

OPINION

FOR THE DISSERTATION FOR OBTAINING THE EDUCATIONAL AND SCIENTIFIC DEGREE
"DOCTOR"

OF DONIKA NIKOLAEVA TSANOVSKA-SCHNEEWEIS,

ON THE THEME: "THE ROLE AND ACTIVITIES OF THE DRAGOMANS. THE AUSTRIAN BRANCH
OF THE TESTA FAMILY DURING THE SECOND HALF OF THE 18TH CENTURY – THE FIRST HALF
OF THE 19TH CENTURY”,

WITH SCIENTIFIC SUPERVISOR ASSOC. PROF. DR. MARIA BARAMOVA, SUBMITTED FOR
DEFENSE AT THE FACULTY OF HISTORY OF SOFIA UNIVERSITY "ST. KLIMENT OF OHRID" IN
2024.

The research topic chosen for Donika Tsanovska-Schneeweiss's dissertation is the historical analysis of the activities and role of the representatives of the Austrian branch of the Testa family, which traditionally has important positions in the dragoman sphere, in the second half of the 18th century - the first half of the 19th century, the time when this branch played a particularly important role in diplomatic relations between the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires.

Donika Tsanovska-Schneevais is a well trained and qualified researcher with a master's degree from Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" (programme "Diplomacy and Intelligence in the Balkans"), with successfully completed doctoral studies at the Faculty of History under the supervision of Prof. Maria Baramova, who is a recognized authority in the field of diplomatic relations between European countries and the Ottoman Empire, with a command of several foreign the language (German, English, Turkish, Russian, Romanian), which is especially important given the scope of activities of the representatives of the Testa family.

The dissertation is based on the use of wide range of documents from the various departments of the Habsburg central administration deposited in the Austrian State Archives. Donika Tsanovska-Schneeweiss knows well and critically uses the publications of Austrian, Dutch, Italian, English, Turkish and other historians.

The first chapter of the dissertation is dedicated to a thorough analysis of the place and role of dragomanship, an institution that arose out of necessity due to the great difference between the administrative and legislative system of the Ottoman Empire and European countries, and the language barrier. Along with that, the dragomans as a mediating and connecting link exerted a significant influence on diplomatic relations between the European countries and the Ottoman Empire, as well as on the development of international relations, and the transfer of information and culture between the East and the West.

Nevertheless, some dragomans began over time to use their access to important information and their influence for personal purposes, incidentally betraying the trust of their employers. That had created negative opinion and led to the discrediting of the institution and its decline towards the middle of the 19th century. Then European diplomatic institutions, the British one in particular, began to prepare their own personnel for direct communication with the Ottoman authorities (the so-called "secretaries for oriental affairs" with a corresponding language training).

The initial period of the activity of the Austrian branch of the Testa family is examined in the second chapter. The Testa dynasty had been associated with the Habsburg monarchy since 1740 in the person of Bartholomeus I Testa, who during his long career had shown brilliant abilities and skills, and was awarded a high administrative rank, a noble title and a family coat of arms. Thus he paved the way for subsequent generations of the family which pursued the same career, consolidating their positions and strengthening their influence.

The third chapter is devoted to examining the careers of the next two generations of the Austrian branch of the Testa family, who had also distinguished themselves in the dragomanic and diplomatic spheres. Their professional activities were in the service of Habsburg diplomacy in the center of the Ottoman Empire, but also in Austrian diplomatic missions in a number of European countries and cities (Athens, Hamburg, Kassel, Hanover, Florence). The qualification and loyalty of the following generations of the Austrian branch of the Testa family received corresponding recognition, they were awarded orders by Habsburg rulers, by the papacy, and one of them achieved the highest state post by being included in the Imperial Council. The case of the carriers of the representatives of the Testa family offers an additional touch to the methods of incorporating qualified personnel of different ethnic origins into the administrative machinery of the Habsburg Monarchy.

According to the conclusions of the doctoral student, the representatives of the Austrian branch of the Testa family exerted great influence on diplomatic life and the development of international relations and contributed significantly to maintaining stable diplomatic relations between the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires during the period under review.

In the fourth chapter, "The Dragomans and their networks of influence. The Austrian branch of the Testa family as an example", the specific case is treated as a historical model of the status and functioning of the dragoman institution, which had been a very important element in the international information channels. In their efforts to maintain a monopoly in the profession, extensive networks had been created between important and influential families, including those based on matrimonial ties.

Donika Tsanovska-Schneeweiss has successfully accomplished the main task of her research work, to reveal the important role of dragomans from the Austrian branch of the Testa family in Austro-Ottoman diplomatic relations and maintenance of information channels. Thus, the dissertation contributes to a more complete and adequate understanding of the history of the functioning of this specific institution in general, and of its role in Austro-Ottoman relations, in particular.

Donika Tsanovska-Schneeweiss has three publications that are related to the topic of the dissertation work (a historiographical review of the role of the dragomans and their influence, about the dragomans from the Dutch branch of the Testa family and others), and several participations with reports of student research readings.

The dissertation of Donika Tsanovska-Schneeweiss is shedding new light on the problems related to the history of the dragoman institution, especially the representatives of the Austrian branch of the Testa family, it introduces new archival sources and offers original interpretations of the questions related to the role and activities of these specific diplomatic functionaries.

Given the importance of the chosen scientific problem, its comprehensive and competent research, the impressive volume of documents introduced into scientific circulation and critically use of scholarly literature, the convincing conclusions and the contributions in the dissertation, as a member of the Scientific Jury, I will vote positively, that

the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in History, is to be awarded to Donika Nikolaeva Tsanovska-Schneeweiss.

Apr. 28, 2024

Prof. Dr. Roumen Genov