Michał Górny

COSSACK SHASHKA WITH A POLISH BLADE — ANALYSIS OF THE FIND

Abstract: In 2019, the Bulgarian museum in Veliko Tărnovo received an extraordinary Russian cold steel weapon from the nineteenth century — a Cossack shashka with silver hilt and blade taken from a Polish patriotic sabre. The item, measuring 960 mm in length, is an example of a non-regular shashka of the Asian type. Due to the sabre's unique hybrid character, its analysis has to proceed along two parallel routes — separately for the hilt and the blade. Judging from the signatures found on its decorated hilt, it was manufactured in one of the workshops in Saint Petersburg sometime between 1875 and 1896. One side of the blade bears an etched inscription reading *Vivat najwyższa władza szlachty*, *Vivat Wolne Sejmiki i Posły* [Long live the supreme rule of nobility, long live free dietines and deputies] next to the Lithuanian coat-of-arms and the letters L and O, while the other side is inscribed with *Vivat Szlachcic Pan i fundator wojska*, *Vivat wola i dobro powszechności* [Long live the noble lord and supporter of the army, long live freedom and common good] and shows the Polish heraldic eagle with the Radwan coat-of-arms. In all likelihood, the blade comes from one of the so-called "patriotic sabres" dating back to the January Uprising and bears clear traces of modification and shortening.

Based on an analysis of the weapon as a whole, including its findspot, it should be presumed that it belonged to a Russian officer in the Cossack corps who participated in crushing the January Uprising and then continued his military career until the outbreak of the Russo-Turkish War. The said officer must have either died during the intensive fighting at Pleven in 1877 or stayed in Bulgaria in the capacity of a military instructor — a group of such instructors remained in the country until the year 1885.

Keywords: January Uprising, shashka, Bulgaria, Cossacks, Russo-Turkish War

In 2019, employees of the museum in Veliko Tărnovo received an extraordinary Russian cold steel weapon, reportedly related to the times of the Russo-Turkish War from the years 1877–1878. Its form fits such an origin, as the weapon is a shashka with a silver hilt [Fig. 1], a private commission of a high-rank officer of the tsarist army. Shashkas, that is, slightly-curved sabres coming originally from the Caucasus, are characterised by short blades, light weight, and — as their distinguishing feature — hilts devoid of any kind of hand guard. They were very common among Russian dragoons, Cossack troops, as well as officers hailing from the Caucasus, Central Asia, or Cossack strongholds. However, what makes this particular specimen unique is the blade, bearing on one side an inscription *Vivat najwyższa władza szlachty, Vivat Wolne Sejmiki i Posły* [Long live the supreme rule of nobility, long live free dietines and deputies] next to the Lithuanian coat-of--arms (Lithuanian: *Vytis*, Polish: *Pogoń*) and the letters L and O, while the other side reads *Vivat*

Szlachcic Pan i fundator wojska, Vivat wola i dobro powszechności [Long live the noble lord and supporter of the army, long live freedom and common good] and shows the Polish heraldic eagle. Hence, it is an exceptional weapon, combining two elements of different provenance and dating — the blade taken from a Polish patriotic sabre and the lavishly-decorated hilt of a Cossack shashka, along with a scabbard matching the whole set.

The total length of the discussed artefact is 960 millimetres, including 145 millimetres for the hilt and 815 for the blade. Measuring 35 millimetres in width, it has three narrow fullers — one starting from the hilt and reaching the 4/5 of the blade length and another two starting *ca.* 1/5 of the length and reaching the false edge. Another notable feature is the relatively short part of the edge which was left blunt. The blade is preserved very well, with few corrosion pits and very little damage, which indicates that the sabre was stored in a dry place and good conditions. The aforementioned inscriptions and heraldic emblems on both sides of the blade were etched with acid.

Importantly, the weapon shows traces of modifications, namely shortening of the blade and reshaping of the false edge, which was undoubtedly necessary for mounting it in the new hilt and turning into a shashka. It is one of the key clues indicating that the secondary owner of the weapon was an officer of a unit where the sabres of this kind were the norm — not only prescribed by the military regulations, but also favoured due to cultural reasons, such as customary laws. At the same time, the edge is relatively intact, apart from some incidental damage likely incurred in the period — weapons hilted in such a fashion served decorative, ceremonial, and symbolic purposes.

The hilt made of silver bears rich floral and geometric ornamentation, as well as punched signature "BA" and a hallmark "84*". Moreover, its pommel is forking in a manner characteristic for shashkas. The silver shows no traces of tarnish, which indicates that the discussed weapon has been regularly cleaned and polished.

The sabre is accompanied by a wooden scabbard made of two laths covered with leather. The metal chape was made of silver, while the locket of brass, which is also typical for shashkas. Both fittings — suspension rings — were made of silver, with geometric ornamentation similar to that on the hilt. One of the fittings was placed just below the brass locket, whereas the other one, equipped with a little suspension hook, was mounted at *ca.* 1/3 of the length of the scabbard. Due to its specificity, the discussed shashka has to be divided into two distinct analytical parts — the later Russian hilt and the earlier Polish blade.

Fig. 1. Shashka in its entirety (photo by I. Cărov)

Analysis of the blade

In order to correctly identify the blade, it is necessary to have a closer look at the evolution of Polish sabre from the end of the eighteenth century to the fall of the January Uprising in 1864, focusing in particular on the characteristic type of this weapon known as the commemorative sabre or patriotic sabre.

The history of Polish commemorative sabres, usually referencing the proclamation of the Constitution of 3 May 1791, begins already at the time when new patriotic symbolism was being formed, drawing from the experiences of the terminal years of the First Commonwealth of Poland and the years directly after its breakdown. The symbolic significance of the sabre grew at the time, making it a culture-carrier of sorts and a patriotic manifestation. Therefore, already during the War in Defence of the Constitution (1792) and the Kościuszko Uprising (1794) sabre blades became decorated with such inscriptions as *Vivat Kawaleria Narodowa* [Long live the National Cavalry], *Vivat Naród Polski* [Long live the Polish nation], or *Król z narodem, naród z Królem* [King with the nation, nation with the King].[1] The inscriptions were often made in Latin and could be either etched or engraved. During the next decades after 1795, especially in the course of the so-called Napoleonic Period, Polish armies — of the Duchy of Warsaw, the Congress Kingdom of Poland, or emigratory formations — used predominantly ordinary sabres of foreign types, in all shapes and forms. The cavalry would use also older eighteenth-century models, including the karabela, the so-called "Kościuszko" sabres, or other cold-steel arms with patriotic ornamentation. Sabres were also manufactured by private sabre-makers, as luxury weapons, however after 1815, in post-Partitions context, the patriotic motifs were not immediately applied — more than a decade had to pass before the pro-independence sentiments would rise again. In effect, a typical sabre of the Congress Kingdom of Poland (1815–1830) was the Russian officer's cavalry sabre Model 1809, whereas during the Polish-Russian war of 1830–1831 the Russian Model 1827 sabres were also produced, fitted with a steel hilt. The second period of relatively intensive production of patriotic sabres and karabelas came in the 1840s and 1850s and lasted until the fall of the January Uprising.

Analogy — sabre from the Lubomirski Museum

According to Stanisław Meyer, author of the paper "Próba określenia wieku i pochodzenia głowni szabel polskich" [Attempt at determining the dating and provenance of Polish sabres], many patriotic sabres had blades with punched patterns and inscriptions modelled on those found on sabres from the terminal decades of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, namely *Vivat najwyższa władza szlachty, Vivat Wolne Sejmiki i Posły* [Long live the supreme rule of nobility, long live free dietines and deputies] next to the Lithuanian coat-of-arms and the letters L and O, and on the other side — *Vivat Szlachcic Pan i fundator wojska, Vivat wola i dobro powszechności* [Long live the noble lord and supporter of the army, long live freedom and common good] along the Polish heraldic eagle with the Radwan coat-of-arms [Fig. 2]. This model was then characteristic both for the end of the eighteenth century and the period of increased demand for patriotic sabres between the November and January uprisings. Meyer analysed four sabres bearing the aforementioned emblems and inscriptions etched on both sides of their blades, concluding that they came from the nineteenth century, as attested by the makers' marks punched on their tangs.[2] The fifth specimen was out of his reach, but it is still likely that it originated in the eighteenth century, since it was held in the collection of the Lubomirski Museum in Lwów.

The sabre was described in a work by Edward Pawłowicz titled *Katalog broni w muzeum im. Lubomirskich* [Catalogue of arms in the Lubomirski museum], published in 1876 in Lwów. The exhibit under discussion is listed under the catalogue number 31 in the aforementioned publication and has a hilt of black brass and a steel scabbard. Its total length is 1043 millimetres, with the

[1] Kwaśniewicz 1999, p. 104.
[2] Meyer 1934, p. 33.

blade measuring 913 millimetres.[3] Unfortunately, its current whereabouts are unknown, because the aforementioned collection was scattered across different museums by Soviet Union officials after Lwów had been taken over in 1941, while the Germans took part of it to the West before the town was captured once more in 1944. The fact that it was presented at a museum exhibition, next to sabres from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, may point to its eighteenth-century provenance, but such a view has to remain tentative given that the sabre is missing.

Taking the findspot of the analysed shashka into account, as well as its secondary use in the Russian army, it should be noted that some analogous sabres fell to the Russians hands after the January Uprising. One example could be the Austrian Model 1850 sabre currently held in Tbilisi, with filigree floral ornamentation and four narrow fullers on the blade. One side of it shows a silhouette of an armoured knight with a plume inscribed in an oval, captioned "JAGIEŁŁO", while the other depicts the Mother of God with Child and inscriptions "POD TWOJĄ OBRONĘ" [To thy patronage] and, below, "UCIEKAMY SIĘ" [We fly]. This sabre, although lacking any documentation, undoubtedly did not end up in Georgia by pure chance.[4]

Let us turn our attention directly to the analysed blade. Measuring currently 815 millimetres, it was certainly shortened by an unknown length [Fig. 1]. The analogy from the Lubomirski Museum indicates that it may have originally been longer by *ca.* 10 centimetres, with clear traces evidencing that it was reshaped to fit the standard dimensions of Model 1838 officer's sabre. The patriotic inscriptions were etched with acid, which was a classical method at the time [Fig. 3]. The form of the blade was standard, however its tang and, thus, maker's marks could not be scrutinised, rendering it impossible to decide whether it should be dated to the eighteenth or nineteenth century.

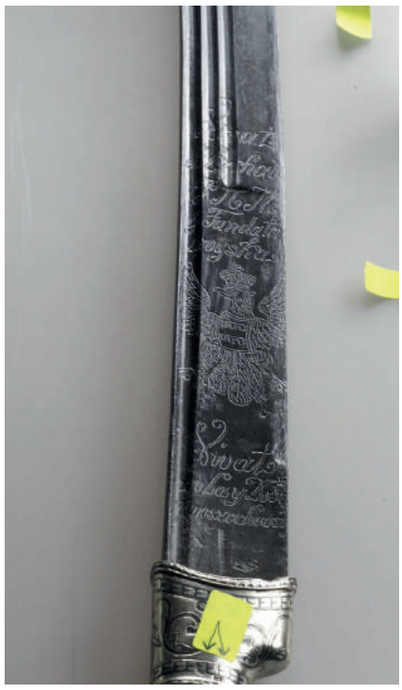

Fig. 2. Close-up on the patriotic inscription (photo by I. Cărov)

Fig. 3. Close-up on the inscription near the final part of the hilt (photo by I. Cărov)

[3] Pawłowicz 1876, p. 7.
[4] Kwaśniewicz 1999, p. 147.

Shashkas

Shashka, a Circassian word for a "long knife", is undeniably one of the most famous representative of Caucasian arms, widely used throughout the region in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. This one-handed and single-edged weapon had an open hilt without a guard and with a characteristic forking. Unlike other sabres of the period, it was relatively straight and usually accompanied by a deep scabbard allowing the whole shashka to be hidden in it, apart from the characteristic ending of the hilt, bent at an almost right angle.

The shashkas were adopted in the nineteenth century in result of unceasing conflicts in the Caucasus. They were used by Russian Cossacks serving the Empire, later to become the prescribed weapon of the Russian army, employed by all tsarist troops and then in the Red Army until the end of the Second World War. Shashkas' morphology reflects the idiosyncrasies of combat in mountain woodlands against modern military formations, largely devoid of any kind of sword-proof protective equipment — the light and short sabre allows for quick ambushes and can be conveniently wielded from horseback, on foot, or in close quarters.[5]

The differences found in morphology of shashkas and their scabbards allow for distinguishing four types of these sabres:

1. Caucasian;
2. Asian, or the so-called; "Bukharian";
3. Cossack;
4. dragoon.

The shashkas coming from the Caucasus would usually have lavishly-ornamented blades, hilts, as well as scabbards. Lighter and shorter than the later "military" models, they would usually measure between 790 and 990 millimetres, weighing from 658.2 to 928.3 grams. The distinguishing feature of the Caucasian shashkas was the aforementioned construction of the scabbard, covering the weapon at least to the middle part of its hilt. This solution was then abandoned in later versions due to its impracticality — scabbards manufactured this way did not protect the weapon from water during rainy weather.[6]

The Asian shashkas, also known as Bukharian, apart from the scabbards covering only the blade, had five fullers on the blade instead of three and a more geometrised form of the hilt.

Without a doubt, the most famous shashkas known from the European battlefields were the Cossack and the dragoon types. Due to the almost permanent state of war in the Caucasus between 1817 and 1864, numerous Russian and Cossack veterans gradually adapted to the harsh conditions in the region by adopting the non-standard equipment and weaponry of their adversaries. This is how shashkas earned their popularity among the Cossack troops, which led to their official recognition as Cossack military sabres during the unification of armament of particular formations of the Russian army in the 1830s. The appearance of regulated models, such as Model 1834 or 1838, resulted in the emergence of the military shashka with a brass hilt and a wooden grip covered with leather and wrapped in wire. Only the earliest versions of Model 1834 with the so-called "Asian" hilt had a plain hilt of solid metal. The regulated sabres would also become heavier and longer.[7]

The Model 1834 shashka, also known as "Nizhny Novgorodsky" (after the Nizhny Novgorod dragoon regiment where it was first introduced), is one of the most recognisable types of this weapon. The "Caucasian" sub-type has a scabbard covering the hilt, whereas in the "Asian" variety the scabbard terminates where the hilt begins. It is also the only type with a full-metal hilt.[8] In the course of the next half a century, other versions, such as the cavalrymen's Model 1838 or

[5] Urazbakhtin 2018, pp. 126–128.
[6] *Ibidem*, p. 129.
[7] *Ibidem*, pp. 125–127.
[8] *Ibidem*, pp. 127–128.

officer's Model 1838, would become the basic weapon of the cavalry, as well as much of the officer corps of the whole army. Model 1838 shashkas were so popular that the later introduction of Model 1881 faced major resistance, with many regiments returning to the earlier battle-proven design. The 1838 shashkas were the first model to be fitted with a brass hilt and a wooden, leather-covered grip. The officer's version had the grip additionally reinforced with a wire wrapping made of brass. Importantly, the officer's Model 1838 would often have "voluntary" blades — commissioned, for instance, in Germany (e.g., Solingen) or Persia, or even captured as spoils of war.[9] Such shashkas, although made to resemble the regular ones, were often lavishly-decorated, with their hilts made of different materials. The arms of nineteenth-century Russian officers, albeit regulated by official standards, still showed more "individuality" than their Western counterparts. This observation is crucial for the shashka discussed in this paper.[10]

Apart from the three types of sabres mentioned above, one more variety is distinguished — the so-called "dragoon shashka". It clearly differed from the others by its hilt, fitted with a full hand-guard. Shashkas of this kind were introduced in response to frequent finger and hand injuries sustained by inexperienced recruits.

While analysing the hilt of the investigated specimen, several important questions have to be addressed. First of all, the kind of materials used; then, the correspondence between the hilt and the scabbard; and finally, the signatures "BA" and "84*" seen on both the hilt and the scabbard fittings. Its dimensions are also pivotal for the final interpretation.

The fact that the whole hilt was made of silver betrays its luxury character (more expensive were only sabres with golden hilts, the ultimate sign of extreme wealth) but also its early manufacturing date, certainly no later than the nineteenth century. The twentieth century saw some shashkas with full-metal hilts, namely Model 1913, but these were always made of brass rather than precious metals and produced in a very limited quantity. Shashkas with metal hilts were most common during the early, pure, unregulated period, that is, among Caucasian tribesmen, and in the official Nizhny Novgorodsky model (1834) and the "voluntary" variants of Model 1838 officer's shashka. Also the non-regular shashkas used by the Cossacks, modelled after the tribal designs, would have hilts of brass or silver.

As for the second question, that is, the correspondence of the hilt and the scabbard, it needs to be noted that, despite its protruding end, the hilt does not slide into the scabbard, which makes it similar to the "Asian" type. It is, therefore, safe to assume that it was not of the Caucasian variety, so common in the Caucasus region. Importantly, the Asian shashkas enjoyed greater popularity among the Don and the Terek Cossacks. The Don Cossacks were the largest group within the Cossack corps in the Russian army, amounting to 1/3 of all the Cossack soldiers, whereas the Terek Cossacks settled in the northern Caucasus, serving as protectors of the southern frontier of the Empire.[11]

It is also possible that the similarity in dimensions between the discussed shashka and Model 1838 Cossack sabres is purely accidental and the investigated specimen is a tribal, "Circassian" weapon — these shashkas, however, were also carried by Cossacks and officers fighting in the Caucasus. Nevertheless, this hypothesis is unlikely given the signatures seen on the hilt, because they clearly indicate that it was manufactured in one of the many jewellery workshops in Saint Petersburg, none of which can be plausibly linked to tribal craftsmen hailing from the Caucasus or Central Asia.

In conclusion, the investigated weapon is by all likelihood a Cossack shashka of the Asian subtype, modelled on the regular Model 1838 officers' shashkas — arms of this type were common among Don and Terek officers.

[9] *Ibidem*, p. 132.
[10] *Ibidem*, pp. 133–136.
[11] *Ibidem*, pp. 130–138.

Analysis of the hilt

The silver hilt and the scabbard come from the same jewellery workshop, which can be inferred from the uniform ornamentation on both the hilt and the suspension fittings. The decoration was applied through engraving in the metal and then covering the thus-prepared pattern with a paste made of silver sulphides, copper, and lead. Next, polishing was used to achieve the black, well-visible, and contrasting ornament with a silvery shine. Such technique, known as niello, dates back to Antiquity but was still commonly used by jewellers in the nineteenth century.[12] Moreover, additional embellishments were engraved [Fig. 4]. Of particular interest is the ending of the hilt, which was usually flat in "Asian" shashkas in order to make the hilt adhere tightly to the top of the scabbard. In this case, the shashka has a protruding end, seen typically in sabres with hilts covered by the scabbard, as in the Caucasian type. However, there are examples of silver Asian shashkas with a similar hilt design.[13]

Fig. 4. Niello decorations on the hilt. Engraving and punched marks are also visible (photo by I. Cărov)

[12] Kunalska-Sulkiewicz 2002, p. 279.
[13] Astvacaturân 2004, p. 60.

Signatures

The investigated weapon bears two types of marks punched in two places, always next to each other — on the hilt and on the scabbard, near the suspension fittings. Both signatures were made with oval embossed punchers formed as the number "84*" and the letters "BA" [Fig. 5].

The analysis has to begin with the hallmark "84*", because the other signature has to be interpreted in direct reference to the first. The hallmark in question was meant for silver "84*", indicating the weight of silver in a zolotnik — in this case, it is 84, which was one of the most common values in Russian hallmarks. The fineness of 84 meant 84 zolotniks of pure silver per pound, which in Russia equalled 96 zolotniks. In other words, the purity of silver in the discussed hilt was 87.5%. The remaining part was copper. 87.5% of silver was the most common value for a very mundane reason — it was the lowest legal silver content in the period.[14]

Fig. 5. Signatures on the suspension fitting of the scabbard
(photo by I. Cărov)

The classical hallmarks in nineteenth-century Russia were composed of three elements — the silver fineness mark measured in zolotniks as well as the date punched along with the initials of the tester and the mark of the workshop, which allowed for establishing the exact place where a given hallmark was made. The marking style changed after 1896, when only the silver fineness was punched, accompanied by a depiction of a woman in the traditional headgear known as *kokoshnik*,

[14] Gradowski 1988, pp. 57–58.

a characteristic mark of Russian jewellers, and the tester's initials.[15] It can be noted that in the investigated case not only the date and initials are missing, but also the image of a woman, which makes precise dating very problematic. However, the hallmark includes the symbol of Saint Petersburg testers — signatures of this kind were used in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, until the aforementioned reform of 1896, which dates it to the years 1875–1896.[16] In result, there is no doubt that the blade was mounted in a new hilt in this period by an unknown jeweller — initials "BA" [Fig. 5]. Although it was typical to punch the initials with a date, examples without it are also known.

Hypotheses regarding the owner

The analysis of the hilt and the dimensions of the shashka — total length of 960 millimetres, blade length of 815 millimetres, blade width of 35 millimetres — reveals that the investigated weapon is most similar to Model 1838 officer's shashkas, which were standardised to be 960 millimetres long and 35 millimetres wide. The only difference is the proportion of the blade length to the hilt length, since Model 1838 was to measure 820 and 140 millimetres, respectively. When compared to other shashkas, the differences are far greater — Model 1834 was 1000 millimetres long, with the blade width of 34 millimetres and blade length of 880 millimetres. What is particularly worth noting, is the popularity enjoyed among the Russian officers by "non-standard" shashkas, commissioned individually and often known as "voluntary". This practice was particularly common for Model 1838, fitted with blades imported mostly from Solingen, Warsaw, or Persia, manufactured in local workshops, or captured in different circumstances. This explains the non-standard blade, with three narrow fullers and a patriotic Polish inscription, reshaped to fit the length required by official regulations on shashkas of Cossack officers. The investigated weapon can be linked to the Cossack rather than Caucasian or standard military shashkas, because of its two features discussed earlier — the Asian-type form, popular among the "protectors of the Caucasus", that is, the Terek Cossacks, and its non-standard hilt made of silver.

Admittedly, two elementary questions regarding the provenance and history of this particular specimen could not be solved. First: How did the original Polish sabre fall in the Cossack hands? Second: When and why did it find its way to Bulgaria? We can only speculate on both matters, narrowing the chronology to a few select moments in time. Regarding the first question, the dating of the signatures may provide basic orientation — if the whole set was made after 1875, then the chronologically closest conflict in which the original Polish sabre could be obtained by the new Cossack owner is the January Uprising. It could have happened in combat, as well as during requisition or even ordinary looting of a nobleman's residence. The high quality of the blade, the materials used, and the overall form of the shashka suggest that the reshaping and rehilting was commissioned by a high-rank Cossack officer. The fact that this task was entrusted to a jeweller from the capital city suggests, in turn, either an officer stationed in Saint Petersburg itself or a member of the elite — an aristocrat well-acquainted with the imperial court. It is worth mentioning that the said officer could have just as well be a Russian or German, not necessarily an ethnic Cossack — it is logical in the light of the prolonged fighting taking place in the Caucasus at the time, where Cossack regiments served along Russian dragoons and infantry formations. Some officers — many of whom were Germans (both from the Baltic lands and emigrants) — took Caucasian and Cossack shashkas as tokens to remind them of these battles during their further

[15] https://carskarosja.pl/carskie-punce (accessed 26.01.2021).
[16] Postnikova-Loseva, Platonova, Ul'ânova 1995, p. 178 (punchers nos. 152 and 153).

service. Such a shashka was carried during the January Uprising by Colonel Duke Emil Karl von Sayn-Wittgenstein-Berleburg, who served in the Nizhny Novgorod Regiment of Dragoons in the Caucasus and was later sent to crush the rebellion in the Kingdom of Poland due to his previous experiences.[17] However, this hypothesis is less likely than a Cossack owner, since no other officer would have a reasonable motivation to remake a Polish sabre into a shashka — the only explanations for a non-Cossack owner would be personal preference, a fantasy, or a need to replace a lost or broken weapon of the same type. In effect, it should be assumed that the shashka belonged to a Cossack officer, most probably serving in one of the formations where these sabres were popular — especially the Don or Terek Cossacks. Of these two groups, it was the former who were sent to serve beyond the borders of the Russian Empire, since the Terek Cossacks were busy maintaining the permanent defensive line in the Caucasus.

If we assume that the blade was manufactured prior to or at the time of the January Uprising, it is still unknown what happened to it during the gap, at least 12-years-long, between capturing of the sabre and its reshaping and rehilting — this question proved impossible to solve. Perhaps, the Polish sabre may have been acquired earlier, before 1863. But if so, then it was presumably a token commemorating an important event in the life of its owner as well as a source of pride — the modifications made to the weapon show that he continued to use it. However, the earlier the time of the sabre's acquisition, the older the age of its owner during the Russo-Turkish War, unless we assume that the officer decided to rehilt a blade inherited from his father or other relative (unlikely but still possible). Participation in both of the aforementioned armed conflicts, separated by 13 years, would be nothing unusual for a professional officer.

The second question in need of scrutiny is the fact that the sabre ended up in Bulgaria and was discovered near the place where the Russian forces crossed the Danube during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878.

The said war broke out on 24 April 1877, although the Russian troops entered the Bulgarian territory only after they crossed the Danube near the town of Svištov on the night of 27/28 June 1877. During the crossing, 812 soldiers were either killed or wounded. Next, the forces led by General Mikhail Dragomirov (interestingly, also a veteran of the January Uprising) were divided into three separate groups — the eastern, commanded by the crown prince, Tsarevich Alexander, took the eastern flank of the offensive; the western, tasked with capturing the Nicopolis stronghold; and the avant garde, led by General Count Iosif Vladimirovich Romeyko-Gurko, marched towards Veliko Tarnovo and later towards the mountain ranges. One of the crucial episodes in the war was the siege of Pleven, which lasted from 20 July to 10 December. The staunch Turkish defence dealt heavy losses to the besieging Russian and Romanian troops. Initially, the only unit attempting to capture the town was the 5th Division of the IX Corps commanded by General Yuri Schilder-Schuldner, which was later reinforced by the Romanian army and the rest of the IX Corps. Eventually, the Russian forces became 100,000 men strong, led by the Grand Duke Nicholas Nikolaevich Romanov, whereas the Romanians brought 44,000 soldiers under Prince Charles. The siege cost the lives of more than 50,000 Russian and Romanian soldiers, but it was also a decisive final blow for Turkey — the fall of Svištov freed the Russian forces which then could support the military operations in the south. The war, waged simultaneously in the Balkans and the Caucasus, ended on 3 March 1878 with a peace treaty in San Stefano.

The war, which lasted slightly less than a year, took the lives of 15,567 to 34,742 Russian soldiers. This number does not, however, show the total scale of the so-called irretrievable losses — another 81,166 men died of sickness and further 1713 from their wounds. All in all, counting the Balkan and Caucasian campaigns together, the Russian army lost between 98,446 and 117,621

[17] Gorczyca, Górny, Płachciński 2021, p. 37.

soldiers.[18] The vast majority of these deaths were results of the Bulgarian expedition, especially the siege of Pleven. The casualties during the Caucasian campaign were much smaller due to the scale of the conflict and the size of the armies — 50,000 Russian soldiers.

Considering the number of casualties — victims of sickness in particular, since diseases, unlike the dangers of direct combat with the enemy, affected officers and rank-and-file soldiers in equal measure — chances are high that the owner of the discussed shashka was among the fallen. This hypothesis assumes, as per the dating of the signatures, that the new hilt was manufactured between 1875 and 1877.

What is also important, the Russian military presence did not end in March 1878. Already at the beginning of the war, the Provisional Russian Administration in Bulgaria was established, with the majority of officials being Russians, and the Bulgarian militia units formed during the war were trained by Russian officers. The provisional administration was dissolved in May 1879. However, even this did not mean the end of the Russian presence — although the main army had left the Balkans, a strong officer corps remained. It was in accordance with the Treaty of Berlin (1878), which replaced the Treaty of San Stefano. The agreements signed in Berlin were *de facto* favourable for Turkey, as they corrected the decisions from San Stefano — the Kingdom of Bulgaria was created, formally subordinated to Turkey and with much smaller territory, instead of a fully independent Bulgarian state. It was in Russia's best interest for the newly-created state to possess a relatively strong army, so a group of officers were selected from the Danubian troops and sent to the freshly-formed Bulgarian regiments as commanders and instructors. A military academy was established in Sofia,[19] with tsarist officers as lecturers, and the Bulgarian army was provided with weapons and supplies. The presence of Russian soldiers in the Bulgarian army ended when the mutual relations between the two countries worsened in the wake of the Serbo-Bulgarian War of 1885.

The fact that Russian officers stayed in Bulgaria for seven years after the Russo-Turkish War enables proposing a second hypothesis regarding the owner of the shashka — he may have belonged to the group of officers-instructors, perhaps being involved in creation of Bulgarian cavalry. This hypothesis, however, does not entirely explain why the sabre, definitely not an expendable item, was left in Bulgaria (if we assume that he returned to Russia). While it cannot be completely ruled out that the owner had to abandon his weapon due to some life circumstances, such run of events is unlikely, if we consider the attitude and cultural respect for cold-steel weapons among officers. Hence, the hypothesis about his death at war appears more plausible. On the other hand, the "officer-instructor" hypothesis has value as well, especially because of its extended chronological range — up to the year 1885.

The Polish-Russian sabre found in Bulgaria undoubtedly hides more secrets and provokes questions without easy answers. It is a unique example of two different structural elements of a weapon being combined. But it is even more than that — a combination of two distinct cultural patterns which in the second half of the nineteenth century were clearly antagonistic towards each other. There are very few comparably exceptional exhibits in museums. What could be established with a high degree of certainty is the story of a Cossack officer who acquired a patriotic sabre while crushing the so-called "Polish rebellion" of 1863–1864, then had it rehilted for an unknown reason, over a decade after the fighting in Poland was over, and finally took the newly-fashioned shashka with him to the trans-Danubian campaign, where he either fell or settled permanently, possibly losing the weapon in unclear circumstances. This hypothesis is one of a number of options discussed in the present paper and the most plausible one — but by no means certain. For it is history's nature that it sometimes writes entirely unpredictable scenarios.

[18] Urlanis 1960, pp. 104–105, 129.
[19] https://www.srpska.ru/article.php?nid=1306 (accessed 8.02.2021).

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Michał Górny
University of Warsaw
Center for Research on the Antiquity
of Southeastern Europe
orcid.org/0000-0002-2624-6856
mic.gorny@o2.pl