

TRACES OF AMERICAN INFLUENCE IN THE ROMANIAN ABOLITIONIST MOVEMENT

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Abstract: The Romanian abolitionist movement was in close connection with the political reforms that took place in the first half of the 19th century in Moldavia and Wallachia, being strongly influenced by the wind of progress and modernization coming from the West. The present paper aims at offering a brief presentation of the American presence in Romanian literature and public sphere of the mid-19th century and to emphasize the elements that played an important role in the adoption of the final emancipation laws. The young intellectual generation of the 1848 Revolution saw the resemblances that could be traced between the slavery institutions from the United States and the Romanian Principalities as well as between the general attitude of supremacy of the dominant population towards the enslaved minority groups and used them to promote abolitionist feelings in the Principalities. The fact that the first American novel to be translated in Romanian was the anti-slavery manifestation “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” and its enormous popularity in the Romanian space come to confirm the interest of the Romanian people in the information about the modern American society in those difficult times of change and political turmoil.

Keywords: abolitionism, emancipation, slavery, Romanian literature, “Uncle Tom’s Cabin”

After more than four centuries of constant presence in the history of the Romanian Principalities, the system of slavery was still an important characteristic of the Wallachian and Moldavian social, economic, and judicial life at the beginning of the 19th century. The theories and beliefs that justified and supported the practice of giving the people of Roma origins the status of slaves was so deeply ingrained in the Romanian spirit that it took a long and difficult process for the abolitionist spirit to gain roots in the Romanian culture. The abolitionist movement was part of a larger process for the modernization and democratization of the Romanian system and institutions as well as for gaining and securing the political autonomy of the Romanian state.

The Romanian abolitionist movement had the dimensions and characteristics of a formally organized movement in the 1840s and 1850s, when the number of written texts focusing on the “Gypsy problem” reached a peak, being directly influenced by the fight for national spirit and identity from 1848. But the anti-slavery feelings started to grow in the Romanian Principalities from the first years of the 19th century, when the young generations started to move closer to the Enlightenment ideology - already strongly felt in Western Europe - and to embrace the democratic principles adopted by countries like France, England, or the United States. The members of the young and newly formed intellectual elite that were educated in the Western European countries were the ones who first became aware of the urgency to reform the Moldavian and Walachian society in order to build the modern Romanian identity and to promote the patriotic spirit among the entire Romanian population. In their political platform that was meant to build the modern national state, the emancipation of the Roma slaves was a fundamental step. The third decade of the 19th century witnessed the changes brought by *Regulamentul Organic* (a semi-constitutional organic law) in Moldavia and Wallachia and the increase in the number of sources praising the American

social and political reforms meant to intensify the interest of the Romanian people in undertaking similar actions.

The 1848 Revolution was led and organized by some of the most prominent abolitionist figures and it was only natural that it would not ignore the “Gypsy problem”; thus, one of the points of *Proclamation of Islaz* mentioned the emancipation of the slaves that was to be done by offering financial compensation to the owners. Even though the revolution did not have the intended outcome, the fact that the social emancipation of the Gypsies was among its goals made the abolitionist spirit stronger than ever in the two states and more people were willing to take an active stand against it. The fight against slavery from Moldavia and Wallachia was organized on two main directions: one in which the need of emancipation was justified with social and economic arguments and that saw the Roma people as more profitable if given the status of free tax-paying citizens and, secondly, one that underlined the theory of natural rights and human equality, according to which the Roma slave was equal in body, mind, and spirit to their Romanian master.

Though the anti-slavery movement from the Principalities was, as the Roma expert Gheorghe Sarău noted, a “strictly Romanian one”, the national political changes were naturally influenced by the reforms from the surrounding territories. As the historical evidence shows, the journals and magazines published and distributed in Moldavia and Wallachia often included references to the important events taking place in Europe and across the ocean. Though later than in other European countries, the information about the discovery and colonization of The New World, the birth of the American nation, and, especially, the fight for independence and autonomy started to raise sustained interest among the Romanian reading public in the first half of the 19th century. One of the earliest relevant texts for the present study would be the 1740 printing of the Romanian translation of a Western collection of historical-geographical texts: *Pentru descoperirea a multor împărății și locuri care s-au descoperit și s-au aflat de portugali* (*For the discovery of many kingdoms and places that were discovered and found by the Portuguese*). In this volume, readers could find out about the way in which the European colonizers decimated the Native American communities, but also about the enslavement of African people and the transatlantic slave trade: “They buy them as beast on African shores and the majority of Blacks brought to America serve with the obedience of slaves a small number of Europeans” (Cernovodeanu, 39, *my translation*).

Maybe even more than it did in the Romanian Principalities, literature played a fundamental role in the fight against slavery from the United States. If the abolitionist literature written prior to the American War of Independence was characterized by the prevalence of a religious tone and arguments against the perpetual bonding of another human being, the revolutionary philosophy determined an important change in the anti-slavery ideology:

The philosophy of inalienable rights as written in the *Declaration of Independence* holding <all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness> gave a new concept and philosophy in the writing of anti-slavery literature” especially since more and more people started to notice the hypocritical contradiction of the situation in which “the black man could not be thought of as property, but as a person too with inalienable rights. (Shockey, 233)

The same decades mark the publication of multiple political and philosophical treatises and pamphlets promoting the inconsistency between African American slavery and the principle of natural rights and the national fight for independence, which were widely distributed in Europe as well.

Naturally, besides the technological development and important inventions, Romanian scholars were also interested in details about the social and political organization of the North American nation. The American event that attracted by far the largest audience and raised the highest interest in the Romanian Principalities – especially in the context of the Romanian

struggle for national autonomy and unity – was the American Independence War. The strategies used by the rebellious American colonies to obtain their *freedom* from the powerful Great Britain as well as the thinking and mentalities guiding them in the fight against their common oppressor found an enthusiastic audience among the young Romanian elite looking for social and political reforms in the Principalities. Periodic news about the War appeared in various Romanian translations of western books and articles as early as the end of the 18th century informing Romanians about the way in which the American people, after “begging for equality and fair treatment” and being constantly refused, decided to turn against their mother nation and, in 1776, obtained the “free country” that they demanded (Cernovodeanu, 71). Different studies – foreign texts with or without Romanian translations at that time – about the official birth of the United States circulated in the Romanian Principalities in the first decades of the 19th century, having, as the study published by Paul Cernovodeanu and Ion Stanciu informs us, “remarkable success among Romanian readers” and, maybe most importantly, among the Romanian intellectual elite. Not only the fight for independence and autonomy impressed the progressive Romanian figures; many publications also presented, in what could be called an admiring tone, the expansionist tendencies and the ideology of *Manifest Destiny* that defined the American mentality in the 19th century

A special role was played by the translation and popularization of the *Declaration of Independence* particularly in the period surrounding the 1848 Revolution. The Transylvanian revolutionary activist Simion Bărnuțiu was one of the many Romanian intellectuals who saw how the American way of thinking as it was formulated in the *Declaration* could be used to draw a parallel with the local political situation from that time and to make the Romanian people understand that it was in the power of the individual to stand up against the oppressing system and to fight for their common goal – national unity and independence. Thus, as Cernovodeanu’s study notes, in a speech held in May 1848 at Blaj, Bărnuțiu “proclaimed the liberty and independence of the Romanian nation” (Bărnuțiu quoted in Cernovodeanu, 131, *my translation*). Being “a principal disseminator of American political documents” (Perry, 31) in the Romanian Principalities, Bărnuțiu played a significant role in the Romanian fight for change and progress through the spread of the American doctrines of freedom and independence.

The American abolitionist movement was based on a series of arguments that were related to various aspects of the American life and society. First, the religious argument was meant to convince the mass of people that guided their lives according to the Christian religion. It was promoted that slavery came against Christianity since the Bible said that all men were created in the image of God and that all men have the duty to live in universal brotherhood. Another common argument against slavery was shaped by the Americans’ struggle to gain their independence in the Revolutionary War. Many abolitionists continued to promote the inconsistency in the fight for national freedom of a country that deprived an entire race of their rights and freedoms. Other abolitionists brought economy-related arguments in favor of the emancipation by saying that people who had to live in those miserable conditions could not work effectively and, consequently, the human resources in the plantation economy were wasted. Not less popular were the ideas that promoted the negative consequences of the slavery institution both on the oppressed population and its oppressors: a society that was divided in such a way could not dream of a peaceful, prosperous, civilized and culturally-matured future. However, the abolitionist movement also influenced the evolution of its counterpart – pro-slavery activism. Many articles and literary works that were purposely meant to defend the legitimacy of the slavery institution heavily contradicted the details given in the most popular abolitionist works or even presented them as false, non-reliable political propaganda. The slave-owning American population was not yet willing to give up the privilege that they felt entitled to.

The conflict between the American slave-owners and anti-slavery activists was also frequently covered by Romanian journalists. Interestingly, many Romanians often underlined the inconsistency that stayed at the very bottom of the American society: fighting for the freedom of their people while, at the very same time, depriving an entire racial group of the same right. For instance, George Barițiu, a former student of Simion Bărnuțiu who was also interested in writing about alien places and cultures, published in 1839 an article describing the American institution of slavery which, by that time, was already “a topic with which many Romanians identified” (Perry, 32). References to the enslavement of the African American people started to be more and more frequently included in Romanian magazines, newspapers, and textbooks of the pre-revolutionary period. The news about Black people being kept as slaves of White Americans generally stirred indignation and resentment among the Romanian reading audience (many of them being owners of Roma slaves) and only few were able to trace the similarities between the tragic fate of the African American and the Romanian Roma slaves.

For instance, an article entitled “Comerț spurcat” (*The Defiled Commerce*) that was published in an 1838 edition of *Curierul Românesc* presented in a clearly reproving tone the American practice of holding Black slaves:

there are some people who pretend to have mercy and who, praising Christianity for having abolished slavery, call themselves Christians and then they express their wish to maintain slavery. There are some people that pretend to have a love for freedom but who find it too natural that in the United States, this gentle country of liberty, some people own and sell humans like selling or trading cattle. (Cernovodeanu, 98, *my translation*)

Besides the obviously critical attitude of the liberal authors, many of these articles included information about the first organized attempts of some Black American people to rebel against their masters and highlighted the potential threat that the enslaved groups posed to the white owners and the dominant society at large. Thus, the Romanian reading audience was informed that “the slaves from the United States have started from some time ago to raise and ask for freedom, but unfortunately their voice does not really find an answer in the ruthless hearts of their masters” (98) or that “the persons with a *dark soul* justify themselves in keeping as slaves their brothers that only have a *dark skin*” (99). It is interesting to note that the Romanian authors were also interested in covering the negative aspects and consequences of racial discrimination that seemed to intensify in the free states: “[Americans] can not stand sitting at the table with someone with black blood in his veins, or going to the church together with the blacks, or taking care of themselves at the same time with them, but Blacks are to be behind everyone else” (100, *my translation*). The general interest in news coming from the American continent and the attitude towards the existence of Black slavery in the pre-1848 period is explained by Cernovodeanu in the following way:

The attitude shown in the Romanian press at the drafting of the first news about the problem of Black slavery from the United States can be explained through the generally liberal orientation of the press. It also reflects their own preoccupation with the existence in the Principalities of a similar situation of the Gypsy slaves, for whose emancipation all the representative figures of the revolutionary generation from our country were fighting. (100, *my translation*)

The resemblance between the lives of the African American and the Roma slaves was often underlined both by Romanian political figures (such as the author of an 1849 article from *Gazeta de Transilvania* who, after describing the current situation of the American system of slavery, ironically concluded: “And one would wonder when noticing the boyars from Moldo-Romania with the enslavement of their gypsies!” (Cernovodeanu, 138)) and by foreign travelers to the Principalities. For instance, in 1850, the French-Romanian activist Paul Bataillard strongly emphasized in his studies that “the Gypsy slaves are the blacks of these lands” and, one year later, the French historian Elias Regnault summarized the Romanian situation, highlighting the fact that the Romanian Principalities were basically in

the same situation as the American colonies before the Revolutionary War: “The Moldo-Wallachians ask Europe to be granted their lost rights. They are undoubtedly right. But in order for them to deserve freedom they have to give it back, in their turn, to those who are born just like them on the same land” (Regnault quoted in Tomi, 63, *my translation*). The famous Romanian political and cultural figure Mihail Kogălniceanu was one of the most active abolitionists and fighters for the freedom and social emancipation of the Roma people. In his 1849 article “Dezrobirea țiganilor” (*The Gypsies’ Emancipation*), Kogălniceanu spoke in favor of the abolition of the slavery system “in order to lift the country along with the most civilized countries in terms of moral principles and justice” and he drew a direct connection with the situation from other Western countries: “by emancipating its slaves, the country blesses the principle that all people are born and are free while the French colonies and many republican states of the North American Union are moaning about the millions of oppressed blacks” (Kogălniceanu, 667-668).

Utterly important in the attempt to understand the role played by the information about the American abolitionist movement in the Romanian struggle for the emancipation of the Roma slaves is the story surrounding the publication of the Romanian versions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel was an instant success in the States and abroad and it is even today considered to have played a crucial role in triggering the outburst of the American Civil War. President Abraham Lincoln acknowledged and publicly recognized the value of Stowe’s literary work and her personal impact upon the course of the American history: “So this is the little lady who made this big war” (Ch. Stowe, 203). Stowe’s personal views on the condition of the African people forcefully brought to America and compelled to live and work in absolutely dehumanizing conditions and on the solution that would solve the crisis that affected the American nation were carefully presented throughout the text in a way that would effectively create the desired impact upon the emotions of American people of different origins and social backgrounds.

Harriet Beecher Stowe’s anti-slavery text was the first American novel to be translated into Romanian language. Kogălniceanu played an important role in this, too. As Thomas Perry in *A Passage to Romania* informs us,

Even if *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* had not achieved such instantaneous popularity there [Paris], its subject matter, so much the concern of the new Romanian journals and of Kogălniceanu personally, would very well have attracted his attention. He communicated at once with friends in Iași, sending them a copy of Leon Pilatte’s translation and urging its publication there. Among them was Teodor Codrescu, who undertook the task of translating it into Romanian. (Perry, 34-35)

The popularity that this anti-slavery novel achieved in the Romanian Principalities was enormous even before its publication. Teodor Codrescu as well as other Romanian writers published various articles describing the unprecedented success of Stowe’s book both inside the American nation and “across the world”, thus raising the interest of Moldavian, Wallachian, and Transylvanian readers who subscribed in large numbers and eagerly waited for their own copy of *Coliba lui Moș Toma sau Viața Negrilor în Sudul Statelor Unite* (*Old Tom’s Cabin or the Life of Negroes in the Southern United States*). Later the same year, Dimitrie Pop published a second translation of Stowe’s novel, entitled *Bordeiul unchiului Tom sau Viata negrilor în American* (*Uncle Tom’s Hut or the Life of the Negroes in America*), which enjoyed a similar success, going through three printings in a single year (Perry, 36).

Though the two translations were equally good in quality, Codrescu’s version of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* had a bolder contribution in the Romanian abolitionist movement as the novel was preceded by a twenty-three page introduction written by Mihail Kogălniceanu. Entitled *Ochire istorică asupra sclaviei* (*A Historical Look at Slavery*), the essay describes, in an ironical way, the “dark stain” that the slavery system will forever leave in the history of all

the nations that wanted to be seen as “the most civilized and most religious” (Perry, 36). As the American professor explains, Kogălniceanu’s thesis “was that both the American institution of slavery and East European serfdom are developments in the modern economy” (37). Kogălniceanu focused on the history and characteristics of ancient slavery as well as on the existence of the serfdom system and its presence in various European countries. He also commented on the modern system of slavery and how it came against the moral values of the Christian world. The author analyzed the American system of slavery, its emergence and most important characteristics, criticizing the self-assumed superiority of the White race as compared to the “black blood of the African race” (Kogălniceanu, 484-485, *my translation*). In the final part of his essay, he mentioned the Gypsies as “the only slaves that a Christian nation still has” (485) and emphasized the terrible implications that this system had both in front of God and the rest of the world.

Uncle Tom’s enormous success in the Principalities could also be explained by the fact that it came in the context of an already-existing body of abolitionist literature that was actively trying to change the generally negative perception of the ethnic minority and to offer them literary portrayals that would help the dominant Romanian population see them in a different light. Such texts were published with the precise purpose of appealing to the reader’s emotions as a way to teach them about the dark and evil side of the system of human bondage. Religion, humanism, and morality were used as main arguments against the long tradition of slavery, which was now considered to have stopped the Romanian people from achieving the highest level of civilization. Writers such as Cezar Bolliac, Vasile Alecsandri, Gheorghe Asachi, and others attempted to build a new image of the Roma population in literature and to offer a new perspective over the system of slavery. Thus, their texts contributed to the intentionally created, overly romanticized and exclusively positive image of the *Gypsy slave* in total opposition to the image of the *Evil Master* who physically and morally abuses an entire ethnic group based solely on centuries-old beliefs and practices. Among them, the Moldavian writer Vasile Alexandrescu Urechia attempted to write, in 1855, a Romanian version of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* entitled *Coliba Măriucăi (Măriuca’s Cabin)*.

In Urechia’s novel, the Roma slave Vasile is presented as a hard-working, skilled, and loyal man who is inhumanely treated by his evil master. The action of the story takes place around 1840 and presents the story of Vasile, Măriuca’s son, who, just like the character of Uncle Tom in Stowe’s novel, contradicts the stereotypical image of the Roma community of that time: he stays away from and strongly opposes stealing or deceiving the master in any way, he is brave, and, above everything, extremely devoted to his family and especially to his mother. In fact, his qualities and his refusal to commit any crimes draw the hate of his overseer who, in revenge, accuses him of stealing, punishes him, and tortures him with daily beatings. Hence, the antithesis between the innocent Gypsy slave and the evil Romanian master is clearly shaped and readers can easily notice the compassionate attitude of the Moldavian author who, through his text, drew attention to the hypocrisy of a large part of the Romanian population – who liked to think that they were only offering to the “uncivilized Gypsies” the best life that they could ever have. Just like many of the other pro-abolition writers, the author expressed his criticism towards the false Christianity of most slave owners and the way in which many of them only pretended to respect the Christian values and tradition:

This is how most boyars usually behave, these Christians who respect all the fasting days, who go to church every Sunday [...] when returning home, they curse and damn the Gypsies and they order how many lashes a certain Gypsy deserves for what they did... or consult their wives about which Gypsy man to marry which Gypsy woman. (Urechia, 236, *my translation*)

Though the final part of the novel was never published (potentially because, by the second half of the same year, the Moldavian Prince Grigore Alexandru Ghica had already adopted

the final emancipation law), Urechia's story is still one of the strongest literary denouncements of Gypsy slavery.

In the end, it can be concluded that the information brought to the Principalities by Romanians temporarily living abroad or by foreign travelers about the North-American culture and reformatory political doctrines significantly shaped the path followed by the Romanian anti-slavery movement. Presenting the information about the American independence, unity, and general progress as an example to be followed by the Romanian Principalities, the Romanian political activists looking for national unity and autonomy attempted to portray the United States as a haven of freedom, justice, and civilization. However, the information about the long existence of the slavery institution and, above all, the presence of strong racial discrimination was heavily criticized by liberal Romanian writers promoting the doctrine of human equality. In this way, pro-emancipation Romanians started to highlight the connection that could be drawn between the African American slaves and Roma slaves in order to make people aware of the real tragedies that the human bondage system could cause. Though the information about American abolitionism was useful in spreading the anti-slavery feelings in the Principalities and in making people aware of the need to adopt emancipation laws, the Romanian abolitionist movement was, as Viorel Achim stated, "the first major social reform" (Achim, 105) and a clear act of Romanian sovereignty. The fact that slavery was finally abolished in the Romanian Principalities before it ended in the United States encouraged many Romanians to take pride in the successful efforts made by Romanian abolitionists and revolutionary figures and to hope that the Moldo-Wallachian society would soon turn into the modern nation that they had been fighting for.

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