately, we are able to ascertain that there were „voices” in the London Parliament, which criticized in harsh terms Britain’s „association” with Russia in order to cede southern Bessarabia to it. The existing discussions denote the fact that the issue of southern Bessarabia was an important one in the „gearing” of the Eastern question of 1878, one of European interest, although it was solved behind „closed doors”.

References

1. Ardeleanu, C. (2008). *Evoluția intereselor economice și politice britanice la gurile Dunării*. Brăila: Istros.
2. Bălăceanu, I. (2019). *Memoriile unui Pașoptist-Model. Amintiri politice și diplomatice 1848-1903*. București: Humanitas.
3. Constantinesco, N. (1998). *Romania on the European stage, 1875-1880: the Quest for National Sovereignty and Independence*. Columbia University Press.
4. Damean, S. L. (2005). *România și Congresul de Pace de la Berlin (1878)*. București: Mica Valahie.
5. Durandin, E. (1979). *La Russie, la Roumanie et les nouvelles frontières dans les Balkans. Le cas de la Dobroudgea. Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique*. 20 (1), 61-77.
6. Govora, N. S. (1981). *Relațiile româno-ruse. vol. II*. Madrid: Editura Carpații.
7. Gwendolyn, C. (1921). *Life of Robert Marquis of Salisbury, vol. II, 1868-1880*. London, 1921.
8. Hansard Debates, (1878). *Hansard Parliamentary Debates, third series, vol. CCXXXIX*, London, 1878.
9. Harris, D. (1928). *Balkan diplomacy, July, 1875 to July, 1876: from the revolt in Herzegovina to the Reichstadt agreement*. Stanford University.
10. Jelavich, B. (1969). *Russia and the reacquisition of Southern Bessarabia, 1875-1878*. Südost-Forschungen. 28, 199-237.

11. Jelavich, B. (1970). *Great Britain and the Russian acquisition of Batum, 1878-1886*, in „The Slavonic and East European Review”, vol. 48, nr. 110 (January 1970), pp. 44-66.
12. Jelavich, B. (1984). *Russia and the formation of the Romanian National State, 1821-1878*. Cambridge.
13. Mosse, W. E. (1963). *Britain, Russia and the Question of Serpents Island and Bolgrad. Two incidents in the execution of the Treaty of Paris*. The Slavonic and East European Review. 29 (72), 86-131.
14. Rădulescu-Zoner, Ș. (1982). *Dunărea, Marea Neagră și Puterile Centrale: 1878-1898*. Cluj Napoca: Dacia.
15. Sclifos, E. T. (2018). *Marea Britanie și cheștiunea sudului Basarabiei (1856-1857)*. Tyragetia. XII [XXVII], 2, 139-148.
16. Seton-Watson, R. W. (1950). *Russo-British Relations, 1875-1878: 2nd Series. XII. The Détente between Lord Salisbury and Count Shuvalov (April 1878)*, în „The Slavonic and East European Review”, vol. 28, no. 71 (April 1950), 504-515.
17. Weeks, R. G. (1979). *Peter Shuvalov and the Congress of Berlin: A reinterpretation*, in „The Journal of Modern History”, vol. 51, no. 1, (March 1879), pp. 1055-1070.