

# NATALIA OBRENOVIĆ – PRINCESS AND QUEEN OF SERBIA. BETWEEN POLITICS AND FAMILY\*

Lilia Zabolotnaia\*\*

**Abstract:** *Studies devoted to women in power are of particular interest, since regardless of the era, this issue is of particular relevance. Most often, any female personage, even if she is a representative of a ruling dynasty, is viewed from the perspective of a mother, wife or sister. In this article, we will try to consider some fragments from the life of Natalia Obrenović, nee Keshko, widely known in the history of Moldova, Serbia and Russia, and, in particular, her attitude to politics. In our opinion, it was her desire to delve into and interfere in the political activities of her husband Milan Obrenović that became the main reason for her tragic fate, in which there were divorce, separation from her son, and subsequently his death, change of religion and long years of renunciation and loneliness. Our research began with the search for her famous work „Mother”, which, undoubtedly, contains the most reliable information about her life and work firsthand. Attempts by my colleagues-historians in Serbia and France, as well as all our searches in the leading Russian archives (Moscow and St. Petersburg), have so far been unsuccessful. The main sources of this study were unique historical documents from Russian archival collections, especially of a private nature – letters from Natalia Obrenović, newspaper publications of the era and the memoirs of contemporaries about her.*

*The author suggests that the marriage between a representative of the Bessarabian elite and a member of the Obrenović dynasty had far-reaching, far-sighted plans for dynastic merging and strengthening the positions of the Moldavian-Serbian aristocracy in the Balkans. However, the matrimonial union was not strong and durable. In the tragic breakup of the family, differences in political views between the spouses and Natalia's desire to dominate and rule the country played a role.*

**Keywords:** Natalia Keshko, Milan Obrenović, Serbia, Bessarabia, politics, divorce, family.

Natalia Obrenović (Наталија Обреновић), nee Keshko, was born on May 15, 1859 in Florence (Italy), died on May 8, 1941 in France, in Saint-Denis (she was buried at Lardy). She spent her childhood and adolescence in Moldavia, as well as in various European cities (Vienna, Florence, Odessa, Iași etc.). She received an excellent education at home, spoke several foreign languages. From 1875 she was married to the Serbian Prince Milan Obrenović (Милан Обреновић) (August 22, 1854, Mărășești – February 11, 1901, Vienna), from 1882 to 1889 she was Queen of Serbia, from 1889 to 1903 – the Queen Mother. In 1903, being a deeply Orthodox believer, she decided to convert to Catholicism and settled permanently in France.

A considerable number of articles, collections and monographic studies in Serbian<sup>1</sup>, Russian<sup>2</sup> and Romanian literature<sup>3</sup> are devoted to Natalia Obrenović. The importance and

---

\* The article is made within the project: *Museum heritage and historical memory: research, interpretation, presentation* (20.80009.0807.43).

\*\* PhD in history, National Museum of History of Moldova, 121-A 31 August 1989 Street, MD-2012, Chișinău, Republic of Moldova; e-mail: lilizab61@gmail.com.

<sup>1</sup> Nicole René Bazin, *Nathalie, reine de Serbie Fille du Cœur de Marie 1859-1941*, 1996; Kraljica Наталија Обреновић, *Мојеуспомене*, Српски Мемоари. Книга 7, Београд 1999; Alexandre de la Cerda, *Nathalie de Serbie: La reine errante*, Biarritz, éd. Atlantica, 2000; Наталија Обреновић у Фонду Бранка

value of these publications, undoubtedly, is of great importance, since numerous written documents of the era and evidences of her multifaceted social activity became available thanks to them.

Since our main task in this article is an attempt to show Natalia Obrenović's attitude to power through the prism of her personal (family) life, we resorted to a micro historical approach and an interdisciplinary principle, which allows us to highlight in detail the particular phenomena that took place in the life of our heroine and to show her image not only as a Serbian queen, but also as a mother, wife, and woman.

The dynastic alliance between the Serbian ruling dynasty of Obrenović and the Keshko boyar family from Bessarabia (a province of the Russian Empire) was far from accidental. Natalia was always proud of her high aristocratic origin and emphasized it. She was the daughter of a wealthy Bessarabian landowner, colonel of the Russian service Peter Ivanovich Keshko (ethnic Moldavian) and Moldavian princess Pulcheria Sturdza. On the maternal side, Natalia was associated with the most powerful boyar families of Cantacuzino-Deleanu, Moruzi, Ghica-Comănești, Sturdza, Rosetti-Răducanu<sup>4</sup>, who represented the power political structures and were the highest aristocratic elite of Bessarabia. Members of the noble families of Sturdza and Moruzi were rulers of Moldavia.

Through her father, Natalia also inherited a rich and eminent family tree from the boyar families of Balș, Manolachi, Paladi, Callimachi, Catargiu. Natalia's grandfather, Ivan (Ion) Keshko (04/10/1831, Chișinău – 1865), was a member of the Supreme Council of Bessarabia and the Marshal of Nobility of Chișinău and Orhei uyezds, and then Iași and Soroca uyezds.

After the early death of her father, Natalia was brought up in the family of her relatives, Ecaterina and Constantin Moruzi, who, together with her grandmother, took care of Natalia with special warmth. In the summer, she spent time with her grandmother in the Dănuțeni estate and in Odessa (where her father's parents were buried). The Moruzi family also gave her an excellent upbringing in the brilliant aristocratic society of Iași, taking her to various

Стојановића. Каталог изложбе: Београд 2015; *Kraljica Natalija Obrenović. Ruža i trnje: uspomene, aforizmi i priče, pisma*, Beograd 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Teplov V.A., *Serbskaja neurjadica* [Serbian turmoil], Saint Petersburg, V.V. Komarov Publ., 1903; Sokol'skij Ju.M., *Natal'ja Obrenovich: Zhenshhiny na trone. Biografija monarhin'* [Natalia Obrenović: Women on the throne. Biography of monarchs], Saint Petersburg, 2009, p.105-106; Morozan V. *Bessarabija i ee dvorjanstvo v XIX – nachale XX v.* [Bessarabia and its nobility in the XIX – early XX century], Saint Petersburg, 2018, p. 193.

<sup>3</sup> Octav George Lecca, *Genealogia a 100 de case din Țara-Românească și Moldova*, București, 1911, p. 53; Gheorghe Bezviconi, *Natalia Kesco, regina Serbiei*, în vol. *Din trecutul nostru*, 1935, no. 17-20 (III), p. 59-74; Gheorghe Bezviconi, *Regina Natalia a Serbiei: Profiluri de ieri și de azi*, București 1943, p. 254-261; Neaga V., *O româncă – regina a Serbiei. Tragedia familiei Obrenovic și istoria unei mărci poștale*, Meridian Filatelie, 1999, no. 1-2 (12-13), p. 54-55; Anikin V.I., *Natalia – Queen of Serbia*, „Novoe vremja”, 1999, no. 31, p. 8.I. (in Russian).

<sup>4</sup> This is evidenced by the genealogy of Natalia, published in the archive of Vladimir Ghica. See *Arbre généalogique de Nathalie de Serbie*, Bulletin de Archives Vladimir Ghica, №3, 2016. [https://issuu.com/postulatorvladimirghika/docs/bulletin\\_des\\_archives\\_vladimir\\_ghik](https://issuu.com/postulatorvladimirghika/docs/bulletin_des_archives_vladimir_ghik). It is also mentioned here that Natalia converted to Catholicism in 1902. Vladimir Ghica was an eyewitness to the tragic events associated with Natalia Obrenović, and her life later, in France, so this information is as reliable as possible.

European cities. Vienna played a special role in her life, since it was here that she “met her future betrothed”<sup>5</sup>, the Serbian Prince Milan Obrenović.

Milan Obrenović (August 10/22, 1854, Mărășești, the Principality of Moldavia – January 29/February 11, 1901, Vienna) was the son of the officer Miloš Obrenović Jr. (1829-1861) and the Romanian boyar Maria Catargiu<sup>6</sup>. From early childhood, Milan Obrenović spoke two languages: Serbian (paternal) and Romanian, the mother’s language. After the birth of their son, the parents divorced, the father died in 1861, and the mother soon became the mistress of Romanian ruler Alexandru Ioan Cuza. Cousin uncle Prince Mihailo Obrenović III of Serbia was involved in Milan’s upbringing. Milan graduated from Lyceé *Louis-le-Grand*, a prestigious school at that time, located in Paris. After the assassination of his uncle (May 29/June 10, 1868), 14-year-old Milan turned out to be the only representative of the Obrenović family. From 1868 to 1882 he was the ruling prince of Serbia. Then, after Serbia was proclaimed a kingdom, from 1882 to 1889 he was the first Serbian king to go down in history as *King Milan Obrenović I of Serbia*.

There are many opinions about the marriage of Milan Obrenović, but we adhere to the point of view of L.V. Kuzmichyova: „It was not easy for Serbia to gain recognition of the legitimacy and equality of Serbian dynasties with representatives of the European Monarchical House. European monarchs treated the young national dynasties of Serbia and Montenegro with distrust and suspicion. All other newly created Balkan states – Greece, Bulgaria, Romania – were ruled by representatives of well-known and quite legitimate European dynasties: Wittelsbach, Glücksburg, Battenberg, Saxe-Coburg, Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen. It was also not easy for representatives of the Serbian dynasties to enter the European monarchical family due to the series of scandals, assassination attempts, and murders that accompanied their rule”<sup>7</sup>.

In other words, Serbia was far from being at that time of particular interest to the leading royal dynasties of Europe in terms of kinship.

The acquaintance and later marriage of Milan Obrenović with the Bessarabian princess Natalia Keshko was far from accidental and romantic, as historians sometimes try to interpret it. His mother, Maria Catargiu, was a cousin of Ecaterina Moruzi. We support the opinion of researchers who believe that this marriage was by a kindred agreement between two women<sup>8</sup>, who were trying to arrange the life of their children in the most profitable and promising way. On the one hand, there was a representative of the ruling dynasty, and on the other hand, a rich bride. We dare to assume that *this marriage had far-reaching, far-sighted plans for the dynastic merging and strengthening of the positions of the Moldovan-Serbian aristocracy in the Balkans. The matrimonial geostrategy of the two women was based solely on political interest*. However, until now there is no clarity in this hard-to-explain and strange marriage

<sup>5</sup> Gheorghe Bezviconi, *Regina Natalia a Serbiei*, 1943, p. 257.

<sup>6</sup> Maria Catargiu, the future mistress of the ruler of Romania Alexandru Ioan Cuza.

<sup>7</sup> Kuz'michyova L.V., *Representatives of the Serbian ruling dynasties of Obrenovic and Karageorgievich on the battlefields in 1876-1918*, in vol. *Slavjane i Rossija: problemy vojny i mira na Balkanah. XVIII–XXI vv. K 100-letiju so dnja rozhdenija akademika Ju.A. Pisareva*, Moscow, 2017, p. 195-215, 201.

<sup>8</sup> Gheorghe Bezviconi, *Regina Natalia a Serbiei*, p. 257-258.

union. Initially, it is not clear how the marriage between second cousins (she at that time was only 16 years old) could have been allowed. In addition, there was an extraordinary haste with the wedding. The betrothal of the young took place in Vienna, and the solemn wedding ceremony was organized on October 17, 1875 in the Belgrade Cathedral, according to Orthodox canons. Numerous relatives of Natalia came to the wedding. The bride, according to eyewitnesses, was dressed in a white, richly decorated, closed dress, with a pearl crown on her head, and she walked to the altar in the presence of representatives of the Moruzi and Catargiu families<sup>9</sup>. *In other words, these were representatives of the family of the groom's mother – Catargiu, and representatives of the family raising the bride – Moruzi. Most likely, then they imagined a completely different future of this Serbo-Moldavian matrimonial union.* However, fate decreed in its own way, and the marriage, unfortunately, was far from ideal, even, on the contrary, very scandalous, with deeply tragic consequences.

Natalia was brought up in such a way that from birth her status was predetermined – to be at the level of a royal position, therefore, having become a queen, she showed extraordinary social and political activity, positioning herself as a domineering and freedom-loving woman. Despite her young age, she knew how to manage the palace, trying to rebuild and modernize everything. At the same time, she did not tolerate objections and had her own strong political convictions. In particular, when the Serbo-Turkish war began in 1876, Natalia, unlike her husband, expressed a deep political conviction that help and support to Serbia could only come from Russia. In addition, she donated all of her dowry for the military needs and every day she visited the military hospital, where she helped the wounded. An excerpt from the newspaper „Birzhevye Vedomosti” from 1876, in the „Kishinevskie eparhial'nye vedomosti”, has survived, in which we find a unique description of the dignified behavior of the young princess Natalia Obrenović during the difficult situation in the country at the height of the Serbo-Turkish war: „[...] Princess Natalia, the wife of Prince Milan, visited the military hospital every day [...] the military saluted her with weapons, and passers-by respectfully took off their hats”. Residents of Belgrade idolized their princess and called her a heroine, „a diamond star, a blessed ray of sunshine amid the dark night of suffering and death of the Serbian people [...]. While others are still considering making insignificant sacrifices in favor of the Slavs, Princess Natalia did not hesitate to donate all her fortune, exceeding three and a half million rubles, to prepare for the war, mortgaged all her estates in Bessarabia, doomed herself to care for the sick and wounded [...]. Sweet, dear daughter of our land !”<sup>10</sup>.

As the above description shows, the Serbs deeply respected and revered Princess Natalia. Prince Milan Obrenović, unlike his wife, did not have a strong and willed character, made decisions spontaneously, did not have a stable political orientation and high moral principles. Having unleashed a war against the Ottoman Empire (June 18, 1876), „at the same time, he not only did not have any military experience and systematic military education, but also did not possess the personal qualities necessary for the supreme

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 258.

<sup>10</sup> „Kishinevskie eparhial'nye vedomosti” [„Chisinau Diocesan Gazette”], 1876, no. 15, p. 568-569.

commander in chief<sup>11</sup>. According to the Serbian historian Sl. Jovanović, „Milan was impatient, superstitious, rancorous<sup>12</sup>, tried to shift the responsibility to the Russian general in the Serbian service, M.G. Chernyaev<sup>13</sup>. Natalia wrote in her letters that Milan avoided going to the battlefield in every possible way and she had to urge him to return to the front, especially during the period of heavy fighting, to raise the morale of the Serbian soldiers<sup>14</sup>.

In addition to the lack of courage and responsibility to his own people, befitting a statesman and military leader, Milan Obrenović, unlike his wife, did not have the strength of will and constancy in everyday life. He was described as an extravagant despot, a spender and an avid gambler. Milan Obrenović hoped that his wife's huge dowry would be at his disposal. However, according to the written and unwritten laws in historical Moldova, the wife's dowry belonged only to her, and the husband had no right to dispose of or use it without the knowledge and permission of the wife. Conflicts and discord in the royal family of Obrenović gained tremendous momentum and resulted in an open war for his son<sup>15</sup>.

After the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-1878, one of the results of which was the confirmation of Serbia's independence from Turkey at the Congress of Berlin, King Milan took a pro-Austrian position. Natalia leaned towards a position hostile to her husband, and took a strong pro-Russian orientation. On February 2, 1882, Milan was declared king of the Serbs, and Natalia became the first Moldavian woman to become queen. The coronation of the spouses did not strengthen the family, but even, on the contrary, further exacerbated the conflicts; in fact, Milan and Natalia lived separately, and then a divorce followed. In addition to the struggle for political priorities and leadership in governing the country, a fierce struggle unfolded between them for the upbringing and influence on their son Alexander (August 14<sup>th</sup>, 1876/June 11<sup>th</sup>, 1903).

In the Department of Manuscripts of the Russian State Library (Rumyantsev Hall), we found several collections that contain letters, telegrams, notes, magazine and newspaper materials about Natalia Obrenović, her personal letters, etc. Our attention was drawn to the Fond of Konstantin Petrovich Pobedonostsev (1827-1907), a Chief Procurator of the Most Holy Synod; it contains unique letters describing the events in Wiesbaden, when Natalia Obrenović was forced to divorce and was separated from her only son, Alexander.

Konstantin Petrovich Pobedonostsev's Fond 230, Karton no. 4397, storage unit 1<sup>16</sup>, contains letters to Alexander III for 1888. On the letters there are inscriptions and resolutions of Alexander III. Attached to the letter dated July 3/15, 1888 are three letters from the

<sup>11</sup> Kuz'michjova L. V., *Representatives of the Serbian ruling dynasties of Obrenovic and Karageorgievich on the battlefields in 1876-1918*, in vol. *Slavjane i Rossija: problemy vojny i mira na Balkanah. XVIII – XXI vv. K 100-letiju so dnja rozhdenija akademika Ju.A. Pisareva*, Moscow, 2017, p. 201.

<sup>12</sup> Јовановић Сл., *Влада Милана Обреновића*, Књ. 2, Београд 1934, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 79.

<sup>14</sup> *Kraljica Natalija Obrenović. Ružaitrnje*, p. 88-89.

<sup>15</sup> In the family of Milan and Natalia Obrenović, two sons were born: Alexander (1876-1903) and Sergei (1878). The graves of the sons of Natalia Obrenović are in the Church of St. Mark in Belgrade.

<sup>16</sup> The Department of Manuscripts of the Russian State Library (Rumyantsev Hall), Fond 230 Pobedonostsev Konstantin Petrovich, Karton no. 4397, Storage unit 1, [Further: NIOR RGB (RZ), F.230, K. 4397, storage unit 1], sheets 6 -11.

archpriest of the church in Wiesbaden, Sergei Protopopov, to K.P. Pobedonostsev; copies of telegrams of the Queen Natalia of Serbia to Metropolitan Theodosius and to Cristi and answers to them; copy of Queen Natalia's letter to Archpriest Sergei Protopopov dated July 10, 1888 in French. Sergei Protopopov (1851-1931) was the rector of St. Elizabeth Church in Wiesbaden (from 1887 to 1914) and in 1888 he witnessed a personal tragedy of the Serbian queen when she was forced to divorce, abdicate and her son was taken away.

In 1888, Milan Obrenović had not yet received an official divorce, since he had no formal grounds and arguments for the ecclesiastical court. However, there was a memorandum according to which their son Alexander was to be brought up in Germany and France, away from both parents. The king and the queen were not supposed to influence his upbringing. The terms of the memorandum, of course, were unilateral, since the Serbian king had unlimited power and was known as a tyrant. Natalia was forced to leave Serbia, she had access to her son only in the summer months. During this period, at the height of summer, when Natalia was with their son in Wiesbaden<sup>17</sup>, Milan Obrenović decided to finally remove her from raising and influence on their son, the only heir to the Serbian crown. To this end, he sent his henchman, Minister of War Kosta Protić, to Wiesbaden, with a new agreement, the purpose of which was to completely isolate Natalia from her son and expel her from Serbia.

In one of the letters of Archpriest Sergei Protopopov, Natalia's negative attitude towards Protić is emphasized, who was instructed to „force the queen to sign a divorce”<sup>18</sup>.

We find no less interesting information about how the procedure for the removal of the heir Alexander from the Serbian queen will take place. In particular, the archpriest writes: „Tomorrow at 4 pm, with the assistance of the German police, Protić, the Serbian Minister of War, will come to the Queen to take away her son”<sup>19</sup> „on the basis of some law on the forced administrative expulsion of foreigners under international law. The Queen implores me to be present at this terrible act, to support her spirit with a word of consolation”<sup>20</sup>.

We dare to assume that Natalia Obrenović not only sought protection from the Russian Orthodox Church, but also counted on the intervention of the Russian Empire in such an unprecedented divorce process. The Serbian church strictly carried out only the instructions of the Serbian king, absolutely not taking into account the queen, who was defenseless in this situation.

In a subsequent letter written on June 28/July 11, 1888, Archpriest Sergei Protopopov reports to K.P. Pobedonostsev that he has some important documents related to the events of the expulsion of the Serbian queen. At the same time, he notes that these are „copies I made of letters that Queen Natalia exchanged with the Serbian secular and ecclesiastical authorities on the divorce case”<sup>21</sup>. Undoubtedly, these copies were not made secretly. With a high degree of probability, they were made with the permission of Natalia Obrenović herself. She

<sup>17</sup> The name Wiesbaden translates as „meadow baths”. It is one of the oldest resorts in Europe and was the second largest city in Hesse (after Frankfurt am Main).

<sup>18</sup> NIOR RGB (RZ), F.230, K.4397, storage unit 1, sheet 6-6 back.

<sup>19</sup> NIOR RGB (RZ), F.230, K.4397, storage unit 1, sheet 7.

<sup>20</sup> NIOR RGB (RZ), F.230, K.4397, storage unit 1, sheet 7.

<sup>21</sup> NIOR RGB (RZ), F.230, K.4397, storage unit 1, sheet 8.

was a highly educated woman and understood perfectly well that without the protection of influential patrons, she would not be able to cope with the lawlessness of her husband, Milan Obrenović, on her own. It is possible that she perfectly knew the basics of law, since, judging by the documents, she always acted prudently, did not take rash or reckless actions. Despite her age, she had a deep intuition, was a rather strong-willed and determined woman. Finding herself tired out and abandoned in Wiesbaden by all her royal surrounding (by the strict order of the king), Natalia Obrenović did not lose her usual composure. She coordinated all her actions with representatives of the Russian authorities.

In particular, in one of the dispatches, Sergei Protopopov reported that „Yesterday (June 26 - author's note) the acting Regierungspräsident came to the Queen at 4 o'clock to apply the law and forcibly expel foreign princes. Besides me, there were with the Queen: her lawyer, Baron Steiger – a banker from Frankfurt with his brother, and several ladies. But instead of applying the law, a small comedy took place: he asked the queen: if she did not want to let her son go with Protić, then could she point out the person with whom she would decide to send her son to Serbia? She replied that she **would give her son only from hand to hand to the king**”<sup>22</sup>.

As you can see from these lines, Natalia Obrenović foresaw and expected all possible actions in the execution of the ridiculous and mediocre law on her expulsion. Among her entourage, a whole staff of responsible and important persons is mentioned – a lawyer, a priest, a banker and court ladies, who, at the same time, acted as witnesses of the events taking place. Wise, judicious and at the same time rather dexterous was her instant answer to the question to whom she would entrust her son („from hand to hand to the king”). Nobody expected such a turn of events. Confusion and inability to make a quick and logical decision by incompetent officials caused embarrassment. The authorized persons were not ready, either legally or formally, to carry out the order under force majeure circumstances. In turn, Natalia Obrenović won not only the first battle in Wiesbaden, but also managed to defend her son.

However, a few weeks later, on July 13/25, 1888, Alexander was taken away from his mother<sup>23</sup>. According to the archpriest, the tragic events of the removal of Alexander and the expulsion of Natalya Obrenovich took place when the Russian Orthodox Church celebrated the 900<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Christianization of Rus' on July 15, 1888. Archpriest Sergei Protopopov and all the Russian nobility attended the celebrations in the Wiesbaden St. Elizabeth Church, and it is quite possible that the executors of the order to expel Natalia Obrenović took advantage of this situation. Leaving the celebrations, the archpriest came to share the grief of the unfortunate Serbian queen, since the police allowed only him to be next to her at the station, with a „parting prayer”. The letter noted that she behaved with dignity, courage and „morality”, like a true queen and a real mother.

The further fate of Natalia Obrenović was no less tragic. She did not give up and fought desperately to regain her son, her own rights and the crown. However, this is already the subject of a separate study.

---

<sup>22</sup> NIOR RGB (RZ), F.230, K.4397, storage unit 1, sheet 8.

<sup>23</sup> NIOR RGB (RZ), F.230, K. 4397, storage unit 1, sheets 10 - 10 back - 11.