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**BEYOND THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE'S CORDON SANITAIRE.
ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES IN THE DANUBE DELTA (1830^S–1850^S)¹**

Abstract: This paper examines how the sanitary separation of the St. George Island from the rest of the Russian Empire influenced the development of the town Sulina, the main settlement established on this island, and the creation of a distinct territorial identity. To this end, I have corroborated archival documentary sources from the archival fund 'Chancellery of the Governor of Bessarabia', held at the National Archive of the Republic of Moldova, with other types of narrative accounts, be they authored by travellers, sailors, merchants or soldiers who visited Sulina during that period. The paper will thus determine how the sanitary isolation of the St. George Island manifested itself, then it will analyse the lucrative opportunities that attracted new inhabitants to Sulina and examine how, despite harsh living conditions, Sulina came to be regarded as an 'American Eden'.

Keywords: Russian Empire, Bessarabia, Danube Delta, Sulina, cordon sanitaire, navigation, fishing, migration

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Introduction

The Peace Treaty of Edirne (Adrianople, 2/14 September 1829) secured to the Russian Empire control over the entire Danube Delta through the annexation of the strategic territory between the Chilia (Ukr.: Kiliiske hyrlo) and St. George (Rom.: Sf. Gheorghe, Ukr.: Heorhiyivske hyrlo) branches of the river. The treaty forbade the establishment of military fortifications in the region, where the Russians were allowed, however, to organise quarantine stations.² In 1834, in line with this provision, the Russian government initiated the transfer of the empire's cordon

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² *Polnoe Sobranie Zakonov Rossijskoj Imperii* (hereafter *PSZRI*), sobr. 2, vol. IV, 1829, SPb., 1830, No. 3128, ss. 628–629.

sanitaire from the Chilia to the Sulina arm. A portion of the newly annexed territory – the so-called St. George Island – remained outside Russia's anti-epidemiological barrier. Subsequently, in 1836, the Chilia branch was closed to international shipping and all commercial navigation was redirected to the Sulina arm (see Map 1 below).

This paper is based in particular on unpublished sources from the archival fund 'Chancellery of the Governor of Bessarabia', held at the National Archive of the Republic of Moldova. The fund mainly consists of various reports sent by quarantine authorities in the Danube Delta region to the Military Governor of Bessarabia, but also directives sent to the latter by the Governor General of Novorossiia and Bessarabia in connection to the activity of Bessarabia's Danubian quarantines. My aim is to establish how the sanitary separation of the St. George Island from the rest of the Russian Empire influenced the development of Sulina, the main settlement established on this island, and the creation of a distinct territorial identity. To this end, I have corroborated archival information with other types of narrative accounts, be they authored by travellers, sailors, merchants or soldiers who visited Sulina during that period. This aspect has been the subject of several works written by Romanian scholars.³ This paper will thus aim to determine how the sanitary isolation of the St. George Island manifested itself, then it will analyse the lucrative opportunities that attracted new inhabitants to Sulina and examine how, despite harsh living conditions, Sulina came to be regarded as an 'American Eden'.

³ See *Călători străini despre Țările Române în secolul al XIX-lea*, serie nouă, vol. III–VI (București: Editura Academiei Române, 2006–2010); Constantin Ardeleanu, *Gurile Dunării – o problemă europeană. Comerț și navigație la Dunărea de Jos în surse contemporane (1829–1853)* (Brăila: Editura Istros – Muzeul Brăilei, 2012).

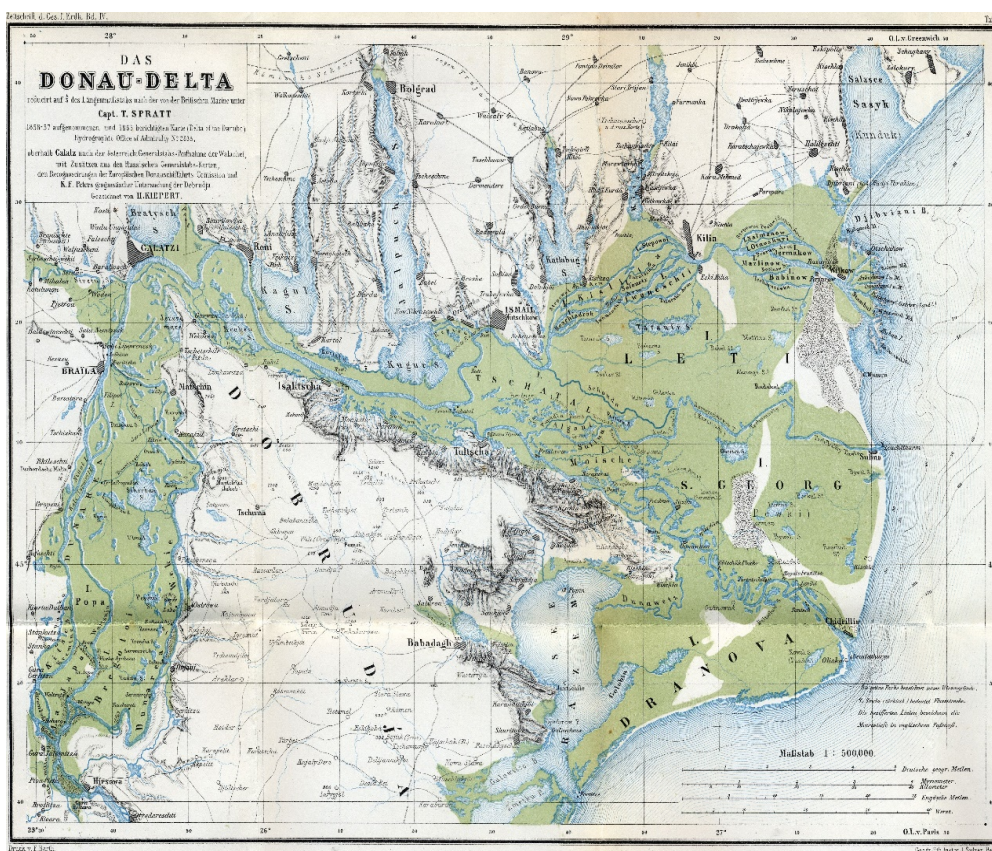


Fig. 1. Map of the Danube Delta

Source:

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/81/Danube_mouths_1867.JPG

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The Sulina quarantine and the sanitary isolation of the St. George Island

To prevent unauthorized crossings between the right and the left banks of the Sulina branch, a cordon sanitaire with guard posts was established in 1835 so as to secure visual control over the entire course of the anti-epidemic borderline. Cossack troops and six fluvial warships were tasked with coastguard duties. The warships, placed in a ‘doubtful status’ (so deemed to follow quarantine restrictions when entering a Russian port), were based at several strategic points along the river.⁵

The preventive sanitary system was completed with the establishment of the Sulina quarantine in 1836. According to the provisions of the imperial ukase of 7/19 February 1836, the secondary-rank (or private) quarantine in Sulina was not meant to sanitarily disinfect incoming ships, but directed them to the first-rank (or ‘main’) quarantines in Odesa or Ismail. Sulina was to serve as a port of refuge for ships sailing in the region during storms, when they needed urgent repairs or in order to follow quarantine procedures for people and goods saved from shipwreck. However, ships bound for Ismail were allowed to purge their quarantine period at Sulina, wherefrom goods could be transported overland, across the Letea Island, towards the ‘clean’ imperial territories. The Sulina quarantine station (lazaretto) was to consist of two sections: Section 1, located at the eastern end of Letea Island (i.e., on the left bank of the Danube), was intended for ships coming from clean ports, and Section 2, on the St. George Island (i.e., on the right bank of the Sulina branch), was meant for ships coming from sanitarily doubtful (‘unsafe’) locations.⁶

The fact that the St. George Island – with the town of Sulina – was placed in a ‘doubtful status’ meant that all local inhabitants had to undergo full quarantine procedures in order to enter the empire. Sanitary observation could be purged on the left bank, in the Practical Section of the Sulina lazaretto. The quarantine period for people was 14 or 28 days, depending on the epidemiological situation of the

⁴ See *Călători străini despre Țările Române în secolul al XIX-lea*, serie nouă, vol. III–VI (București, Editura Academiei Române, 2006–2010); Constantin Ardeleanu, *Gurile Dunării – o problemă europeană. Comerț și navigație la Dunărea de Jos în surse contemporane (1829–1853)* (Brăila: Editura Istros – Muzeul Brăilei, 2012).

⁵ Arhiva Națională a Republicii Moldova (The National Archive of the Republic of Moldova, hereafter ANRM), F. 2, inv. 1, d. 2950, f. 17–18.

⁶ ANRM, F. 2, inv.1, d. 2532, ff. 1–4 verso.

Ottoman Empire. For some personal items, which could only be cleaned by ventilation, the period could be increased to 42 days. Purging quarantine was not only time consuming, but it was also costly. For each day spent in the lazaretto, travellers paid 1.5 (assignation) roubles per room during the cold season and 1 rouble in the warm season. They also had to pay the services of the health guard(s) supervising their strict observance of sanitary restrictions: 1 rouble for higher rank and 0.75 roubles for lower rank.⁷ Even though this fee could be covered, for poorer travellers, from the quarantine's own budget, accommodation costs amounted, in the most favourable case, to 14 assignation roubles (or 4.2 silver roubles after 1840). This almost equalled to the monthly salary of the head of the Chancellery of the Sulina lazaretto, so the price was rather high. Crossing the border without observing sanitary restrictions was punishable with the death sentence during periods of active epidemics or with exile to Siberia in times of epidemiological calm, all cases being judged by the military courts of the Russian Empire.⁸

Initially, the observation period for land travellers could not be purged in the Sulina lazaretto due to lack of proper facilities. On 17 November 1836, the Administration of the Ismail Quarantine sent to the Military Governor of Bessarabia, Major General P.I. Fedorov, an interpellation from the Sulina Quarantine, dated 9 November 1836, concerning the admission of the period of observation in the Doubtful Section for the lazaretto's staff and their families, if they wished to travel to Ismail overland, via the Letea Island. The Administration considered that such permission did not violate the provisions of the imperial ukase. However, it requested further clarifications, including by contacting the management of the Ismail Customs District to inform on this matter the Sulina Customs Office, which generally did not allow border crossings in that region. On 29 November Fedorov referred the request to Count M.S. Vorontsov, Governor General of Novorossiia and Bessarabia. The latter's reply, dated 15 December 1836, stated that such a problem should not have arisen, since the provisions of the ukase allowed merchants and their agents to undergo sanitary formalities at Sulina if they wished to continue their journey overland, through imperial territories, after landing at Sulina. As for the quarantine staff, this permission was all the more justified. Moreover, Vorontsov requested Fedorov to order the head of the Ismail Customs District to instruct the customs official in Sulina to allow unhindered passage of persons wishing to cross

⁷ The 1841 Quarantine Regulation, adopted after the 1839 currency reform, set the lodging fee at 0.45 and 0.30 silver roubles respectively, and the fee for guards at 0.3 silver roubles, plus food. *PSZRI*, sobr. 2, vol. XVI, otd. 1, 1841, SPb., 1842, No. 14614, ss. 465–466.

⁸ *PSZRI*, sobr. 2, vol. VII, 1832, SPb., 1833, no. 5690, ss. 738, 748–749, 773–774; *Ibid.*, vol. X, 1835, otd. 2, Shtaty i Tabeli, SPb., 1836, no. 8717, s. 386.

into the Russian Empire, after undergoing the quarantine observation there.⁹

However, the Sulina lazaretto could clean only a limited number of people due to lack of proper facilities. As several English shipowners had raised this problem, on 27 June 1838 Vorontsov wrote to Fedorov that although purging the quarantine at Sulina was more convenient due to its location and to the fact that the islands were scarcely populated, he agreed to escort ships bound for Russian ports to other quarantines ‘until the proper organisation of the Sulina Quarantine’, asking to be informed of what works were needed to make this possible.¹⁰ The organisation of the passenger quarter of the lazaretto was not followed by an increase in the number of persons who crossed the border between the two river banks. Throughout the year the lazaretto’s passenger section was deserted. The only exceptions were arrestees caught by Cossacks and returned for trial back within the empire, or officials from the Doubtful Section sent on various missions within the empire. Seafarers on ships that brought supplies for the military and militia on the St. George Island from various Russian ports on the Black Sea served their observation term on board their ships. More crowding could be observed during the periods when fishermen returned to their homes as the Danube froze over, or with the rotation of the Cossack troops deployed for service on the St. George Island.¹¹

The only opportunity to get out of the sanitary isolation in which the inhabitants of the St. George Island found themselves was during floods, even though the Russian authorities tried to limit, as far as possible, unauthorized crossings of people on the Letea and Ceatal Islands. In such a case, having been informed by the Ismail Quarantine Administration, the Military Governor of Bessarabia proposed to the Governor General of Novorossiia and Bessarabia, on 23 April 1838, that the area between the Sulina and Chilia arms be placed in a doubtful status. This was because the health guard posts had been flooded, and by order of the Commander of the Danube ports the coastguards were moved to the Chilia arm, and guarding the pickets was transferred entirely to the warships of the Coastguard. Since they were placed at a great distance from each other and could not prevent the plague from entering the imperial borders, and the sailors could not be properly fed, the Commander also proposed moving the warships to the Chilia arm. However, in his reply of 18 May 1838, Vorontsov insisted that one or two warships be kept on the Sulina arm. They had to move along the river, so as ‘to ensure the safety of the sanitary pickets and to prevent the passage of “vagabonds” to the Ceatal and Letea

⁹ ANRM, F. 2, inv.1, d. 2532, ff. 8–14.

¹⁰ ANRM, F. 2, inv. 1, d. 2944, ff. 5–9.

¹¹ ANRM, F. 2, inv. 1, d. 4288, ff. 176 verso–177, 270 verso–271, 274 verso–275, 303 verso–304, 347 verso–348 and others.

Islands'.¹²

In the interior of the St. George Island, police duties were carried out by Cossack detachments. According to the instructions given by the Governor General of Novorossiia and Bessarabia to the Military Governor of Bessarabia on 3 March 1838, 100 Cossacks were to be initially posted on the St. George Island and placed under the command of the Sulina Police Chief. After drawing up the plan and the statistical description of the island and of the town of Sulina, 30–40 Cossacks were to remain in the service of the Sulina Police Chief.¹³ The decree of 14 April 1840, which ordered that a port with its own administrator be officially opened within the Sulina Quarantine station, under the title of Master of the Sulina Port and Chief of the Sanitary Pickets, placed 25 Cossacks under his subordination.¹⁴ In fact, according to the report that the Cossack ataman, Major-General Vasilevskij, sent, on 4 October 1841, to Fedorov, the 25 Cossacks subordinated to the Master of the Sulina Port were periodically changed by rotation from the regiments of the Danube Cossack Army deployed to Southern Bessarabia.¹⁵

The Regulation on the Danube Cossack Army of 13 December 1844 reinforced among its obligations the guarding of the sanitary cordons on the Letea and Ceatal Islands, the organisation of detachments to reinforce the guarding of the cordons on the right bank of the Danube and the maintenance of sentry posts on the St. George Island. The guard was rotated every three years in the month of May. In cases of necessity, the guarding of the cordons could be supplemented by emergency detachments.¹⁶ The Danube Cossacks also formed detachments that raided the St. George Island to catch 'vagabonds.' These 'vagabonds' were various fugitives, both from the Russian Empire or from other states. The domestic fugitives were generally serfs who fled from their estates to escape the excessive exploitation to which they were subjected, while the foreign ones were mostly Christians who fled from the Ottoman Empire to escape religious and economic oppression. On many occasions, during raids, the Cossacks were met with armed resistance.¹⁷

During the first half of the nineteenth century, according to Russian sanitary regulations, towns and regions where cases of plague were detected were cordoned off by military cordons and the movement of people outside was forbidden. The sanitary isolation could last for months, but when no new cases were detected during

¹² ANRM, F. 2, inv. 1, d. 2950, ff. 23–24, 32–32 verso.

¹³ ANRM, F. 2, inv. 1, d. 2775, ff. 16–19 verso.

¹⁴ *PSZRI*, sobr. 2, t. XV, 1840, otd. 1, SPb., 1841, no. 13385, s. 284.

¹⁵ ANRM, F. 2, inv. 1, d. 3682, ff. 22–22 verso.

¹⁶ *PSZRI*, sobr. 2, vol. XIX, otd. 1, 1844, SPb., 1845, No. 18526, ss. 849–850.

¹⁷ I.A. Ancupov, *Kazachestvo rossijskoe mezhdru Bugom i Dunaem* (Kishinev, 2000), 99–100.

the established observation period, the restrictions were lifted and the movement of people was restored.¹⁸ From this perspective, the isolation of the town of Sulina, although permanent, was not total. The detection of a case of plague on the St. George Island did not lead to the breaking of all links, as in other cases, but only to a revision of the observation period in quarantine on the clean bank. Each case of sudden death on the St. George Island, which was a somewhat widespread phenomenon in that period, was examined by the doctor of the Doubtful Section of the Sulina Quarantine to rule out plague or other pandemic diseases. If there were no outward signs of the disease that had caused the death, autopsies were carried out, which were also attended by the doctor from the Practical Section. Such cases were reported by the Master of the Sulina Port to the Military Governor of Bessarabia, and by the Commissioner of the Doubtful Section to the Central Quarantine Administration in Ismail, to which the Sulina Quarantine was subordinated.¹⁹

Employment opportunities in Sulina and on the St. George Island

Fishing. One source of the island's population since ancient times has been the fishing industry, with fishermen attracted by the local geographical conditions that favour this activity. There were 23 lakes on the island rich in fish, linked by creeks and streams to the Sulina and St. George arms of the Danube, as well as to the Black Sea.²⁰

Until 1836 fishing on the St. George Island was free and untaxed. Later it began to be taxed indirectly, through the concession of fishing rights. The concessionaire, who won the tender organised by the state authorities, paid into the treasury the amount proposed and received the right to collect $\frac{1}{8}$ from the fishermen's catch. As the fish required immediate processing, the concessionaires brought in their own workers to salt or dry the fish. Fishing concessions on the St. George Island were granted separately from the rest of the Danube Delta. Thus, between 1 June 1836 and 1 January 1839, fishing in the region between the Sulina and the St. George arms was given in concession for the sum of 5,700 (assignation) roubles or 1,628.56 silver roubles.²¹ In addition, a separate concession was granted

¹⁸ *PSZRI*, sobr. 2, vol. XVI, otd. 1, 1841, SPb., 1842, No. 14614, s. 484.

¹⁹ ANRM, F. 2, inv. 1, d. 4288, ff. 222–224.

²⁰ *Voенно-статистическое обозрение Россійской имперіи*, том XI, Ch. 3. Bessarabskaja Oblast', SPb., 1849, s. 58.

²¹ *Issledovanija o sostojanii rybolovstva v Rossii*, vol. VIII, Opisanie rybolovstva na Chernom i Azovskom Morjah, SPb., 1871, s. 299.

for fishing on the Black Sea coast, off the St. George Island, for a length of 33 versts.²²

Since 1841 the conditions for concessions in the Danube Delta, except for St. George Island, were changed. The concessionaire, a merchant named Shirokov residing in the town of Surazh, got the exclusive right to fish, which basically meant that all fishermen had to become his employees. Following the protests of the fishermen of Vâlcov (Ukr.: Vylkove), in 1843–1847 they were granted the right to fish in the waters of St. George Island until the expiry of Shirokov's concession. This contributed to the settlement, at least temporarily, on the St. George Island of several fishermen from Vâlcov, the main hub of the Lower Danubian fishing industry. Most of its inhabitants were Lipovans or Old Believers who had migrated towards the Danube during the eighteenth century. They gave up the agricultural land belonging to the town, just to be allowed to fish without restrictions. However, after the expiry of Shirokov's concession, the Vâlcov fishermen did not receive back their fishing estates, as promised by the St. Petersburg authorities. Moreover, in 1849–1854 fishing in the waters of St. George Island was given in concession to an Odesa merchant of Jewish origin, Geduld, for the amount of 5,050 silver roubles. The concessionaire enjoyed the exclusive right to fish and paid the fishermen 50 kopecks for each pood of fish caught, applying various restrictions. Thanks to the personal involvement of Vorontsov, from 1854 the inhabitants of Vâlcov were again granted the right to fish freely in the waters of St. George Island for another five years, to compensate for the limitations imposed by Geduld, who had succeeded in obtaining the exclusive right to fish between the Chilia and Sulina arms.²³

The fishermen of Vâlcov are often mentioned in documentary sources, usually individually, but sometimes in groups. Thus, the report of the Master of the Sulina Port dated 1 December 1843, addressed to the Military Governor of Bessarabia, mentioned by name 27 fishermen from Vâlcov, who had passed to the Practical Section of the Quarantine to purge the needed sanitary observation period; the report of 8 December 1843 mentioned another 10, and that of 16 December 1843 another 26 Vâlcov fishermen.²⁴

²² *Pribavlenie No. 92 k Sankt Peterbrgskim Vedomostjam*, 28 aprilja 1838, s. 1010. A verst (Russian: верста, versta) is an obsolete Russian unit of length equal to 1.0668 kilometres (3,500 feet).

²³ *Issledovanija o sostojanii*, vol. VIII, ss. 300–301. See also Ardeleanu, 'Fishing in Politically Troubled Waters: the Fishermen of Vylkove, Romanian Nation-Making and an International Organization in the Danube Delta in Late 1850s and Early 1860s', *Revue des Études Sud-Est Européennes* 55 (2017), pp. 325–327.

²⁴ ANRM, F. 2, inv. 1, d. 4288, ff. 405–406 verso, 426–426 verso, ff. 433–433 verso.

Transshipping cargo and piloting ships. Navigation upstream the Danube was complicated by the many bends of the Sulina arm. Another major problem was the Sulina bar, a sandbank naturally formed at the junction between river and sea. Captains of merchant ships heading for the inland Danube ports had to employ two or three sailors at Sulina to help the crew steer the ship against the current or tow it along the Danube towpaths. If the ship was loaded, more hands were needed. Sailors stayed on board until the ship returned to Sulina. They were extremely useful for loading cargo in inland Danube ports and handling goods that had to be transhipped to lighters. Pilots with knowledge of local geography were also needed. The usual pay for a pilot was 20 dollars for the voyage from Sulina and back.²⁵

According to Russian officials' calculations, from 1838 to 1848 a total of 16,172 foreign merchant vessels entered the Sulina mouth, making an average of 1,470 per year.²⁶ Such a large number of ships created an increased demand for pilots at Sulina. In fact, the French traveller Xavier Marmier describing Sulina in the mid-1840s noted:

'[...] When we entered the Sulina roadstead, the wind was against us and we were forced to drop anchor. More than a hundred merchant ships were there for the same reason. Most of them could not enter the Black Sea, because manoeuvring was difficult and they reached more than nine feet into the water. They were forced to charter other vessels which they loaded with some of their cargo. These followed them to the other side of the mouth, from where they returned the cargo they had been entrusted with. It was hard and dangerous work and often got to the point where ships caught in a strong wind were forced to put out to sea and abandon the cargo. Transshipment fees are the main income of the Russian colony in Sulina. During bad sailing periods, because there were a large number of ships stopped in the roadstead, these revenues were very high.'²⁷

In 1851 a Society of Sulina pilots was founded. Both Russian and foreign subjects with valid passports, who could prove their piloting skills and knew the peculiarities of navigation at the Danube mouths, could join this society. The port master coordinated the work of the society and kept a nominal list of pilots, supervising their conduct and the performance of their duties. Pilots who did not perform their duties with dignity could be expelled from the society, but the verdict was enforced only after approval by the port master. The latter also set pilotage fees,

²⁵ Ardeleanu, *International Trade and Diplomacy at the Lower Danube. The Sulina Question and the Economic Premises of the Crimean War (1829–1853)* (Brăila, Editura Istros, 2014), 35.

²⁶ A.A. Skal'kovskij, *Torgovaja promyshlennost' v Novorossijskom krae, Zhurnal Ministerstva Vnutrennih Del*, XXXIII, SPb., 1851, s. 34.

²⁷ *Călători străini cit.*, vol. IV (București: Editura Academiei Române, 2007), 625.

depending on the time of year, but these fees still had to be approved by the Governor General of Novorossiia and Bessarabia. Persons who were not members of the society were forbidden to pilot vessels on the Sulina arm.²⁸

In 1852 there were about 300 lighters registered at Sulina, which were under the direct control of the port master. Several contemporary sources reported the fraudulent behaviour of these lighters, consisting mostly of Greek sailors 'who were little better than pirates' and robbed ships 'of grain entrusted to them by all sorts of devices – false bottoms, or boats carrying parts of grain unloaded during the night etc.'²⁹

Salvage of wrecked or stranded vessels. Difficult sailing conditions were a frequent cause of shipwrecks of merchant vessels in the Sulina arm.³⁰ The French Consul General in the Romanian Principalities wrote in 1846 about 'the unimaginable state of affairs at Sulina', i.e., 'the storms on the sea, the redoubtable caprices of the Danube, the catastrophes, in a word the whole nature which affects Sardinian, Greek, Austrian, or Russian ships [...]'.³¹

Cargo and goods from the wrecked ships reached both sides of the Sulina arm. As the crews were not able to provide permanent security for them, on the right bank they became an informal source of income for fishermen and other local people. Even the collection of goods along the left bank became a business for some people, but it required authorisation from the Sulina Port master, as it took place right under the eyes of the guard posts of the cordon sanitaire. In a report send by the Head of the Ismail Sanitary District, addressed to the Military Governor of Bessarabia on 5 May 1841, it was stated that since the coastguards were not allowed to touch these goods (which were not sanitarily cleaned), they had become a real problem, blocking access routes to the guard posts and making patrolling difficult. Several Greek sailors from Sulina were allowed to collect them by boat and transport them to the right bank, for which they were legally entitled to ¼ of them, but this arrangement did not solve the problem. According to the official, the situation was particularly complicated between guard posts nos. 31 and 33, for a distance of about 15 versts, where the patrol road was blocked with wrecks and debris of various kinds from wrecked ships. Considering that the measures taken by

²⁸ *PSZRI*, sobr. 2, t. XXVI, 1851, otd. 2, ЦПБ., 1852, no. 25852, ss. 192.

²⁹ Ardeleanu, *International Trade*, 221.

³⁰ See Andrei Emilciuc, "The Trade of Galati and Braila in the Reports of Russian Officials from Sulina Quarantine Station (1836–1853)", in: Constantin Ardeleanu & Andreas Lyberatos (eds.), *Port Cities of the Western Black Sea Coast and the Danube Economic and Social Development in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Corfu, 2016), 63–93.

³¹ *Călători străini*, vol. V (București: Editura Academiei Române, 2009), 84.

the local authorities to clear the shore of this wreckage were not sufficient, he proposed to set up an authorised salvage team at Sulina to assist ships in distress to rescue cargo and crews. This team was to be deployed near the guard post no. 32, about 3 versts away from Sulina, to reduce response times. It was to be made up of people permanently 'in quarantine', i.e., residing on the right bank of the river, and was to be under the command of an officer with naval experience. For maintenance, the team had the right to retain part of the salvaged goods as a legal reward. In return, it was obliged to tow ships from the practical shore only to the doubtful one, so ship masters were exempted from paying the additional premium for compulsory towing in the port of Sulina. Moreover, a team of four workers with two carts was to be formed at Sulina to collect all the wood brought ashore by shipwrecks, with the right to sell it for fire or other needs. The Governor agreed to the creation of the salvage team, but ordered that it be stationed at Sulina and making it report directly to the port master. With regard to the wrecks and parts of wrecks dumped on the left bank, he ordered that the wood be collected by the Cossacks at the guard posts, under the supervision of a quarantine officer, and used for the needs of the cordon sanitaire and of the lazaretto.³² Based on this decision, the construction of a rescue boat was initiated in Sulina.³³

The subordination of the salvage team to the Sulina port master created a direct conflict of interest in terms of his commitment to secure the navigability of the Sulina arm. On the other hand, this inevitably meant that any dissatisfaction with the grounding or wrecking of a ship was doubled by the involvement of the Sulina port master in its rescue, in order to obtain the established reward. A telling example is the British ship *Anna Eliza*, with Daniel Cook as captain. Sailing from London to Galați with a cargo of various goods, the ship ran aground at the Sulina mouth near the St. George Island on 6 April 1844. The captain was forced to seek the assistance of the Sulina port master P.V. Soloviev. All goods were unloaded and stored in a safe place, and the ship was refloated. Soloviev demanded $\frac{1}{4}$ of the value of the cargo as a reward, in accordance with international maritime law, but captain Cook rejected the claim and left for Constantinople, leaving the ship at Sulina. Returning from Constantinople, Cook offered Soloviev 90,000 lei, but when Soloviev refused Cook left $\frac{1}{4}$ of the cargo and sailed with the rest to Galați. The British vice-consul in Galați, Charles Cunningham, who was also representative of Lloyd's Insurance Company of London, send a protest letter to the Governor of Novorossiia and Bessarabia. Following this protest, Soloviev was ordered to return the detained

³² ANRM, F. 2, inv. 1, d. 3682, f. 1–5, 28–29.

³³ *Gosudarstvennaja vneshnjaja torgovlja 1841 goda v raznyh ejo vidah*, SPb., 1842, s. X.

cargo if it was not sold. The case was to be heard by the Ismail Commercial Court to determine the premium that the insurance company would pay.³⁴

In such circumstances, with dozens of ships damaged every year, Sulina provided excellent opportunities for several Greek shipbuilders, ironmongers, carpenters and sailmakers who were licensed and protected by the port master himself. These craftsmen only gave a cursory repair to damaged ships so that they could reach the larger inland ports upstream. With heavy shipping and a problematic passage, which required ships to wait for a favourable time to be able to sail up the Danube, Sulina also became profitable for a handful of petty traders and dozens of tavern keepers tolerated by the Russian authorities.³⁵ French traveller Xavier Hommaire de Hell, who visited Sulina in the autumn of 1846, wrote that 'its inhabitants, traffickers or owners of small boats <know> how to make very good use of the resources offered by the port which shelters so many ships'.³⁶

Sulina arm cleaning pontoons. Another employment for the island's residents was the Sulina arm cleaning pontoons. In 1840, under pressure from European powers, Russia signed a 10-year navigation and trade convention with the Habsburg Empire. By this treaty imperial Russia undertook to clean up the Sulina arm, and Austria agreed that ships under its flag would be subject to a charge of 2–3 Spanish talers when passing from the sea to the Danube or from the Danube to the sea. To fulfil its obligations, the Russian authorities managed in 1842 to build two pontoons, but their operation encountered numerous problems right from the start.

The harsh working conditions on the pontoons and the relatively low wages offered to seafarers limited the number of people willing to accept work on the pontoons. In September 1842, the Sulina Quarantine reported to the Military Governor of Bessarabia that the sailors hired to work on the pontoons refused, after the expiry of their one-year contract, to continue their work. To prevent sinking and damage to the pontoons, eight sailors were kept on a monthly payment of 7 roubles each, until the Governor's eventual disposition in this regard.³⁷

The Sulina port master Soloviev wrote to the Military Governor of Bessarabia, on 22 October 1842, that, as the teams of workers were made up of free men, there was no certainty that they would work hard and responsibly without being supervised. But as the Quarantine Commissioner could only rarely leave his post, by virtue of his duties, they remained unsupervised. Moreover, the team of workers, instead of removing the mud from the bottom of the river, was mainly

³⁴ ANRM, F. 2, inv. 1, d. 4488, f. 2–4.

³⁵ Ardeleanu, *International Trade*, 224.

³⁶ *Călători străini*, vol. IV, 639.

³⁷ ANRM, F. 2, inv. 1, d. 4011, ff. 11, 15.

concerned with collecting various items from wrecked or sunken vessels. The master felt that for these reasons, even if experienced officials were sent to run the pontoons instead of the two underofficers, the desired results could not be achieved.³⁸

Soloviev further reported to the Military Governor of Bessarabia, following the latter's order of 21 January 1843, that although he had communicated to the inhabitants of Sulina and the St. George Island the proposal to work on the pontoons to deepen the Sulina arm, out of the 32 people needed, only 18 people, all Greeks, expressed their willingness to do so, asking for 12 Spanish talers per month each. But they put forward a number of additional conditions: 1) they were to work on the pontoons only and were to be exempt from any other work; 2) the money due was to be given to them every three months; 3) if delays occurred, four people were to be allowed to leave the pontoons to make use of the money, but only when they had managed to find 14 more people to restore the full team; 4) in case someone from the team needed to leave the pontoons to go to the homeland or elsewhere, he was not to be prevented, but that person was obliged to bring another sailor in his place. The port master believed that these sailors could be persuaded to reduce their financial claims to 10 talers, mentioning that they were real professionals who had already worked on the pontoons.³⁹ But in the end the Russian officials were not happy with the amounts they demanded.

Thus, on 18 March 1843, the Military Governor of Bessarabia asked H.M. Varunov, the Administrator of the Reni Quarantine, appointed in charge of the cleaning of the Sulina arm, to find the needed number of soldiers to work on the pontoons, in view of the approaching date on which he was to travel to Sulina to start work that year. In response to a similar request to the Chief of Police of Ismail, Fedorov had already received on 24 February 1843 a list of those willing to work on the pontoons during that year's navigation season, with a monthly payment of 12 silver roubles. According to the estimates of the Ismail Police Chief, in the event of a 7-month sailing period, 84 roubles would have been required for each employee.⁴⁰

In the end, 8 sailors (3 underofficer in reserve and 5 free sailors) and 24 inhabitants from Ismail were employed, with a monthly wage of 10 roubles per person. Work began on 12 May 1843.⁴¹ However, on 6 September 1843, one of the two pontoons was thrown ashore and sank; all its sailors were rescued.⁴² In November 1843 a resident of Sulina, the Austrian subject Mateo Vilencco, having

³⁸ Ibid., f. 21 verso – 24 verso.

³⁹ ANRM, F. 2, inv. 1, d. 4250, f. 6–7.

⁴⁰ Ibid., f. 10, 13–14.

⁴¹ ANRM, F. 2, inv. 1, d. 4116, f. 16–16 verso.

⁴² ANRM, F. 2, inv. 1, d. 4288, f. 237–237 verso.

been promised a reward, managed to save the pontoon after several failed attempts.⁴³ In 1844 only the 8 sailors of the crew remained on the pontoon, four of them between 21 March and 1 August 1844, and the remaining four until 1 January 1845, only for supervision. According to Varunov's reports, during that year work was carried out to repair and improve the pontoons, which again suffered during the winter, being anchored in the port of Sulina. Other problems had to do with manning the pontoons. For this reason, several captains of Austrian ships began to refuse to pay the fee for cleaning the Sulina arm, provided for in the Russian-Austrian Treaty of 1840. On 17 May 1845, after the Austrian side lodged a diplomatic protest, the Governor General of Novorossiia and Bessarabia asked Varunov to urgently hire the necessary number of pontoon workers from Sulina, as there were no more willing workers in Ismail, Reni and Akkerman. For this purpose, he allowed him to use up to 100 roubles. It was only during August – November 1845 that 28 more people, in addition to the 4 sailors who had been maintained until then, were employed in active cleaning work on the pontoons. But in 1846 the work was again stopped and only 6 sailors were kept on the pontoons to supervise them. On 14 March 1847 the Administration of the Ismail Quarantine reported to the Governor General of Novorossiia and Bessarabia that no action was taken to search for sailors to work on the pontoons that year, as they had not received a provision to this effect, and the pontoons were in a deplorable state.⁴⁴ The Russian authorities were already looking for other solutions to carry out the work of cleaning the navigable passageway.⁴⁵

Illegal migration. Living in a borderland, some inhabitants of Sulina and the St. George Island were guides for fugitives from both sides of the border. Such cases were frequently reported by the Sulina Port Master to the Military Governor of Bessarabia. In the report addressed to Fedorov on 31 January 1843, Soloviev informed his superior about the capture near the border by the Cossacks deployed on St. George Island of the Ottoman subjects Timofei Saveliev, Ivan Haralmpiev and the Sulina inhabitant Grigory Pavlichenko. They were accused of helping the Cossack fugitive Semion Postica, who had left his cordon guard post no. 153, on the Letea Island, on 19 December 1842, and crossed the border in his four-oared boat. When searched, the fugitive's handkerchief was found and in it there were nine combat cartridges.⁴⁶ On 8 March, Soloviev reported the capture of 11 more fugitives, including 5 women, who intended to cross the border to the Ottoman

⁴³ ANRM, F. 2, inv. 1, d. 4116, f. 37–37 verso.

⁴⁴ Ibid., f. 111–113, 117–117 verso, 132, 138–140 verso, 145, 195–197 verso.

⁴⁵ Ardeleanu, *Gurile Dunării*, 177–178.

⁴⁶ ANRM, F. 2, inv. 1, d. 4245, f. 52–52 verso.

Empire on a fisherman's boat. The latter, along with five persons, had managed to disappear through the reeds.⁴⁷ The report of 15 October 1843 informs about another fugitive caught, a deserter from the Chişinău garrison, Carp Grashchuk, who was detained by the Cossack from guard post no. 161, Ignatie Arshchuk, while communicating with unidentified persons on Sulina's right bank, who tried to help him cross the water by approaching the left bank with a boat. On 14 November 1843, Soloviev reported on five other 'vagabonds' caught on the St. George Island: one Russian subject from the Chernigov Governorate and two women with their children, who presented themselves as Ottoman subjects from the village of Sarıköy, who had crossed to the St. George Island in search of their husbands.⁴⁸ Of course, there were diametrically opposite situations, when local inhabitants helped authorities to catch fugitives. In 1839, for instance, the British subject Spira-Kaliga, living in Sulina, who was piloting boats along the Sulina arm, was awarded a silver medal for the capture of four sailors from the Sulina Military Coastguard Post, who had deserted and tried to flee to the Ottoman Empire.⁴⁹

We can only guess the real proportions of this migration, as only cases caught by the Cossacks patrolling the island are documented. Some of these migrants found refuge in Sulina itself. Several sources described the Sulina inhabitants as the dregs of Europe: 'fugitive sailors, hunted pirates, convicts escaped from the galleys, murderers, hiding from the law or blood vengeance, gamblers who are too well known everywhere, deserters, swindlers of every kind and category.'⁵⁰

Between harsh survival conditions and the 'American Eden'

In May 1835, when the Governor General of Novorossiia and Bessarabia visited Sulina, there were only eight huts there, made of wood and reeds, which served to accommodate the commander and crew of the local coastguard post, but also a few fishermen. The St. George Island itself was inhabited almost exclusively by fishermen, with conical covers and their boats dotted here and there.⁵¹ Even if formally the Russian authorities vouched not to populate this island, their actions indicated otherwise. On 31 March 1838 the Military Governor of Bessarabia gave P.V. Soloviev instructions on how to act as Chief of Police on the St. George Island. These instructions referred, among other things, to the allotting of land plots for establishing commercial business, with the permission of the Governor of Bessarabia, and supervision attributions to make sure that a certain order was

⁴⁷ Ibid., f. 98–98 verso.

⁴⁸ ANRM, F. 2, inv. 1, d. 4288, f. 312–312 verso, 380–380 verso.

⁴⁹ *Zhurnal Ministerstva Vnutrennih Del*, XXXIV, 1839, no. 11, s. LXXXV.

⁵⁰ Ardeleanu, *International Trade*, 219.

⁵¹ *Severnaja pchela*, No. 114, 24 May 1835, c. 454.

observed during their construction. The Chief of Police was to chair the commission for drawing up the plan of the town of Sulina and of the St. George Island and for the census of local inhabitants, a commission which was to include the cadastral engineer and the commissioner of the Quarantine's Doubtful Section.⁵² This clearly indicates that the Russian authorities aimed to develop Sulina, despite their stated sanitary priorities in the region: increasing Sulina's population contradicted the stated benefits of a sparsely populated settlement, ideal for the operation of a quarantine station due to the low risk of spreading the deadly epidemics.

Life in Sulina was not easy. Frequent floods and storms from the sea, which affected the houses' resistance structure year after year, meant that inhabitants had to repair them regularly and to move to safer locations until the waters receded. The flood of 15–16 February 1847, for example, destroyed 11 private houses, while 12 others were affected to varying degrees. The house bought by the Port Master to provide refuge for affected people was also destroyed.⁵³

But the Russian authorities were more concerned with noting the damage, less with helping to remove and prevent its sources. As early as 1841, on the order of the military governor of Bessarabia of 19 December 1840, the chief architect of Ismail I.F. Dombrovski drew up a plan and a cost estimate for the construction of an embankment 350 sazhen long⁵⁴ and 20 sazhen wide (with 10 sazhen on the slope) to protect the buildings of the local lazaretto and indirectly the private houses in Sulina against river erosion.⁵⁵ However, its construction was postponed, being announced only on 6 October 1850.⁵⁶ The authorities soon realised that the embankment, built using cheaper methods than those envisaged in the original plan, could not cope with the water pressure. On 10 January 1851, the Governor General of Novorossiia and Bessarabia requested the Chancellery of the Special Administration of Ismail to receive the amount of 20,376 roubles, allocated by the Russian government for the reinforcement of the embankment in front of the Practical and the Doubtful Sections of the Sulina Quarantine against ice pressure. The execution of these works was granted by tender, by the contract of 21 August 1852, to Iurchenko, a merchant from Mykolaiv.⁵⁷

The harsh physical-geographical and meteorological conditions, as well as the fact that it was in a state of permanent quarantine, were serious disadvantages for turning the St. George Island into an attractive land, even though the Russian

⁵² ANRM, F. 2, inv. 1, d. 2775, ff. 74–77.

⁵³ ANRM, F. 2, inv. 1, d. 5049, ff. 8–9.

⁵⁴ Imperial Russian units of length: the sazhen was equal to 2.1336 m (seven feet).

⁵⁵ ANRM, F. 2, inv. 1, d. 3413, ff. 12, 18–19.

⁵⁶ ANRM, F. 2, inv. 1, d. 3675, ff. 90–91, 131–132.

⁵⁷ ANRM, F. 2, inv. 1, d. 5681, f. 1–3; d. 6523, ff. 19–20.

authorities pursued an active policy of colonising Southern Bessarabia. In 1841 a total of 781 people lived on the island, 192 of them (24.6 per cent) in Sulina. The distribution by sex reveals a clear predominance of males – 657 (84.1 per cent), with only 124 females (15.9 per cent). This situation was determined by the harsh living conditions and the occupation available on the island, which was basically fishing. To some extent, livestock was also kept, with 591 large horned cattle, 68 horses and 148 sheep recorded on the island.⁵⁸

However, during the 1840s the number of inhabitants of Sulina increased considerably, thanks to the lucrative opportunities that arose with the opening of the port, as presented above. Frenchman Marmier described Sulina around 1845, writing that: ‘On the right bank of this arm was founded a colony of merchants, of workers, who built along the river houses, shops, workshops. There is a Greek church there, a small warship, a commander, officers, inns, cafés. Sulina is no longer a mere quarantine station, it is a regular, well-built settlement, which in a few years will become a veritable town’.⁵⁹

In fact, data from Russian officials indicate that the population of Sulina increased from 192 inhabitants in 1841 to 1,172 in 1853, i.e., more than 6 times. Of these inhabitants 872 were Russian subjects (74.4 per cent) and 300 foreign subjects (25.6 per cent), mostly Greeks. The proportion of foreign residents was the highest in the entire province of Bessarabia and Novorossiia, surpassing even cosmopolitan Odesa, where, by virtue of the restrictions imposed on commercial activities, the number of foreign subjects was steadily decreasing during the 1830s–1850s.⁶⁰ The number of buildings increased during the same period from 80 private houses, 8 shops, 2 groceries, 5 confectioners and a mill to about 400 private houses, shops, confectioners and barbers, 50 restaurants and 40 wineries.⁶¹

At the outbreak of the Crimean War (1853), Sulina was already an important port at the Danube mouths due to the development of international trade, but it was not a commercial gateway to the Russian Empire. Under the lax control of corrupt Russian officials (police chief, harbour master and quarantine commissioner), everyone found a way to prosper. Sulina, according to historian Constantin Ardeleanu, was a refuge and Eden for several hundred pilots, sailors, merchants and

⁵⁸ N. Murzakevich, ‘Poezdka na ostrov Levki, ili Fidonisi, v 1841 godu’, *Zapiski Odesskogo Obshhestva Istorii i Drevnostej*, tom 1 (Odessa, 1844): 550.

⁵⁹ *Călători străini*, vol. IV, 2007, 625.

⁶⁰ See Emilciuc, ‘The Legal Status of Foreign Entrepreneurs in Odessa and Ismail (1807–1860)’, in: Evrydiki Sifneos, Oksana Yurkova and Valentina Shandra (eds.), *Port-Cities of the Northern Shore of the Black Sea: Institutional, Economic and Social Development, 18th – Early 20th Centuries* (Rethymnon, Crete: Centre of Maritime History, 2021), 228–259.

⁶¹ Murzakevich, ‘Poezdka na ostrov’, s. 550; *Novorossiiskij Kalendar' na 1854 god* (Odessa, 1853), 93.

tavern-keepers who earned huge profits from its busy activity and from the natural and artificial obstacles that international commercial vessels faced there.⁶²

During the Crimean War, the Sulina Quarantine station was destroyed by British warships in 1854, and dozens of houses were destroyed along with it, so the number of houses, according to the 1855 census, decreased to 234. The Paris Peace Treaty of 18/30 March 1856 stipulated the loss of the Danube Delta to the Ottoman Empire and the transfer of navigation at the Danube Mouths to the jurisdiction of the European Commission of the Danube. Sulina was soon to revive, with rapid growth in terms of both population and urban development.⁶³

Conclusions

We can conclude that the sanitary isolation of the St. George Island resulted in limiting the economic links of its inhabitants with those of the Russian Empire itself. Sulina, on the other hand, benefited from international trade and shipping, being the gateway of the Danube. By virtue of this status, the main occupations of local inhabitants were linked to navigation problems, generated by the hydrographic conditions and amplified by the protectionist intentions of the Russian government. The only occupation not related to international commercial navigation was fishing, which was practiced by some local fishermen together with less legal or completely illegal activities. The population attracted to these activities was very mixed ethnically and by virtue of the corruptibility of the local authorities and very open to exploiting any lucrative opportunities.

Contemporary foreign sources do not speak in gentle terms about the inhabitants of Sulina. Their avaricious, but not always correct involvement in assisting merchant ships earned them a rather bad reputation. Russian documentary sources, on the other hand, speak of the involvement of Sulinites in businesses that were not always legal, but these things remain hidden in the official correspondence. The journal of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which generally published 'horror' stories from the whole empire, suspiciously skirts them. On the other hand, the 'positive' contributions of Sulinites in support of the imperial authorities were conspicuously noted and appreciated in Russian newspapers and magazines. This was meant to avoid deepening the rift created by the isolation of Sulinites by creating a positive image of that population in the collective mind.

Clearly, however, the difficulties and dangers of living there were instrumental in attracting and keeping at Sulina some of the most 'desperate' and

⁶² Ardeleanu, *International Trade*, 220.

⁶³ See Ardeleanu, *The European Commission of the Danube, 1856-1948: An Experiment in International Administration* (Leiden – Boston, Brill), 2020.

adventurous characters, turning the place into a refuge for outlaws from all over Europe. In addition to the towns and villages of Southern Bessarabia and the Ukrainian provinces of the empire, many of these people arrived at the Danube Mouths from outside the Russian Empire. This is why the proportion of foreigners was far greater than in any other locality in Bessarabia and Novorossiia. The loyalty and attachment of this population to the Russian Empire was, however, rather weak, which was particularly evident during the Crimean War, when very few of the Sulinites volunteered to defend the island from the peril of returning to Ottoman rule, despite the efforts of the Russian generals to convince them to do so.

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