

A Frenchman Wandering through the Banat

The Border Regiment from Caransebeș in Marshal Marmont's Travel Accounts (1834)

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AUGUST FRÉDÉRIC Louis Viesse of Marmont, Duke of Ragusa, appointed marshal in 1809, was born at Châtillon-sur-Seine, Côte d'Azur, on 20 July 1744, and died in Venice on 22 March 1852. History recorded, for the date of 5 April 1814, an event that was to decisively influence the reception of his name by his contemporaries and by posterity alike: the defection of his army corps paved the way for the advancement of the anti-Napoleonic coalition towards Fontainebleau. This incident—in conjunction with his noble title—gave rise to the expressions “raguser” and “ragusade” as synonyms of treason. A skilful and talented commander, especially at the level of army divisions and corps, Marmont participated directly in the military pursuits of the Napoleonic era. A graduate of the School of Applied Artillery at Châlons, the education and training he received were similar to those of Napoleon, who noticed Marmont, in fact, in 1792. The latter was to accompany the future emperor in his campaigns to Italy (1796) and Egypt (1798), being appointed brigadier general shortly thereafter. After the Battle of Marengo (14 June 1800), where he commanded the artillery, he was appointed division general at the age of 26 years. He participated in the Battle of Ulm (on 20 October 1805), and in July 1806 he was appointed Governor General of Dalmatia, to which he added Ragusa, taken away from the Russians in 1807. The year 1809, when he participated in the battles fought in Italy and Croatia, was decisive for the military career of Marmont: Napoleon bestowed upon him, on 6 July of that year, the baton of marshal and granted him the title of Duke of Ragusa.

Two years later, Marshal Marmont received the title of Governor of the Illyrian Provinces, and that same year, 1811, he succeeded Masséna as head of the Army of Portugal. As commander of the Sixth Army Corps, he fought in the Battles of Lützen and Bautzen (1813). He was also present at the Battles of Dresden (1813) and Leipzig (16-19 October 1813). In the decisive year 1814, he fought at Champaubert and Montmirail, as well as at Laon, where he was defeated, a failure for which the emperor admonished him.

He took part in the defence of Paris, which ended in defeat and surrender on 30 March 1814. Marmont withdrew the troops that defended the road to Paris-Fontainebleau, where Napoleon was located. He practically concluded a secret agreement with the Allied Powers, pledging to move the troops subordinated to him into a vulnerable position, where they could be easily surrounded and captured, cancelling thus any possibility of resistance on the part of the emperor, who was forced to capitulate without conditions. Commenting on the marshal's defection, Napoleon is claimed to have said: "Marmont has given me the final blow." In 1815, after learning of the emperor's return, Marmont dismissed the soldiers from the garrison of Paris, thus weakening Napoleon's operational capacity in light of the military conflict that was to take place. In his will, Napoleon mentioned Marmont, along with other three names, on the list of traitors who had contributed to the defeat of France, an accusation that Marmont was to try to exculpate himself from for the rest of life. He was eventually also repudiated by the restored regime of the Bourbons, whom he had supported, and after 1830 he spent the rest of his life in exile. Wandering around Europe, he stopped for a while in Vienna, where he worked as a tutor of the Duke of Reichstadt, Napoleon's son. Reviled by the Bonapartists, Marmont spent the rest of his life writing his memoirs, in which he tried to justify the controversial gestures he had committed throughout his career.¹

In 1834, Marshal Marmont undertook a long journey in the Orient, which began in Vienna on 22 April, crossed the territory of Hungary, the Banat, Transylvania and Bukovina, whence he travelled through the south of Russia, the Middle East, Egypt, etc. This experience is described by the French marshal in his large-scale travel memoirs, printed in four volumes, in Paris, three years later, under the title *Voyage du Maréchal Duc de Raguse en Hongrie, en Transylvanie, dans la Russie méridionale, en Crimée, et sur les bords de la Mer d'Azoff, à Constantinople, dans quelques parties de l'Asie-Mineure, en Syrie, en Palestine et en Égypte*.²

A section of this travelogue—covering a period of about two weeks, from 29 April 1834, when he crossed the Mureş River, entering Arad, until 15 May, when he was in Bistrița, heading towards Bukovina through the Eastern Carpathians—is dedicated to the Banat and Transylvania. This was long enough a period for him to make an idea—beyond superficial and transient impressions—about the realities of these provinces. Coming from Arad, he entered the Banat through Timișoara, where he arrived on the evening of 29 April 1834, and from here, the thread of his journey unfolded as follows: Caransebeș–Orșova–Orșova Nouă–Porțile de Fier–Hațeg–Deva–Alba Iulia–Zlatna–Turda–Cluj–Dej–Bistrița–Chernivtsi.

His records reveal a subtle observer, with mature assessments, able to select the most relevant and representative aspects of the reality he encounters. His considerations on the Banatian and, further, the Transylvanian space, target a wide array of issues, ranging from the region's natural scenery and resources, history, and culture, or the multi-ethnic and multi-confessional communities living here, to peculiar features and details of a military nature—a favourite detail that recurs frequently in the pages of his memories. Marmont records, with exact figures, the configuration of Transylvania's population (ethnicities and confessions), and estimates that here live up to 250,000 Hungarians, 1,000,000 Romanians (whom he designates with the well-known expression "Wallachians"),

500,000–600,000 Germans, 150,000 Szeklers and 120,000 Armenians. He notes, among other things, the fact that the Romanians in Transylvania, the most numerous inhabitants of the province, “are descended from Roman colonies and the ancient owners of this country.” They call themselves “Romans,” their language is full of Latin words, more or less well preserved, attesting this origin.³

In his memoir-like notes, Marmont applies a grid of selection to the realities he encounters that contributes to highlighting and revealing himself, perhaps to a greater degree than the people and the landscapes he comes across in his Banatian-Transylvanian journey. This is because every traveller carries with himself a cultural universe, a “centre of the world,” to which he permanently relates when making assessments and value judgments of the world he journeys through.⁴ In Marmont’s case, his professional military training demands that he should adopt a particular manner of relating to reality, in an unspoken yet obvious hierarchy of his observations. Marmont is significantly interested in the objectives and important places to which he has dedicated his entire life; thus, he recounts about the fortified cities he visits in Timișoara, Deva and Alba Iulia, or the places where battles occurred, especially in the context of the Austro-Turkish wars of the eighteenth century. Moreover, he meets again people whom he had been acquainted with during the earlier stages of his career, such as officers from the Border Regiment of Caransebeș. In Cluj he meets General Pistol, commander of the city garrison, who had been Marmont’s prisoner: Pistol takes advantage of the French marshal’s passing through the city on the Someș River to thank him for the humane treatment he had received during his captivity.⁵ Also, before leaving Transylvania, at Bistrița, Marmont meets again the head of the local infantry regiment, a lieutenant-colonel whom he had met in Croatia, during the period when Marmont had been Governor of the Illyrian Provinces, under French administration. Referring to his reunion with this officer, the marshal makes assessments that suggestively reveal his self-perception and the memoirist’s egocentrism: “It is a real comfort to me to see how well my name is still preserved in this country.”⁶

The Austrian military border⁷, its mode of organisation and operation, as well as its effectiveness represent, in this context, a favourite subject of Marshal Marmont’s travel notes. Thus, the Border Regiment in Caransebeș is an objective that benefits from the most abundant description of all the realities Marmont encountered on his journey through the Banat and Transylvania, a description that spans more than 25 pages.⁸ On 30 April, he reached Caransebeș, coming from Timișoara–Lugoj, and after visiting the regiment, he headed towards Orșova, Orșova Nouă, Mehădia, Porțile de Fier; then, through Hațeg, he continued his journey to Transylvania. Arriving at Caransebeș, the first aspect that seized his attention was the beauty of the places and the people here, as well as their state of prosperity after two decades of peace.

“I enjoyed finding myself amidst these establishments,” Marmont notes referring to the Banat Border Regiment, “which I can appreciate more than anyone else, whose mechanisms I am familiar with and whose numerous advantages I once knew how to evaluate.”⁹ After the Peace of Vienna in 1809, Marmont was appointed Governor General of the Illyrian Provinces, having six border regiments under his administration, which were operating in the areas ceded to France. Marmont critiqued the political power in Paris, the Napoleonic imperial regime, on account of the fact that by remaining attached

to abstract principles, it had failed to understand the role and the importance of border regiments, in terms of their military effectiveness or of the contribution they could bring to the advancement of civilisation amongst the local populations. On this aspect, Marmont categorically states: “There is no doubt that the first condition to civilise the barbarians is to give them a good organisation pattern, whereby a permanent order can be instituted amongst them and that will give them well-trained commanders, for any other system risks producing completely opposite effects to the realities we have observed in the field” (referring to the Border Regiment in Caransebeş). Marmont states that he surprised Napoleon when he tried to convince the latter about the usefulness of maintaining the military border system in the territories from Central Europe, which imperial France had seized from the Austrians.¹⁰

Starting from the particular case he describes, the Romanian Border Regiment from Caransebeş, Marmont frequently delves—in his reports devoted to this military objective—into considerations on the importance and effectiveness of these structures on political-military and civilizational grounds. The regiments defend the entire border of the Habsburg monarchy with Turkey and maintain, at the sovereign’s disposal, an army of 70,000 men, always ready for war, yet costing almost nothing during peacetime. The organisation of the border regiments reveals a deep and truly brilliant design, for their leaders can never abuse their power. Marmont compares the Austrian border regiments with other similar structures, and gives the example of the military colonies existing in Russia. Each of these structures is inspiredly adapted to their particular circumstances and the purpose for which they were created. The numerous and lengthy wars waged by Hungary and, then, the Austrians against the Turks, with the devastation they caused, relegated the population in the border area to utmost misery, as these populations were frequently deprived of their possessions, forced to lead an unstable existence, a life of perpetual wandering and sorrow. In this regard, the conclusion that came naturally was for these communities to be subjected to an organisation effort meant to protect them and give them consistency, as the Napoleonic marshal states in his memoirs.¹¹

As regards the Banatian Border Regiment, Marmont gives a detailed presentation of its organisation and functioning, making reference to the administration of justice across this territory, the functioning of the judiciary system and the courts of trial. Noteworthy is the memoirist’s familiarity with the military organisation, hierarchy and structures, with the relevant terminology, as well as the ease with which he presents these facts, so familiar to such an experienced officer as the French marshal.

Thus, Marmont depicts the border areas of the Austrian Empire as divided into regiments and companies, and the people inhabiting them as subject to military discipline. They were given land, leadership was provided to them, so that the border guards are not forced to leave their habitat except in case of war, while during peacetime they are under the obligation to ensure the border guard service. They are indebted to pay a reduced rate of tax in cash, being compelled, in exchange, to perform duties in kind, their main task being, in Marmont’s opinion, that of guarding the border and providing the soldiers needed to defend the state during wartime in exchange for the facilities that have benefited from and the protection granted to them by the government.

The military border should not be considered a province, but a vast camp, while its population is to be regarded as an army that carries within itself the means of recruitment. It is a “stationary horde,” as Marmont says, whose members remain lodged in barracks instead of living in tents, who bring to the troop the advantage of the crop fields they cultivate: a disciplined and well-organised horde, whose situation and importance have been carefully envisaged. It is a warlike population, whose morals have been tamed by the paternal care of the government, its erratic and undisciplined nature has been limited by severe laws, and any situations of arbitrariness and abuse that might afflict its activity have been removed by all possible measures.¹²

Marmont describes in detail the distribution and administration of land within the domestic community of wealth and the relationships established in the extended frontier guard families. We should note thus the profile of the head of a family, who is chosen on the grounds of age or by elective means, who has the duties of an administrator, who “is a patriarch endowed with full powers,” but who has to report annually on the manner in which he has fulfilled his obligations. Always treated with consideration by the authorities, no corporal punishment can be inflicted on him until after his dismissal from his position for the most serious reasons. He is responsible for coordinating the activities for the achievement of the common needs: land cultivation, or training soldiers a particular company may furnish. He is assisted in carrying out those duties by his wife or, in special cases, by another woman, who is the head or the mistress of the house. At the end of each year, the products obtained by farming the land are divided and each individual, enrolled or unenrolled, present here or away on a campaign, receives an equal share with those of the others, except for the head of the extended border guard family and his wife, who receive two such shares. Marmont concludes by saying that this is the civil law of the military border, based on a system of living together that is particularly advantageous in such a poor country, profitable both in economic and in civilizational terms: it discipline a people “naturally inclined to idleness.” This is because the main interest of the regiment was to discipline the local population in such a way as to allow for the recruitment of as large a number of soldiers as possible. Interpersonal relationships are regulated under the principle of hierarchy and respect for the authority, obedience being very important in this respect, for without it, Marmont says, one cannot instil either order or discipline in this people. If the population forsakes its military spirit—and this risk looms everywhere unless the people are constantly accustomed to respecting the rules—then the soldiers coming from its midst will no longer have the same value. Thanks to this lifestyle and this regime, the soldiers constantly demonstrate an attitude marked by adherence to the military behavioural canons both inside and outside the barracks. They show bravery from the first to the last day of war, as the memoirist states in his notes.¹³

The travelogue written by the French marshal further presents the distribution of land among the domestic community of wealth, the manner in which it is cultivated; it also praises in superlative terms the virtues of the cadastral surveys, which were introduced on the territory of the Banatian Border Regiment half a century before.¹⁴ The regimental administration and the duties of the officers are also extensively presented, starting from the colonel, who is the head of the regiment, continuing with all the other levels

of decision and control, down to the structure of each company. The leadership of the regiment is thus shaped like a well-fitted machine that works simply and efficiently, enabling the rapid verification of the manner in which the regimental administration functions, from top to bottom. After presenting these issues at length, Marmont resumes what really is a leitmotif of his descriptions, namely discipline and authority, which truly ensure the functioning of the regiment. The law of discipline, the marshal says, applied to the cultivation of land by the chiefs entrusted with such duties, is the best means of educating and, eventually, enriching a people whose civilisation has lagged behind. In this sense, individuals must be gathered and organised, as well as accustomed to the exercise of submission to capable and well-trained leaders. In this way, progress is fast and the scope is created for inurement to work and efficient time management, the border residents being allowed to fend for themselves, autonomously. In order to reach this stage, however, the protective hand of paternal leadership, watching over them and guiding their steps, is most useful. “We can only admire the salutary effects produced by this regime when we see what level of prosperity has been reached by the populations that are subject to it,” Marmont states in this regard.¹⁵

The description of the Banatian regiment continues with an extensive presentation of the functioning of justice, which must meet two conditions: it must be impartial and inexpensive in terms of its costs. Three types of justice operate within the regiment: civil, correctional and criminal, with specific courts from the level of the regiment to that of the company.¹⁶

After presenting the regimental organisation and the operation of these administration compartments, Marmont formulates several conclusions with a greater degree of generality, in which he largely resumes his previous findings and assessments. Thus, he states that the organisation of the military border must strive towards the ultimate aim of as numerous a people as possible in the service of the state, capable of contributing to its own welfare and the progress of civilisation. The rules underlying the administration are established so as to ensure the prevention of any abuse, as much as humanly possible. Justice is done with integrity and without expenditures; the regime applied to this people is wonderfully adapted to both its spirit and morals and to its state of poverty and geographical position. A large border, which is essential for the safety of the population and for public health, must be defended by troops in a position to maintain it and intervene rapidly in case of need; this functions and is defended naturally thanks to the system that distinguishes the Banatian regiment. The lifeblood of states consists of soldiers and money: an area like the one allotted to the regiment of soldiers in Caransebeş yields soldiers at a rate that is eight times higher than in the non-military territories, maintaining itself during peacetime, at the lowest possible price. This is an altogether different regime and organisation, for such a region would live under the burden of many responsibilities and difficulties and would yield no profit otherwise. At the end of this ample presentation, with numerous technical details and general considerations that are not devoid of certain stereotypes, Marmont concludes by saying that the merit belongs to Prince Eugene of Savoy,¹⁷ who laid the foundations of this system, and to Marshal Lacy,¹⁸ who perfected it, bringing it to the state it was in then, at the time when the marshal-memoirist recorded this information.¹⁹

Marmont does not conclude the description of the regiment before including some personal details, like the fact that he encountered in Caransebeş several officers who used to serve under him, when he was Governor of the Illyrian Provinces. “These encounters, which were renewed frequently during my trip and always gave me great pleasure, were important to me also because of another reason under these circumstances.” In 1810 Marmont had sent 200 young Croatians to France to study in the military schools, high schools and schools of arts and crafts, at the government’s expense. He was pleasantly surprised to rediscover some of them among the members of the officer corps of the boundary regiment from Caransebeş, an opportunity that he seized to express his satisfaction about having contributed to their education and careers.²⁰

The memoirs of Marshal Marmont represent a particularly interesting source for the history of the Banat and Transylvania in the nineteenth century: rich in information, they lend themselves both to a reconstitution in keeping with the canons of traditional historiography and to a reading from an imagological perspective. The pages dedicated to the Banatian military border are of the greatest interest, not so much for the history of the regiment as such, because the data Marmont provides in this chapter are mostly known from other sources too. These notes, however, shed light upon their author, who selected information at the scene of the place and put it on paper. Thus, the memoirs emphasise at least three dimensions of Marmont’s personality, first and foremost as regards his background as a man of arms, with a career in the military, which makes him display a certain propensity for highlighting the military aspects of a reality that he became acquainted with. The importance of a disciplined and rigorous life, based on rules, on obedience and respect for hierarchy, essential for the proper functioning of the human factor in the military border, also belongs to the memoirist’s sphere of interests and professional outlook. Secondly, the memoirs clearly evince a traveller who comes from the space of Western Europe, which is particularly evident in the almost contemptuous superiority with which he shows the population of the military border, approximating it to a barbarian “horde,” “naturally” inclined to laziness, which has reached civilisation thanks to the military system imposed upon the establishment of the regiment. We find here the typical Western observer, who is educated and represents a refined civilisation, definitely superior to the realities of this Eastern Europe, whom Marmont—like many other travellers arriving from the west of the continent—regards as a poor sister, an Other marked by cultural, civilizational and, not least, economic backwardness.²¹ Thirdly, what is noticeable in Marmont’s account is the strength and persistence of the Enlightenment cultural model, illustrated by his faith in the transformative power of education, by the belief that the education of the local population, carried out in accordance with military canons, can lead to a more civilised humanity, one that is more efficient in professional terms and, not least, more prosperous.



(Translated into English by CARMEN-VERONICA BORBELY)

Notes

1. Information taken over from the site: <http://napoleon1er.perso.neuf.fr/Marmont.html>, accessed on 30 January 2014. See also: Gheorghe Eminescu, *Napoleon Bonaparte* (Bucharest: Editura Academiei, 1986), 244–286 sq.; Pierre Saint Marc, *Le maréchal Marmont, duc de Raguse, 1774, 1852v* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1957); Robert Cristophe, *Le maréchal Marmont, duc de Raguse* (Paris, Hachette, 1968).
2. *Voyage du Maréchal Duc de Raguse en Hongrie, en Transylvanie, dans la Russie méridionale, en Crimée, et sur les bords de la Mer d'Azoff, a Constantinople, dans quelques parties de l'Asie-Mineure, en Syrie, en Palestine et en Égypte*, tome premier (Paris: Chez Ladvoat, Libraire de S. A. R. M. le Duc d'Orléans, 1837) (hereinafter: *Voyage du Maréchal Duc de Raguse en Hongrie, en Transylvanie*).
3. *Ibid.*, 136–138.
4. Alexandru Dușu, *Modele, imagini, priveriști. Incursiuni în cultura europeană modernă* (Cluj-Napoca: Dacia, 1979), 69–96.
5. *Voyage du Maréchal Duc de Raguse en Hongrie, en Transylvanie*, 160.
6. *Ibid.*, 162.
7. See Nicolae Bocșan, Ioan Bolovan, Liviu Maior, *The Austrian military border. Its political and cultural impact* (Iași: Glasul Bucovinei, 1994).
8. *Voyage du Maréchal Duc de Raguse en Hongrie, en Transylvanie*, 78–104.
9. *Ibid.*, 78–79.
10. *Ibid.*, 80–81.
11. *Ibid.*, 80–82.
12. *Ibid.*, 83.
13. *Ibid.*, 83–85.
14. For a succinct historical overview of cadastral surveys in the Banat and in Transylvania, see Liviu Moldovan, “Instanțele de carte funciară și arhivele lor,” in *Revista Arhivelor* 2 (1964): 3–31.
15. *Voyage du Maréchal Duc de Raguse en Hongrie, en Transylvanie*, 85–96.
16. *Ibid.*, 96–100.
17. Prince Eugene of Savoy, or of Savoy-Carignano (1663–1736), was one of the most brilliant officers of the Habsburg Empire.
18. Franz Moritz von Lacy (1725–1801), spelled as Lascy by Marmont, an Austrian Marshal, served under Maria Theresa and Joseph II.
19. *Voyage du Maréchal Duc de Raguse en Hongrie, en Transylvanie*, 101–104.
20. *Ibid.*, 103–104.
21. See, on this topic, Larry Wolff, *Inventarea Europei de Est. Harta civilizației în Epoca Luminilor* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2000).

Abstract

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In 1834, Marshal Marmont undertook a long journey in the Orient, which began in Vienna, crossed the territory of Hungary, the Banat, Transylvania and Bukovina, whence he travelled through the south of Russia, the Middle East, Egypt, etc. A section of this travelogue—covering a period of about two weeks, from 29 April 1834, when he crossed the Mureş River, entering Arad, until 15 May, when he was in Bistriţa, heading towards Bukovina through the Eastern Carpathians—is dedicated to the Banat and Transylvania. His records reveal a subtle observer, with mature assessments, able to select the most relevant and representative aspects of the reality he encounters. His considerations on the Banatian and, further, the Transylvanian space, target a wide array of issues, ranging from the region's natural scenery and resources, history, and culture, or the multi-ethnic and multi-confessional communities living here, to peculiar features and details of a military nature—a favourite detail that recurs frequently in the pages of his memories.

Keywords

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