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NIŠ FORTRESS AS A MILITARY BARRACK 1918–1941

Abstract: This paper, based on archival materials and literature, shows the oldest military facility in Niš in the period between the two world wars. After liberation from the Turks, the Niš fortress played an important role for the Serbian and later the Yugoslav army as the oldest and most spacious military facility. The units based inside the fortress were part of the higher commands of military areas, and a considerable warehouse space was used by the entire Niš garrison.

Keywords: Niš Fortress, Niš, V Army Region, Moravian Divisional Region

The present appearance of the Niš fortress was created at the beginning of the 18th century. It was built on the remains of an ancient and medieval fortification, which was destroyed and rebuilt several times due to frequent wars and invasions. During the Turkish rule, there was no serious work on the reconstruction of the Fortress until the fall of Belgrade to the Austrians in 1717, when Niš became the Turkish military and administrative center. During the Austro-Turkish wars at the end of the 17th and throughout the 18th century, Niš gained greater importance not only as a rear base, but also as a fortified city. The movement of the border and the sudden penetration of the enemy pushed the Turks to pay more attention to the construction of defensive walls in order to successfully defend the city against offensive weapons, the use of which was increasingly gaining momentum during sieges. The fortification of Niš was started by the Austrians immediately after the conquest in 1689, and was continued by the Turks as soon as the Vienna War ended. Building new walls was very expensive, but in the conditions of unstable peace it was urgent to secure the city as soon as possible, so the remains of the medieval fortress were used for fortification, extended and secured by large earthen embankments. The fortress was built and repaired throughout the 18th

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and 19th centuries, and smaller fortifications were also built on the surrounding hills.²

The construction of the fortress began in 1719 and lasted until 1723, although work on certain parts was carried out until the Austrian conquest of Niš in 1737. The final length of the ramparts was 2 km, while the walls were 8 m high and 3 m thick, and the fortress was entered through four large gates: Stambol gate, on the south side; Belgrade Gate, on the east side; Vidin gate, from the north; Water gate, in the south-east, towards Jagodin-mala. The interior was divided into a civilian part and a military part, in which, in addition to the garrison, there were also the quarters of the military and civilian managers.

After the liberation of Niš from the Turks, the Fortress was given an exclusively military purpose, so that civilian objects were demolished and the population was evicted. Until the beginning of the First World War, part of the artillery units of the Niš garrison were housed in the Fortress, while the other part was located in the barracks built in the immediate vicinity, in Jagodin-mala. At that time, a city artillery regiment consisting of two battalions and a siege artillery park as well as a park company of two howitzer divisions were based in Niš.³ The established command of the Niš fortress belonged to the first class of the fortress command, and was subordinated to the divisional area. The commanders of the fortress command had the rank of artillery or engineering colonel.⁴ A photographic record of the interior parts, which was made for military purposes by the Main General Staff of the Serbian Army in 1878, is a significant source for the reconstruction of urban contents in the Fortress.

There were proposals, after the liberation in 1918, to demolish the Fortress and erect modern buildings that would be the basis for the further construction of Niš. In the preparation of the General Regulatory Plan of Niš, which the technical department of the City Administration submitted to the Ministry of the Army and Navy in 1934, it was planned to move the units located in the Fortress and in the barracks around it, i.e. the entire northern complex of barracks, as well as the “Prince Mihajlo” barracks, to the already reserved room between the Niš–Belgrade railway, the Popova railway and the village of Medoševac.⁵ However, it was abandoned, because according to the assessment of the military authorities, the proposed land was inadequate for several reasons. First of all, in the report of the commander of the city of Nis to the commander of the 5th army area, it is stated that the land is already engaged for the needs of the military airport and that, according to the order of the Air Force Command, no buildings may

² See more in: Драгољуб Мирчегић, *Војна историја Ниша*, Ниш: Просвета, 1994; Олга Зиројевић, *Турско војно уређење у Србији*, Београд: Историјски институт, 1974; Срђан Катић, „Нишка тврђава после пада Београда 1717”, *Историјски часопис*, 39/1992, 119–136.

³ Славица Ратковић-Костић, *Европеизација српске војске 1878–1903*, Београд: Војноисторијски институт, 2007, 373–374.

⁴ Ibid, 368. *Распоред официра и војних чиновника за 1903*, Београд, 1903, 84–108; *Државни календар Краљевине Србије за 1907*, Београд, 1907, 185–188.

⁵ Based on the proposal, the General Regulation Plan was drawn up in 1936. Историјски архив Ниш (herewithon: ИАН), Градско поглаварство Технички одсек (herewithon: ГРАПО ТО), К 51, 1/1. Градско поглаварство Министарству војске и морнарице бр. 4416 од 19. новембра 1934.

be built in the zone of 1 km around the airport. Then a remark was made about the distance from the city, which was 4 km, which would make it difficult to supply the army and require an increase in means of transport. This would also entail the problem of military personnel going to work, which required double working hours, so that the road from the city to the barracks had to be covered four times a day. As the last point in the explanation, the large financial costs related to the construction of new military facilities were mentioned, which, in the conditions of the crisis, the state would not be able to afford.⁶ That plan of the city authorities was not put into practice until the beginning of the Second World War (only the trench around the Fortress was transformed into a green area) and the Fortress remained a military facility until 1951, when it was opened for public access.

In the period between the two world wars, the “Nemanjići” barrack was located in the Niš fortress, where the artillery and automobile regiments of the 5th army area, the warehouses of the ordnance and quartermaster’s warehouses, and the artillery workshop of the Moravian divisional area were located.⁷ The warehouses of the murderous warehouse were located in the southern part of the fortress, near the Stambol Gate. It was decided to place a warehouse of this type in the Fortress because of the massive walls that surrounded it and thus protected the buildings in the city from possible explosions. Given that these warehouses were located in the city itself (the distance from the center of Nis was about 500 m, while the other ammunition warehouses were located outside the city, on the hills of Bubanj, Gorica, Kamara and Kovanluk), it remains unclear why they did not use powder rooms from the Turkish period, built exclusively for this purpose, located in the northern (four) and eastern (one) parts of the fortress,⁸ especially because there were no civilian buildings on the northern side of the fortress, but a spacious city field, and in that part a large ditch with embankments separated the walls from the fields, as additional protection against explosions. The illogicality of such an arrangement was demonstrated in 1948, during an explosion that destroyed part of the southern rampart towards Nišava, to the right of the gate, thereby endangering the surrounding buildings.⁹ The arsenal building, built in 1856 on the foundations of an old 18th-century gunpowder room, was used as the largest warehouse of the ordnance depot. The Arsenal had an area of 300 m², and artillery ammunition was stored in it,¹⁰ since an artillery regiment was housed in the Fortress itself, and two

⁶ *Ibid*, 1/2–3.

⁷ Војни архив (ВА), П 17, К 579, Ф 1, 32/6. Ситуациони план нишке тврђаве израђен у штабу V армијске области И. Бр. 1222 од 3. јуна 1939.

⁸ On Turkish gunpowder (jebhana) see more in: Борислав Андрејевић, „Објекти и споменици у комплексу Нишке тврђаве”, *Нишки зборник*, 17/1989, 105.

⁹ The military church located in the south-eastern part of the Fortress was destroyed in the aforementioned explosion. Information about the church is scarce, except for a few orders from the commander of the Niš garrison about worship during Catholic holidays. ВА, П 17, К 912, Ф 9, 19 и 43. Заповест команданта гарнизона за 24. фебруар и 22. децембар 1940.

¹⁰ At the time of the liberation of Niš from the Turks in 1878, according to B. Andrejević, gunpowder and cannonballs were stored in the arsenal, but it is unknown how many cannons could be placed there.

independent artillery divisions were housed in the neighboring “King Petra” barracks. In case of a lack of accommodation space, the building of the Turkish bath (hamam) was used as a warehouse, as well as the facilities built by the Serbian army for their needs after the liberation of the city.

In the western part of the Fortress, there was a pavilion of the V Army Artillery Regiment with four buildings for the accommodation of soldiers and two cannon sheds. The people of this regiment also provided security for the fortress, since it was the only combat unit in the barracks. Bali Bey’s mosque, built at the beginning of the 16th century, which initially served as a canteen, was used as a material warehouse. In the pavilion of the artillery regiment, the central place was occupied by the command building located towards the exit to Gradsko polje. The building was built in 1890 and is the only military building built in the Fortress after the liberation from the Turks. It originally housed the cartographic department in charge of collecting data on the newly liberated areas in the south of Serbia. About ten years later, at the beginning of the 20th century, this department was moved to Belgrade, while the artillery non-commissioned officer school was located in this building.¹¹ In the First World War, the building was used as a military prison, especially after the suppression of the Toplica Uprising, when the prison in the north-eastern part of the Fortress did not have enough capacity for accommodation. After the war, the building was used for the needs of the artillery units of the Niš Moravian Divisional Area, so that, after the formation of the army artillery, the artillery regiment was housed in it. We should also mention that, since 1959, when the Fortress was declared a cultural monument, the Historical Archive of Niš has been housed in this building, and in 1975 the building was placed under the protection of the law as the last military building in the Fortress from the end of the 19th century.¹²

Within the pavilion of the artillery regiment, the Moravian Artillery Workshop also operated, which, according to the artillery branch, met the needs of the Niš garrison. In March 1941, on the basis of the order of the commander of the Moravian divisional area, craftsmen and soldiers, wheelwrights and blacksmiths, were separated from it and transferred to the 10th independent artillery division, in which the workshop-wheelhouse for the entire garrison was united.¹³

In the northern part of the Fortress, near the Vidin gate, there was located the automobile regiment of the 5th army area. This regiment took care of filling the vehicles of commands, units and institutions, as well as their maintenance. The types of motor

267 cannons are reported to have been captured in the fortress, which leads to the conclusion that the material for all the cannons could have been stored in the arsenal. Б. Андрејевић, „Објекти и споменици у комплексу Нишке тврђаве”, 105–106.

¹¹ Б. Андрејевић, *Споменици Ниша и околине*, Ниш: Завод за заштиту споменика културе, 1985, 83–84.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Soldiers and craftsmen from the 1st Cavalry Regiment, 2nd Cavalry Artillery Division, 16th Infantry Regiment and Artillery Regiment V of the Army Region were assigned to the unified workshop-wheelhouse. ВА, П 17, К 882, Ф 3, 8/1. Наредба бр. 29 команданта 10. самосталног артиљеријског дивизиона за 12. март 1941.

vehicles in its composition were diverse and of foreign origin, so maintenance was complicated, and cars confiscated from the First World War that were not sold at auction were often used. The regiment used the above-mentioned four gunpowder sheds (jebhana) inherited from the Turkish period for the purpose of housing equipment for cars. In the Fortress, primarily for the needs of the automobile regiment, but also for the needs of other units of the Niš garrison, modern underground fuel tanks were dug and installed. During 1938 and 1939, the first tank with a capacity of 25,000 liters was installed with a device for filling and dispensing gasoline. Two renowned companies “Autotehna” from Zagreb and “Termotehnika” from Belgrade participated in the auction for this tank. The works were entrusted to the Zagreb company for 234,750 dinars, since, in addition to the lower price, they also offered a discount of 6.10%, as well as free installation of an additional pump.¹⁴ The work, however, did not meet military standards, so the same company had to make improvements to the fuel transfer and metering system, as well as replacing the pipeline.¹⁵ During 1939, the same company installed three more tanks made of sheet steel, placed in specially built brick cisterns and equipped with modern gasoline measuring systems, for the sum of 247,485 dinars.¹⁶ Further works on this issue continued in 1940, with the fact that this time they were entrusted to an entrepreneur from Niš. It is not known how many underground cisterns were installed, but based on the approved sum of 453,205 dinars, it can be assumed that substantial works were carried out.¹⁷ These cisterns were dug in next to the branch of the railway line and were suitable for transferring fuel from the wagons. These works greatly simplified the delivery of gasoline by avoiding transportation from the railway station by motor vehicles and cattle. The supply of units was also made easier, because the fuel intended for the entire garrison was stored in one place, while, on the other hand, this could pose a big problem in the event of an air attack or sabotage, and the placement of ammunition warehouses in nearby vicinity.¹⁸

The warehouses of the quartermaster's warehouse were located in the eastern part of the fortress. In addition to the administration building of the Moravian quartermaster's warehouse, a warehouse for human food and a flour warehouse were also

¹⁴ The offered price of the Belgrade company was 235,750 dinars with a smaller discount of 5.90%. ВА, П 17, К 579, Ф1, 16. Извештај комисије за одржавање лицитације команданту V армијске области од 20. октобра 1938.

¹⁵ Subsequent works were not foreseen in the budget, so the plans for them were drawn up later. The estimated sum for these works was 15,180 dinars. *Ibid*, 22. Решење Министарства војске и морнарице од 5. априла 1939.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 32.

¹⁷ ВА, П 17, К 265, Ф 1, 33/1. Решење Министарства војске и морнарице Пов. И. Бр. 12529 од 23. септембра 1940.

¹⁸ Before starting the construction of the first tanks, a suitable place for their accommodation was discussed. The question arose as to how suitable the fortress was because of the warehouse of explosives. The decision was explained by the fact that the tanks are located underground, which will suffocate the explosion and thus would not damage the surrounding buildings. ВА, П 17, К 579, Ф 2, 40.

located in that part. The flour warehouse was built in 1929¹⁹, while in 1932 a bakery²⁰ was built next to the warehouse. The workers in the bakery were soldiers of the Moravian Bakery Company, which was stationed in the “Prince Mihajlo” barrack.²¹

A military prison built in the 18th century and renovated between 1861 and 1864 was located in the extreme north-eastern part of the Fortress. After liberation from the Turks and reconstruction, it became the first Niš penal institution within Serbia.²² During the First World War, the Bulgarians used it as a central prison from where prisoners were taken to be executed through the nearby so-called “gate of death”. After the end of the war, the prison housed soldiers or civilians convicted by the military authorities. The military prison was a separate entity within the fortress, with security independent from the barracks guard²³ and its own kitchen, since, according to the regulations, the prisoners received different food courses.²⁴ In 1933, buildings called “kazamati” were separated from the military prison and arranged to accommodate the Engineering Workshop.²⁵

The construction of a 2,753 m long military track from Crveni Krst station to Tvrđava was of special importance for the Niš fortress and military facilities in the northern part of the city. This track separated from the industrial track of the Tobacco Factory and passed over the land of the Administration of state monopolies, Gradsko polje and Animal Hospital, so that one branch with a length of 210 m was separated to the pavilion of the 1st Balloon Battalion behind the barracks “King Peter I”, while the main branch entered the Fortress to the ordnance warehouse. The track to the Fortress was built in 1929, and the extension of the branch for the 1st Balloon Battalion in 1931. The track was built by the Directorate of State Railways from Belgrade, with the fact that, after handing over to the command of the Moravian Divisional Area, the army

¹⁹ ВА, П 17, К 622, Ф 1, 9/1-11. Одобрење министра војног команданту V армијске области Е. П. Бр. 10308 од 30. августа 1929. After construction, an electrical installation was introduced for lighting the warehouse for the sum of 24,860 dinars. The entrepreneur Božidar Petrović, who introduced lighting, also did the plumbing in the bakery that was built later.

²⁰ ВА, П 17, К 255, Ф 2, 47/1-2. Наређење команданта Моравске дивизијске области И. Бр. 470 од 10. марта 1933.

²¹ There are conflicting data on the accommodation of the bakery company. Based on the situational plan of the Niš fortress from 1939, there was a facility for the accommodation of soldiers in the pavilion of the quartermaster’s warehouse. ВА, П 17, К 579, Ф 1, 32/6; Nothing is said, however, about which unit it is, while the Niš press announces the celebration of the saint day of the bakery regiment in the pavilion of the quartermaster’s warehouse in the fortress. *Ревија*, 28. јануар 1937; Data from the Official Military Gazette state that the baker’s regiment was stationed in the barrack of “Prince Mihajlo”, where the saint day was celebrated. Службени војни лист Краљевине Југославије (СВЛ), 1932, 167.

²² Б. Андрејевић, *Сјоменици Ниша и околине*, 81–82.

²³ The security of the military prison was provided by the soldiers of the 16th Infantry Regiment (14 people in total). ВА, П 17, К 574, Ф 2, 19/21-22. Преглед стража јединица Моравске дивизијске области К. Пов. Бр. 1692 из 1936.

²⁴ According to the rules, for a large number of convicts, as is the case with military prisons, food was prepared separately, according to specific tables. When the number of convicts was smaller, they were fed in one of the garrison units. СВЛ, 1926, стр. 413.

²⁵ ВА, П 17, К 578, Ф 2, 11.

was obliged to maintain that part of the railway with its own manpower and money from the military budget, under the supervision of experts from the Directorate.²⁶ Upon entering the Fortress, the railway had two tracks, a main and a secondary one, so that several trains could run smoothly.

It is not necessary to emphasize how important the military track was for the Fortress and, in general, the Niš garrison, since the northern complex of barracks around Gradski polje was the largest in terms of area and, apart from the warehouses of the quartermaster's depot and the slaughterhouse, one artillery station relied on this track regiment, one cavalry artillery division and two independent artillery divisions. The construction of the tracks certainly necessitated the installation of the previously mentioned gasoline tanks and facilitated the supply of automobile units in the garrison. The transport of tools and equipment of these units became much easier, and during larger movements or delivery of materials, the hiring of additional motor vehicles and cattle traction was avoided, as well as the congestion of city streets and transshipment to several places with the interest of curious civilians.

Since the barracks in the southern part of the city were built near the railway station, and the railway line passed by the airport, all important military facilities in the city and the surrounding area were connected by the railway line.

Due to insufficient financial resources, in the period between the two world wars, no major construction of buildings for the needs of the army was undertaken in the fortress of Niš. The buildings that the Serbian army inherited after the liberation of the city were still used with minor adaptations. A large number of buildings from the time of Turkish rule were used for non-intended purposes and thus their value as cultural and historical monuments was reduced. Two major undertakings of the 1930s were the construction of a military track and modern underground cisterns that facilitated the supply of units, but also changed the appearance of the fortress. A large number of buildings were demolished during the Second World War, but even after that, adaptations were made for the needs of the army until the beginning of the 1950s, when the Niš fortress ceased to serve military purposes and became open to public access, and the buildings in it during the following decades became protected by law.

²⁶ The railway was built from 1929 to 1931, but the final agreement on the construction and exploitation of the military track was signed no sooner than 1935. ВА, П 17, К 282, Ф 3, 19/2-12. Споразум између Дирекције државних железница и команде Моравске дивизијске области Бр. 41168/35 од 4. децембра 1935.

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