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THE ROLE OF THE ARMY IN THE CHANGING PHYSIONOMY OF THE CITY – GARRISON OF NIŠ 1918–1941

Abstract: This article, based on archival materials, provides the history of the creation of the General Regulatory Plan of Niš and the dispute with the garrison over the relocation of units and the construction of military facilities in the city. The material used is stored in the Military Archive, in the fund of the Army of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and the archive of the city of Niš, in the fund of the City Administration.²

Key words: Niš, General regulation plan, Army of the Kingdom of SHS/Yugoslavia, garrison, Army Region V

Intensive works on the modernization of Niš and the construction of buildings of public importance began after the liberation of the city from the Turks. In these activities, considering the strategic importance of the city, the army took the lead with its monumental buildings and roads that changed the image of Niš at the end of the 19th century. The stay of the army in Niš contributed to the development of crafts and trade, catering, as well as the establishment of industrial enterprises, which caused migration from the surrounding towns and the sudden expansion of the city.

Considering its geostrategic position and proximity to the border with Bulgaria, a fairly strong garrison was located in Niš. First of all, the city is home to the command of the 5^w Army Region, the command of the Moravian Divisional Region, the 2nd Cavalry Division, the Army Military Hospital, the infantry, artillery, engineering and aviation regiments.³ Such a large number of diverse commands and units conditioned

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³ See more in: Миле Бјелајац, *Војска Краљевине СХС / Југославије 1922–1935* (Београд: Институт за новију историју Србије, 1994); Драгољуб Мирчегић, *Војна историја Ниша* (Ниш: Просвета, 1994);

the integration with civilian structures, which is also reflected in the construction of buildings, which changed the appearance of Niš at that time.

During the interwar period, the role of the army in changing the appearance of Niš can be seen through the relationship with the municipal authorities in the implementation of the General Regulatory Plan and the demarcation of military and civilian responsibilities.

The urban development of Niš from the end of the First World War to the adoption of the General Regulatory Plan was characterized mainly by spontaneous construction and settlement. Increase in the number of inhabitants (in 1921, the city had 25,109 inhabitants, and according to the 1931 census, the number rose to 35,465).⁴ Unplanned construction influenced the city authorities to regulate urban construction with the Construction Law as of 1932. After the adoption of this law, the surveying of the city's land began, and in 1934, a program for the development of a regulatory plan was prepared. For this purpose, a competition was announced for the development of the aforementioned plan, in which the best was the project of the architect Mihajlo Radovanović, a professor at the University of Belgrade. The project was presented in 1936, but was approved by the Ministry of Construction no sooner than 1939.⁵ The responsibility for implementing the General Regulatory Plan was assumed by the Technical Department of the City Administration.

With the envisioned plan, construction on the city's territory would be regulated and the arbitrary construction of buildings, which was gaining momentum after frequent migrations, would be prevented. The problem for the city authorities was the regulation of the military-state land, which occupied a considerable area on the northern and southern sides of the city, and as such was inherited from the Turks (let us not forget that in 1878 there were two barracks in Niš: the Fortress, around which later Cavalry and Artillery Barracks and a building in the southern part of the city were constructed, next to which the Engineering Barracks was built) and in the vicinity of which, for security reasons, the construction of civilian buildings was not allowed. After all, this is evidenced by the relocation of the hippodrome from the town field to Chair in 1930, since the periodic gathering of citizens during the races could threaten safety and disrupt life and work in the barracks. A good example is the expansion of the settlement on the southwest side of the city, towards Bubanj hill, where ammunition warehouses were located. In 1936, at the request of the city authorities to relocate the warehouses for the safety of the population, the command of the Moravian divisional area stated that, due to a lack of financial resources, relocation was impossible in the following period and asked the municipality to stop the expansion of the settlement because otherwise the army cannot take responsibility for any accidents. In addition,

Далибор Велојић, *Војска у нишу 1918–1941* (Лепосавић: Институт за српску културу Приштина, 2014).

⁴*Definitive results of the population census of January 31, 1921, I, Sarajevo: State printing house, 1932. Definitive results of the population census of March 31, 1931, I, Belgrade, 1937, XIV.*

⁵*Encyclopedia of Niš, II, Niš, 1995, pp. 125–128.*

the command assured that there is no danger to the city in the event of an accident, as all measures have been taken for the safe storage of ammunition.⁶ The expansion of the city also affected the area around the “Knjaz Mihailo” barracks (the old Mithad Pasha barracks), so the commander of the 16th Infantry Regiment reported to his superiors about the construction of civilian houses on the south side of the barracks where the explosives warehouses were located.⁷ The problem of permission to build on military land also required a series of procedures, so there were sites owned by the military that stood unused for a long time. One of them is a part of the military land on Kralj Petar square at the corner of Vojvoda Putnik and Stevan Sremac streets, which, although part of the “Knjaz Mihajlo” barracks, was not usable for military purposes. The municipality asked the military authorities to hand over the land in question for the construction of a new primary school for the needs of the Bubanj settlement and in return offered a three times larger area (since the state land was of greater value than the municipal land) near Apelovac for the construction of a shooting range.⁸ Since there was a misunderstanding about this exchange, because the military authorities were also asking for a certain additional payment, the mayor of the municipality had to intervene with the military minister and after a lot of procedures, the problem was transferred to the Ministry of Finance. This ministry, considering that it is about constructing a building for cultural and educational purposes, agreed with the municipality and approved the exchange without any additional payment.⁹ Such examples only show the problem that the municipality encountered in implementing the intention to arrange the urban conditions, which should have been finally solved by adopting a unified plan and demarcating the city from the state jurisdiction.

Based on the program drawn up in 1934, lands within the limits of the regulatory plan were designated, and land reserved for military purposes was also designated. The future development of Niš unconditionally demanded that the then barracks concentrated around the Fortress, as well as the barracks of the 16th Infantry Regiment, be moved to a more favorable terrain. In a letter from the city administration to the Ministry of the Army and Navy dated November 19, 1934, a proposal was made, considering the municipality's idea, to reserve for military purposes a complex of land between the Niš–Belgrade railway, the Popova railway and the village of Medoševac, a part of which was occupied by the airport.¹⁰ After consultations of the Minister of

⁶ Historical Archive of Niš (hereinafter: IAN), City Administration Technical Department (hereinafter: GRAPO TO), K 51. Headquarters of the Moravian Divisional Area to the City Administration of Niš I. No. 958 as of 2 April 1936.

⁷ IAN, GRAPO TO, K 53, 1/6136. Report of the commander of the 16th infantry regiment to the commander of the city of Nis No. 2372 as of 30 October 1936.

⁸ The area of the military land was 13,480 m², while the offered replacement near Apelovac was 33,800 m². Military Archive (hereinafter: VA), P 17, K 255, F 3, 18/1-2. Report of the head of the Engineering and Technical Department to the Ministry of the Army and Navy I. T. No. 14390 as of 25 August 1933.

⁹ VA, P 17, K 256, F 1, 30/1-2. Decision of the Ministry of Finance No. 44040 as of 15 November 1933.

¹⁰ IAN, GRAPO TO, K 51. Proposal of the City Government to the Ministry of the Army and Navy No. 4416 as of 19 November 1934.

Defense with the commanders of the V Army and Moravian Divisional Areas, it was decided to carry out an assessment of the remaining land around the airport and look at the possibilities of relocation. This was opposed by the air force, whose command sent a letter stating that the terrain was intended exclusively for the needs of the airport, which would prevent open access by any construction. Since the provisions of the Air Navigation Act prohibit construction within 1 km of the airport border, the Air Force could not accept such a proposal.¹¹ To that reason, the commander of the Moravian divisional area added his own reasons: a) that the land is about 4 km away from the city center, so that this distance would make it much more difficult to supply the army and require an increase in means of transportation; b) it would be difficult for officers and military clerks to live, given that the area is uninhabited and that distance must be covered four times a day, so that each officer must cover 16 km; v) a longer period of time is needed to carry out this relocation, assuming that adequate material resources are available, because there are a large number of buildings, including new ones, with an individual value of 2,500,000 dinars. Thus, in the opinion of the military authorities, the land was absolutely unsuitable and insufficient for further military construction and other military facilities except for the needs of the airport.¹² Considering the poor cooperation with the city authorities on the mentioned issue, the army gave its opinion after drafting the proposal and announcing the tender for the preparation of the General Regulatory Plan, so this project was included in the plan and later there were big problems regarding its correction.

After these failed negotiations on the relocation of military facilities, the provisions of the General Regulatory Plan concerning the military merely stated the existing situation:

- a) The military hospital of the V army area with the hospital company remained at the hospital complex between Znepoljska street, the Niš–Pirot railway and the Gabravačka river;
- b) Marvena Hospital is northeast of the town square;
- c) The hospital non-commissioned officer school is east of the Gabravačka river between Znepoljska street and the Niš–Pirot railway;
- g) The Moravian divisional area is in Skopljanska Street;
- d) The officers' home will be built in one of the representative places designated for public buildings;
- đ) The aviators' home will be in the aviators' colony that will be built between the Fortress and the barracks of the 1st Cavalry Regiment;
- e) The barracks of the 16th infantry regiment is on the land complex between Vojvoda Putnik, Jovan Babunski and Čarnojevićeva streets;
- h) The engineering barracks is on the land complex between Vojvoda Putnika,

¹¹ Ibid. The Air Force Command to the Command of Moravian Divisional Area V. I. No. 11184 од 26 December 1934.

¹² Ibid. The opinion of the commander of the city of Niš submitted to the commander of the V army area No. 9403 as of 1 January 1935.

- Prizrenska Street and Kralja Petra Square;
- z) The artillery barracks is on the square in front of the bridge in Jagodin-mala on the right bank of Nišava;
 - i) The barracks of the 1st Cavalry Regiment, with the barracks of the 2nd Bicycle Battalion, are located on the complex east of Beogradska Street;
 - j) The air base of the 5th aviation regiment is located on the complex of military land northeast of the Fortress;
 - k) The building of the Moravian Gendarmerie Regiment is on Kralja Petra square between Stevan Kaćanski and Stevan Sremac streets;
 - l) Institute for the production of military clothing is between Lešjaninova, Strumička and Novosadska streets;
 - m) Building V of the Army District will be on Knjaz Mihajlo Square at the corner of Kneginja Ljubica Street.¹³

Of these buildings, only the buildings of the command of the V Army Region, the Moravian Gendarmerie Regiment and the Officers' Centre were planned for construction. Regarding the construction of the building of the command of the V Army Region, there were two locations in circulation, on the land of the branch of the National Bank and on the square of Knjaz Mihajlo. The military and city authorities decided on the square, next to the Workers' Insurance Office, because it offered the best conditions for the construction of a representative military facility. According to the General Regulation Plan, Knjaz Mihajlo Square, as the most spacious square, was intended to be the main administrative center in the city and therefore had to be framed by the most important public buildings. The middle of the square would be a park area, while the tram line would be moved to the city center along Vardarska and Lešjaninova streets. In this way, Knjaz Mihajlo Square would be away from traffic and would best suit its intended function.¹⁴ The command building had to be built in accordance with the already existing building of the Workers' Insurance Office and, according to the plan, it had to have a ground area and three floors. All other buildings on the square, public and private, after designing by the command had to have a height in accordance with it, except in the case of the building between the square and the streets of Nikola Pašić and Kapetan Antina, and in the extension of the axis of Ristićeva Street, which could have one floor more.¹⁵ Based on the project of the command building, a building, public or private, had to be built on the corner of Nikola Pašić and Kneginja Ljubica streets, which would match it architecturally.¹⁶

The construction of this building was carried out in 1938, and according to calculations, the value of the works was 5,000,000 dinars.¹⁷ There were controversies

¹³ IAN, GRAPO TO, K 62. Regulation on the implementation of the General Regulatory Plan of the City of Niš, p. 77–79.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 70.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 119.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 77.

¹⁷ IAN, GRAPO TO, 1/165. Building permit No. 600 for the subject of the Headquarters of the V Army

about the financing and the construction itself, since according to the law there were two variants: that the municipality at its own expense erect the building according to the projects and under the supervision of the Ministry of the Army and Navy, which means that the municipality carries out the construction and take it takeover according to the regulations of the Ministry of Construction, or that it puts the necessary amount at the disposal of the Ministry of the Army and Navy, which means that the construction and takeover is carried out by the army according to its regulations, and it must also comply with the regulations of the Ministry of Construction. Based on the proposal of its Technical Department, the city administration adopted the first option, but at the request of the military authorities, it had to be abandoned due to the specific purpose of the building itself.¹⁸ Regarding financing, it was decided that the municipality would give RSD 1,000,000 to the Ministry of the Army and Navy as an interest-free loan that would be repaid within 20 years. Most of the money, about 4,000,000 dinars, was taken by the municipality as a loan from the State Mortgage Bank, the repayment of which would take 20 years, and with interest, the amount almost doubled during that period.¹⁹ The State mortgage bank rejected the proposal that the army take over the loan, since it was problematic to mortgage military facilities, while it was a different case with the municipality. The municipality could take out the loan and use its property to guarantee the repayment of the loan without any problems, with the fact that the building would be its property for the next 20 years, and the army would pay rent for it in the value of the annual installment of the loan, as well as taxes and maintenance costs. After this term expires and the debt is paid off, the building would become the property of the Ministry of the Army and Navy, so with this method of financing, the municipality was, in fact, only an intermediary in the bank's agreement with the military authorities, but, as a debtor, had to take on the obligation of repayment of loans in case of suspension of lease payment by the army.²⁰ Since the municipality bore the greatest burden with this contract, its demands were met for the army to release the building on the corner of Knjaz Mihajlo square and Jug Bogdanova street (old Šivara), which housed the command of apartment V of the army district. For this purpose, the army was obliged to provide rooms for the accommodation of this unit in the newly erected building.

More important than handing over the building of the old Šivara was the demolition of part of the Fortress for the purpose of road construction. Namely, according to the project of the Ministry of Construction, the section of the road that led from the direction of Belgrade towards the Bulgarian border and that passed through Niš (next to the Fortress, then over the fortress bridge and Kralja Milan Square, Sinđelić Square

Region as of 10 March 1938.

¹⁸ Ibid, 2/165.

¹⁹ IAN, GRAPO TO, K 42, 69–71. The contract between the City Government and the Ministry of the Army and Navy on the construction of the command building of the V Army Region has been concluded as of 8 September 1937.

²⁰ Ibid.

towards Niška Banja) had to be widened and modernized.²¹ In connection with that, it was planned to demolish a part of the fortress wall on the southern side near the Stambol Gate, as well as the military warehouses and workshops located along the wall. According to the agreement, in exchange for ceding the lot for the construction of the command post and taking a loan from the bank, the army ceded to the municipality the tasks related to the demolition of this part of the wall, after which the municipality handed over the road widening works to the Ministry of Construction. The only real benefit of this exchange for the municipality was the expansion and improvement of the square in front of the building of the Moravian Banovina.²²

As for the Officers' Center, the existing building was not built according to military standards, so there were proposals for new ones in the 1930s. In 1938, on the basis of an agreement between the city and military authorities, a plan was drawn up and a certain expert commission, consisting of the head of the Construction Department of the V Army Region Command and the chief architect of the City Administration, was drawn up to examine the land that could be considered for the construction of the new Officer's center. Three locations were considered, mostly near the old centre building and the Nišava park.. The first location was next to the Orient hotel, but it was abandoned because it was planned to build a system of blocks-dense settlement there, so it was inconvenient to build the Officer's centre in the middle of the settlement, since it was planned that there would be a large garden around the centre building. The second location was the land to the left of the entrance to the fortress bridge on the left bank of Nišava, however, it was also unsuitable because in that case the river bed would have to be corrected, and there was also a monument to bishop Milentije, so the permission of the church authorities had to be sought. for its displacement. The proposed third location proved to be the best because it included land within the park to the right of the approach to the bridge on the left bank of the river, so that the building could have a planned garden. Since the army would thereby take away a part of the park from the city, compensation would be made by donating the former Officer's centre building to house the city museum.²³ For this purpose, in 1940, the Ministry of the Army and Navy allocated 4,000,000 dinars for the construction of a new building of the Officers' Center in Niš, however, that project was not realized until the beginning of the war.²⁴ There were also other solutions that did not go beyond newspaper speculations, and they speak of the fact that a commission made up of officers, city councilors and engineers

²¹ The citizens benefited from the arrangement of this section in terms of raising the prices of plots near the Fortress and on Sindelić Square. The search for a suitable location on this square for the construction of the Officer's Home building was met with disinterest from the plot owners who did not want to sell their land at low prices. *Revija*, 1 March 1940, p 3.

²² IAN, GRAPO TO, K 29, 71/165. Report of the Technical Department of the City Administration to the Engineering Department of the V Army Region No. 1977 as of 24 April 1936.

²³ VA, P 17, K 579, F 1, 4. Commander of the V Army Region to the President of the City Administration as of 11 January 1938.

²⁴ VA, P 17, K 264, F 2, 35/1. Order of the Ministry of the Army and Navy on raising a loan for the construction of officers' homes. Conf. I. G. No. 11934 as of 29 August 1940.

visited and evaluated the plots on Sindelić Square near the National Theater building. According to the press, none of the plots were bought, because the owners did not want to sell them, bearing in mind the favorable position of Sindelić square in the very center through which the main communication from Belgrade to the Bulgarian border as well as the tram line passed.²⁵

The building of the Moravian Gendarmerie Regiment was constructed in 1939, according to the plan, on Kralj Petar Square. The construction conditions entailed compliance with the building code and the decision of the construction committee, formed by the City Administration.²⁶ According to the calculation, the value of the construction was 3,980,000 dinars, and the Gendarmerie Command bought the plot from private individuals for 155,520 dinars. The plan envisaged a basement, ground floor, three floors and an attic space, with appropriate rooms: bedrooms, classrooms, offices, kitchen, dining room, warehouses, workshops, and the installation of showers was foreseen as well. Under the courtyard, and in connection with the basement, a shelter for protection against air raids was designed to accommodate 300 people.²⁷

The creation of the General Regulatory Plan finally defined the relationship between the city and the army in terms of urban planning and demarcated military from municipal land. In the following period, minor corrections were made when arranging the communication between Belgrade and the Bulgarian border, which led past the Fortress and across Kralja Milana Square. For this purpose, a part of the fortress wall was repaired, the demolition of which was foreseen by the previous agreement as compensation to the army for the assignment of land on Knjaz Mihajlo Square. In addition, in 1935, the city received permission from the army for the arrangement of the park area around the Fortress in the part of the bridge on the right side of Jadranska street, over which a misunderstanding arose regarding ownership.²⁸ Namely, the military authorities claimed that the land was given to the city exclusively for the arrangement of the park, but not for ownership, as a result of which commissions were formed and the discussion lasted for the next two years.²⁹ At the end, the park area was landscaped, and the place for the construction of officers' apartments was determined. Officers' apartments were the subject of negotiations regarding the construction of the command building of the V Army Region, when the location for their construction was finally determined in Jadranska Street next to the Fortress.³⁰ It is assumed that the mentioned apartments were intended for army officers because, according to the data,

²⁵ *Revija*, 7 March 1940, p. 3.

²⁶ IAN, GRAPO TO, K 32, 3. Building permit for the construction of the building of the Moravian Gendarmerie Regiment No. 5129 as of 1939.

²⁷ *Ibid*, K 32, 19. Technical description of the building of the Moravian Gendarmerie RegimentS.

²⁸ IAN, GRAPO TO, K 61, 5/2663. Petition of the City Administration to the V Army Region Command No. 696 as of 21 March 1935.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 8/2663.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 7/2663. Sketch of the southern part of the city field with the planned land for the construction of apartments in the construction of the Niš garrison as of 14 March 1935.

apartments in Beogradska Street were intended for air force officers.³¹ In addition to these, there were disagreements about the construction of facilities for the needs of the 5th Assault Battalion. The battalion, after its formation, was temporarily housed in the Sokolski dom building, until the barracks were built in the “Knjaza Mihailo” barracks. Since the construction of these barracks was in conflict with the General Regulatory Plan, there was a dispute from which the army came out as the winner with the argument that the buildings are being erected within the barracks, on military-state land, so they are not subject to the plan and are outside the regulatory line.³² Another change was made in relation to the General Regulatory Plan, and it is about the return of part of the land on Bubanj hill. On that hill, there was municipal land with an area of about 78 hectares, which the army used as a training ground for pioneering and training in the construction of fortifications. According to the request, a part of about 18 hectares was returned to the municipality, which it gave to the Banovina authorities for the establishment of a plant centre³³

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³¹ To the request of Sotir Dojčinović, who in 1938 intended to build a house in Beogradska Street, the answer was that the lots were earmarked for the construction of apartments for aviation officers. Since even after two years the apartments were not built, and the number of private houses under construction was increasing, the municipality turned to the 5th Air Force Base for a solution to the construction problem. IAN, GRAPO TO, K 72. Petition by Sotir Dojčinović as of 17 April 1940.

³² Ibid, 1/3775. Headquarters of the V Army Region to the City Administration of the City of Niš I. No. 1963 as of 3 September 1940.

³³ IAN, GRAPO TO, K 66, 1/35816. Petition of the City Administration to the V Army Region Command No. 35816 as of 8 August 1938.

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