

Ovidiu Cristea, *Puterea cuvintelor: știri și război în sec. XV-XVI [The Power of Words: News and War in the 15th and 16th centuries]*, Târgoviște, Cetatea de Scaun Publishing House, 2014, 390 pp.

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How did the news appear? How did it travel, from who to whom and what route did it take? How much did it cost? How was it used to manipulate people? These are just a few questions that the author Ovidiu Cristea addressed in his book suggestively entitled *Puterea cuvintelor (The Power of Words)*, a book dedicated, as can be read in the subtitle, to the news about the war that circulated in the 15th and 16th centuries, on the territory of the Romanian countries and the Ottoman Empire and on the Italian territory, especially in Venice. Except for the introduction and the conclusions, the book has three extensive parts – the first part is dedicated to the information/news as a historical subject, the second part analyzes the way in which the mechanism of producing, distributing and receiving news functioned, highlighting its functional segments, and the third part contains several case studies that prove very useful for the better understanding of this subject. The book seems to have been written not only for the reader interested in history, which finds in the second part of the book an excellent synthesis of the elements that are comprised in news and that activate it, but also for the researcher who, in the third part of this book, appreciates the elaborateness of

the manner in which the information about the wars is presented and the carefulness in analysing the sources.

As the author declares in the introduction to this book, the research for this topic was difficult because of „several important handicaps”, the first one being represented by the sources (p. 20). Ovidiu Cristea makes several references to the sources, trying to comprehend what the sources actually transmit; thus, referring to a letter dated 9 July 1480, in which Stefan cel Mare/Stephen the Great tried to find out from the inhabitants of Brasov as many information as possible about a potential Ottoman attack, the author does not only reproduce the information contained in the document, but “asks” himself some questions: „Why did Stephen ask the inhabitants of Brasov when, as he confessed, had spies in the Ottoman country? Did he have more trust in the information received from the Transylvanian fortress? Was he trying to test their loyalty? Did he want to compare this information with the news he got from his men?” Since, as it was the case in many situations, the reply of the inhabitants of Brasov was not found, the historian does not venture in offering an ambiguous answer, pointing to the fact that to all the questions asked „there is any possible situation or even all these situations put together” (p. 67).

Alongside the correspondence of Stephen the Great with Brasov and Sibiu, the letter exchange between the rulers of Wallachia and the same German towns in Transylvania is dealt with extensively in the first part of the book. This letter exchange has several characteristics: the absence, in many cases, of the replies to the letters of the Wallachia princes, the researcher being exposed to only “half of the dialogue”; the partial or integral vocality of the message sent by the Wallachia princes („many of the letters contain, regardless of the one in power at the time, the stereotyped formulation: «And what [messenger] tells you, you’d better believe it, because these are the true words of my lordship»”); establishing the chronology and identifying exactly the authors of the epistles; the different commercial orientation of the two Transylvanian towns („Brasov

seems better placed for the commercial activities with Wallachia and Dunărea de Jos/Lower Danube, while Sibiu was better oriented towards Central Europe") (p. 89-90).

The reader is gradually acquainted with the way in which the news was collected, following the couriers, their routes and the receptors, and finding out about the information price. „Our spies”, „my scouts” or *explorator secretus* are just a few of the words used to designate those who in the Middle Ages were involved in collecting and transmitting information. For the future historians, a test of their professionalism and skill is to identify „the spies”, because „the signs they had left in the documents are rather confusing [...] sometimes impossible to identify, since a genuine spy does not leave any marks, or even worse, leaves misleading proof” (p. 164). The profile of a spy is a complex one: people sent with clear missions to obtain information, merchants that transported goods, but also news from the countries they were passing through, or even artists (as the Spanish painter Velázquez, which was suspected by the Italian ambassadors in Madrid of deeds that were not related to painting). On other occasions, the face of the informant was hiding under „a conspirative name”, as was the case of the town of Ragusa, which sent to the Western world information about the Ottomans, under fictive identities, Tarquinio Sanctone or Lucio Pisone were only two of the names used. It should not be neglected the „diplomatic scandal” generated by spying; thus, in 1492, at the order of Baiazid II, Girolamo Marcello had to leave the Ottoman Empire, being accused of disclosing secret information.

Ovidiu Cristea underlines the importance of news from a humane perspective, a perspective which involves a complicated network of people. „An informant is the one who gives life to the news, but the courier offers it mobility, assures the reach of the destination. The courier’s worst enemy seems to be the distance, and the space domination is the main concern of the news” (p. 177-178). The world of the couriers is a world of records – 150-200 km could be covered in one day by a western riding courier (p. 178), while in the

east, a certain Baraka had travelled 300 km in one day and one night (p. 184). Having to cover long distances, the pedestrian couriers from the Ottoman Empire were often seen as possessing super-human qualities; contemporary western chronicles stated the fact that they could „run in high speed and had the skin of their feet so thick that, some say, if they were to shoe themselves like horses, they would not have felt the pierce of the nail” or that „during their childhood, their spleen had been removed so that not to feel any pain or exhaustion while running”. (p. 184)

An interesting conclusion regards the routes that had been taken to transmit information during the time and in the space of the centuries discussed in this book. „Thus, the geographical representation of the route of the news would not be a continuous line, but a succession of segments of variable lengths. Sometimes, the route seems to be a straight line, but most of the times it is a broken line.” The Romanian territories were part of the so-called infrequently used information routes. In this case, „the news circulation seems more like a relay race, in which the one that receives the information takes the responsibility to transmit it further” (p. 194). „The end of the line” of the news is „the addressee of the letter”. „In reality, this is in many cases just a new moment in the life of the news.” (p. 197)

In order to estimate the price of the news, the historian gives two examples referring to Venice: that of Piero Bragadin, present in the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the reign of Suleiman the Magnificent („expenses during peace time”) and that of Piero Pasqualigo, the ambassadors of the Marciana Republic in Hungary, during the war between the Venetians and „The League of Cambrai” („expenses during crisis”). The thorough investigation of the archive documents, led to the conclusion that Bragadin had used 15.82% of his yearly expenses for the payment of the messengers who transmitted various news. Even if for Pasqualigo the percentage of the sums spent for communicating information could not be established, since the sources were not as accurate and comprehensive as in the case of Bragadin, the conclusion was that

„Pasqualigo had spent in the first six months of his first year of his mission at the Ottoman Porte almost as much as his homologue in Istanbul had spent in one year.” (p. 217)

The work ends with five case studies, which are symbolically introduced in a „story bag”. In the chapter entitled *Cacealmaua/The Bluff*, the author describes the way in which the Ottomans had managed to launch certain news so that to mislead the Venetians in the second half of the 15th century. Ovidiu Cristea brings forth two events in order to describe how Venice was manipulated by the Ottoman Porte – the Turkish-Venetian conflict started in 1462 and the Moldavian-Polish confrontation in 1497. The Turkish-Persian confrontation at the beginning of the 16th century, ended with the battle of Chaldiran, is the subject of the second „story”. „«The battle of words» between the Ottomans and the Safavid, before, during and after the campaign in 1514, doubled the military conflict and, as in the case of the latter, the battle of words, declarations and gestures seemed to have been won by Selim the Grim.” (p. 289)

The chapter *Si e fatto Turcho: o poveste neobișnuită/Si e fatto Turcho: an unusual story* deals with the „Turkishization” of a Moldavian prince at the middle of the 16th century, called Iliăș Rareș, the son of the better known Petru Rareș; the events are told by Bernardo Navagero, a Venetian bail at Constantinople during that time. One by one, all the „phases” of Iliăș’ passing to the Islamic religion are related, starting with the audience at the Grand Vizier Rustem Pasha, during which the Moldavian prince expressed his desire to become a Muslim and ending with the position of Beg of Silistra, given to the one who was to be named Mehmed. Navagero concluded sadly that – the former Moldavian prince had become „from rich, poor, from master, a slave” (p. 310). Regarding the last two cases, these are „dedicated to the first two years of Wallachia’s participation in the «The Long War» (1593-1606)” (p. 32).

Half a millennium ago, people seemed very much interested in obtaining information that foretold the outburst of a conflict. Both Venice, „the capital of the news during medieval and modern times”

(p. 219), and the Romanian territories, at an informational level not very well developed, had constantly monitored and tried to forecast the „movements” of the Ottoman Empire; the Turks, on the other hand, had paid particular attention to everything that happened around them. This complex relationship has been analysed from many angles in the book written by Ovidiu Cristea, a book which, as the author admits, „has taken the entangled route of the news in the 15th and 16th centuries” (p. 372).