# Knowledge of Epidemic Danger in the Middle Dniestr Region in the Late 18th Century

*Kateryna Pasichnyk*

This essay intends to show how knowledge about epidemic danger moved between people, places, and genres; what status was attributed to this knowledge; and the practices of its assessment within the contact zone of Middle Dniestr in Eastern Europe in the late 18th century. Today, the Dniester river runs through southwestern Ukraine and Moldova, flowing into the Black Sea. In historiography, which foregrounds the connection between epidemics, reforms, and Russo-Ottoman relations, the Dniestr basin has been viewed as the northwestern limits of the Black Sea region, interconnected by trade, migration and intelligence-gathering networks about epidemics.[1] Dniestr basin is also represented as the initial conquest in the Russian southwestern takeover of the 19th century, since it was the first to fall under imperial control, along with Bessarabia, in 1812 before the empire moved further into the Danubian principalities.[2] What follows is an attempt to construe Middle Dniestr as a contact zone in its own right, narrowing the chronological focus to the late 18th century, when the Dniestr river still constituted a border between lands belonging to different political powers. To the south, the Moldavian lands, an Ottoman tributary state; and Podolia to the north, belonging until the Second Partition of Poland (1793) to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and to the Russian Empire afterwards.

Rethinking the Dniestr borderlands under this concept of the "contact zone" draws historians' attention to their connective and integrative functions, which were established through long-standing exchange across the political divide between the cultures inhabiting them.[3] Natalie Rothman, additionally, reminds us that contact zones are not self-forming: their constitutive processes of intercultural exchange and "boundary maintenance that unfolds in specific sites and institutions" are constantly sustained by the practices of their participants.[4] Examining the case of the movement of knowledge about epidemic

1 See Andrew Robarts, Migration and Disease in the Black Sea Region. Ottoman-Russian Relations in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries, London 2017.

2 See Victor Taki, Between *Politzeistaat* and *Cordon Sanitaire*. Epidemics and Police Reforms During the Russian Occupation of Moldavia and Wallachia, 1828–1834. In: Ab Imperio (2008), 4, p. 75–112.

3 Mary Louise Pratt, Arts of the Contact Zone. In Profession (1991), p. 33–40; a historiographical contextualization of the "contact zone" in William O'Reilly, Fredrick Jackson Turner's Frontier Thesis, Orientalism, and the Austrian Militärgrenze. In: Journal of Austrian-American History 2 (2018), 1, p. 1–30, p. 6–7, 29–30.

4 Natalie Rothman, Brokering Empire. Trans-Imperial Subjects between Venice and Istanbul, Ithaca/London 2012, p. 4.

danger across the Dniestr river allows us to see both the connections by which this occurred, and the ways in which they were used by the participants. Such knowledge had great importance in the period, since the neighboring Moldavian lands, as well as the Ottoman empire as a whole, were feared as hotbeds of epidemics, particularly plague. Often as a result of the Russo-Turkish hostilities, plague would spread northwards to Eastern Europe, while in Western and Central Europe, it had already waned in the early 18th century. Still, Western European medical and travel literature continued to reinforce the idea that the plague was an Oriental scourge.[5] A particularly devastating plague in the 1770s, known to have passed all the way from the Moldavian lands to Moscow, forced the Russian Empire to significantly increase control over its western border, which ran along the Dniepr river at the time.[6] Thereafter, its spread in the late 18th century was confined to the borderlands area, where knowledge exchange about the plague's approach was correspondingly more frequent.

Such knowledge could appear in the form of rumors, news, expert reports, etc. suggesting the need to look at the context in which it was received. The definition of "knowledge" by Philipp Sarasin is helpful in this regard. According to Sarasin, knowledge is in constant co-formation by "various actors, discourses, institutions, and media," and changes along its movement "across social spaces and geographical borders."[7] Such a broader approach to knowledge allows one to step beyond strict "scientized" definition and account for various actors' perspectives, "what procedures protect and stabilize knowledge" and its practical dimensions.[8] The above considerations regarding the application of the idea of the "contact zone" to Middle Dniestr through the prism of the history of knowledge will be further developed on the basis of two examples from the sources which were not previously considered from this angle.

The first example is taken from the rich correspondence of Jan de Witte, who in 1768–1785 was the commandant of the fortress in Kamieniec Podolski, the capital of the palatinate of Podolia within the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. In addition to guarding the fortress, the commandant considered himself responsible for protecting the Podolian border from contagion, and to be the first to inform the Polish king of any real danger from across the

5 See Lori Jones, The Diseased Landscape. Medieval and Early Modern Plaguescapes. In: Landscapes 17 (2016), 2, p. 108–123.

6 See Oksana Mykhed, Not by Force Alone. Public Health and the Establishment of Russian Rule in the Russo-Polish Borderlands, 1762–85. In: Paul Readman/Cynthia Radding/Chad Bryant (eds.), Borderlands in World History, 1700–1914, Basingstoke 2014, p. 123–142; John Alexander, Bubonic Plague in Early Modern Russia. Public Health and Urban Disaster, Oxford 2003 (Baltimore 1980).

7 Philipp Sarasin, Was ist Wissensgeschichte? In: Internationales Archiv für Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur 36 (2011), 1, p. 159–172, p. 164.

8 Ibidem, p. 169–170.

Dniestr.[9] To this end, he kept himself informed of the latest developments, using trade and diplomatic connections. The local and foreign merchants, who could go as far as the Danube region for trade matters, were convenient informers about epidemic danger on the spot.[10] Such news was also expected from the commandant's frequent correspondent, pasha, who was the governor of the administrative unit, the *sandjak* of Hotin, in the Moldavian lands on the right bank of the Dniestr. In the first half of the 18th century this territory came under the direct control of the Ottoman Porte and the town of Hotin with its fortress became the administrative center and the Ottoman stronghold in the north instead of Kamieniec Podolski, which belonged to the Ottoman Empire in 1672–1699.[11]

Neither the merchants, nor the pasha, nor more distant correspondents warned him of the epidemic danger in 1778, when in mid-March more than seven dozen Russian infantrymen and Cossacks arrived to quarantine near the fortress of Kamieniec in Dłużek.[12] While the Russian military authorities explained this need by the appearance of contagion (*zaraza*) in Istanbul, Hotin and its surroundings, Witte hastened to attribute to it the status of a "rumor" (*pogłoska*)[13] or, more disapprovingly, "fairy tales" (*baśnie*).[14] The danger of the epidemic served, in his view, as a "pretext" for dragging Russian troops to the borderlands[15] to hamper mobility and food supply in the palatinate and across the Dniestr under the guise of closing the border against the spread of contagion.[16] Later, Jan de Witte argued that the main objective was to prevent the supply of grain to the Ottoman lands.[17]

However, the perception of epidemic danger in the Middle Dniestr was not determined by the commandant's opinion alone but was also shaped by political considerations in Warsaw as well as the general anxiety about impending danger. In his correspondence, the commandant implied the influence of the Russian Empire on Commonwealth policy, as an explanation for why the danger of the epidemic was unduly exaggerated in the capital. It was an understandable suspicion in the aftermath of the First Partition of

9 Jan De Witte to Stempkowski, Castellan of Kijów, 23 March 1778. In: Stanisław Krzyżanowski (ed.), Listy Jana de Witte: jenerała majora wójsk koronnych, pułkownika artyleryi koronnej, komendanta fortecy kamienieckiej, kawalera orderu św. Stanisława (1777–1779) [Letters by Jan de Witte. Major General of the Crown Army, Colonel of the Crown Artillery, Commandant of the Kamieniec Fortress, Knight of the Order of St. Stanislaus], Kraków 1868 [= JdW in the following], p. 99–100.

10 JdW to Komarzewski, 16 May 1778, p. 143–144.

11 Mariusz Kaczka/Dariusz Kołodziejczyk, A Turkish Pasha and Polish Nobles: The Correspondence of Ilias Kolchak Pasha, the Ottoman Governor of Hotin with Polish-Lithuanian Nobility, 1730–1739, Warsaw 2020, specifically, p. 83–85.

12 JdW to Stempkowski, Castellan of Kijów, 23 March 1778, p. 99–100.

13 JdW to Great Crown Hetman, 4 April 1778, p. 111.

14 JdW to Komarzewski, 16 May 1778, p. 143–144.

15 JdW to Oberst Dahlke, 16 March 1778, p. 90–91.

16 JdW to General Komarzewski, 21 March 1778, p. 95–97; JdW to Military Department, 11 April 1778, p. 121–123.

17 JdW to Military Department, 3 April 1779, p. 250–252.

Poland (1772), which bluntly heralded the growing control of the empire over the Polish court.[18] After all, it was the powerful Russian ambassador, Otto Magnus von Stackelberg, the chief proxy of Empress Catherine II in Warsaw, who pointed out the danger of the epidemic to the Polish King Stanisław August Poniatowski.[19] Subsequently, the commandant presented his opinion to the authorities after the closure of the border was approved in the capital.[20] The news of the contagion in the region, which was already deemed prone to epidemic, also sowed real doubts reinforced by further updates from the Russian military. The fact that several houses in Hotin had recently caught fire suggested that they were contaminated, and therefore purposefully destroyed, and later some contagious disease was discovered in the village Medynka three miles from Mohylów, a town on the left bank of Dniestr, southeast of Kamieniec.[21] The type of the supposed impending epidemic (or even multiple ones) is for the most part unclear in the correspondence, reflecting the problematic differentiation of epidemics in early modern times. In one place it is noted that Hotin allegedly suffered from contagious smallpox (*ospa zaraźliwa*), but then we learn that the plague (*dżuma*) was suspected to have appeared in the village of Medynka.[22]

Knowledge of possible epidemic danger, regardless of its specific type, helped maintain a precautionary regime in the region, according to which Jan de Witte had to adapt his policy. He gradually enacted the approved displacement of imperial troops by the Commonwealth National Cavalry to control the border along the Dniestr[23] and resorted to subtle diplomatic maneuvers to get the Russian military out of Dłużek.[24] At the same time, Jan de Witte did his best to preserve "neighborly friendship" with the pasha. Cooperation with him was not only important in resolving domestic issues, such as cross-border crimes, but was also an integral part of peaceful Polish-Ottoman relations in general.[25] Therefore, when the third rumor of an epidemic reached the commandant, he appealed to the pasha in the manner of a friendly neighbor, with

18 The commandant alludes to political reasons for the exaggerated news in JdW to Lipiński, Chamberlain of Latyczew, 2 January 1779, p. 221–222.

19 JdW to Stempkowski, Castellan of Kijów, 23 March 1778, p. 99–100. For more details on Russian policy in Warsaw and the activities of the Russian envoy there, see: Richard Butterwick, The Enlightened Monarchy of Stanisław August Poniatowski (1764–1795). In: Richard Butterwick (ed.), The Polish-Lithuanian Monarchy in European Context c. 1500–1795, Basingstoke 2001, p. 193–218.

20 JdW to Suleiman, Pasha of Hotin, 27 March 1778, p. 102.

21 JdW to Military Department, 28 March 1778, p. 104; JdW to Pasha of Hotin, 23 December 1778, p. 218.

22 JdW to Great Crown Hetman, 4 April 1778, p. 111; JdW to Military Department, 16 January 1779, p. 227.

23 JdW, Ordinance, 2 April 1778, p. 106–107; JdW to Military Department, 4 April 1778, p. 109–110.

24 JdW to Russian Major, 4 April 1778, p. 112–113; JdW to Military Department, 18 April 1778, p. 126–127.

25 JdW to Military Department, 16 March 1778, p. 91–93; JdW to Suleiman, Pasha of Hotin, 27 March 1778, p. 102.

a proposal to send an expedition from Podolia to this allegedly infected place, to study the epidemic. In the same letter, where he asks for the pasha's written permission for the expedition, he additionally informs him that he sent a traveling artisan with an interpreter to Hotin. According to the commandant, the artisan presented in Kamieniec "his skill in various arts, which both amused and surprised" the audience, and he wanted to share this delight with his neighbor.[26]

Sending an expedition across the Dniester can be interpreted as a political maneuver as well as the creation of verified knowledge by collecting evidence on the ground. This practice was aimed at debunking the claim of imminent epidemic danger, which was economically and politically disadvantageous to the Commonwealth and the Ottoman empire. Therefore, the pasha willingly responded to the commandant's proposal, welcoming an expedition in Hotin to obtain permission for medical inquiries in the Moldavian lands and assigned to it his own convoy for safe passage to Medynka.[27]

Beginning in late October 1778, a group consisting of a feldsher, two townsmen "knowledgeable on the subject," and military guards looked for signs of epidemic danger.[28] Notably, the findings proved that the news from the Russian military was not entirely groundless. In one house in Medynka several people had died of an infection from a fur coat purchased from a merchant from Anatolia. This was followed by one more death among those neighbors, who fled into the field to escape a similar fate.[29] The discovered localized outbreak did not spread further, but such sporadic evidence contributed to the uncertainty of knowledge about epidemic risk in border areas, creating the potential for their political instrumentalization.

The commandant's expedition was a practice of knowledge assessment, but sources recorded only its conclusion rather than the intricacies of the process of assessment itself. The knowledge assessment existed only in the oral interactions of the expedition participants with those they met and examined. The evaluation process became amply documented in writing with the growth of medical authority and the parallel mastery of genres for recording medical expertise. Therefore, the second example here is taken from the bureaucratic records of the Podolian Medical Board, the main medical authority in the Podolian province of the Russian Empire. After the establishment of the Medical Board in 1797, it was involved in anti-epidemic protection of the Dniestr line, which only four years earlier had become the southwestern bor-

26 JdW to Pasha of Hotin, 23 December 1778, p. 218. Promoting "good neighborliness" was a reciprocal obligation. It also belonged to the responsibility of the pasha and was an important factor in resolving cross-border conflicts, as shown in Kaczka/Kołodziejczyk, A Turkish Pasha and Polish Nobles, p. 78–79.

27 JdW to Military Department, 26 December 1778, p. 219–220.

28 Ibidem.

29 JdW to Military Department, 9 January 1779, p. 224–225; JdW to Military Department, 16 January 1779, p. 227.

der of the Russian Empire. The members of all imperial medical boards were ex officio obliged to inspect infectious places and to give an expert assessment of the development of the epidemic from its beginning to its end, channeling their knowledge to the Medical College in St. Petersburg in the form of reports.[30] One of the earliest of such reports from the Podolian Medical Board, which at that time consisted of an inspector and an operator, concerned the expeditions of its members to the Ottoman Hotin in spring–summer 1797.

Similar to the 1778 expedition to Medynka, these expeditions were initiated by the local military authority, this time by the military governor of Kamieniec Podolski, Aleksei Beklashov, to check the news about the plague in Hotin.[31] For the execution of the mission, it was also important that two of the expedition participants, one member of the Medical Board and a physician companion, were former Polish medics who had served in Podolia since the time of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.[32] Thus, they can be seen as informed locals who contributed to the creation of knowledge about epidemic danger in the region during imperial times. One of them, the physician companion Shchetinskii, who was versed in Turkish and was once in the entourage of the Polish embassy in Istanbul, proved particularly valuable as an intercultural mediator in Hotin, combining his language skills with his medical professional identity.[33] At the same time, the former Polish medical staff, by virtue of receiving imperial ranks, together with the inspector of the Medical Board, were all the representatives of the Russian officialdom, which means that their visit to Hotin and their meeting with the pasha also had a diplomatic nature.

The medical staff met with the pasha's entourage during their second visit to Hotin and received a friendly welcome that facilitated an exchange of information about epidemic danger and the means to contain it. Presumably, in order to build trust for this exchange, the vice-pasha complained to the medics about his suffering from hemorrhoids and his servants' rheumatic attacks and consumption, giving the medics an opportunity to respond with the polite gesture of offering medicine.[34] The sanctioning of this expedition by the pasha literally opened doors for medics, whose examination hinged on the residents'

30 On the Establishment of Medical Boards 17.742 (19 January 1797). In: Complete Collection of Laws of the Russian Empire, St. Petersburg 1830, p. 287–296, p. 289–290.

31 A total of 8 expeditions visited Hotin, but the most extensive descriptions were compiled during the first two visits. During subsequent inspections, the operator could go there on his own. State Archives of Khmelnytsky Region (DAKhmO), f. 69 op. 1 Podolian Medical Board (PVU), d. 6 On Diseases Found in Hotin by the Members of This Board, p. 2; subsequently: DAKhmO, PVU, d. 6, 20.

32 About the operator of the Medical Board Ivan Fokkelman, see: Ivan Chistovich, History of the First Medical Schools in Russia, St. Petersburg 1883, p. CCCXXI.

33 DAKhmO, PVU, d. 6, p. 9.

34 Ibidem, p. 3; more on disease "as much political as medical condition" in early modern diplomacy in Megan Williams, Immobile Ambassadors. Gout in Early Modern Diplomacy. In: Sixteenth Century Journal 47 (2016), 4, p. 939–969.

willingness to cooperate. If during the first expedition they mostly strolled through town stalls, roads, graveyards, and only houses that were "opened" to them, then the second visit included "almost all houses," Jewish infirmaries, dugouts, and Turkish barracks, that is, even the fortress itself, where the barracks were located.[35] In all these spaces of encounter medics communicated and examined the representatives of the three most populous groups of multicultural Hotin (Orthodox Christians, Jews and Muslims), of various ages and both sexes, with the exception of Turkish women, whose observation by male physicians was deemed unacceptable.[36]

The face-to-face interactions with the Hotin inhabitants appear in the account as sites of selective knowledge creation. Some of what people said was recorded ethnographically, in the form of anecdotal sketches about the medical perceptions of local "others," while the doctors' attention was focused on sick bodies and their surroundings. In search for the signs of epidemic danger, medics had a keen eye on corporeal symptomatic and manifestation, especially those of fevers, which, according to contemporary pathogenesis, were believed to obtain contagiousness when the diseases multiplied.[37] Not finding "bad signs," medics continued to come to Hotin to observe diseases "in continuation" in order to catch the moment of transformation that they believed was likely to come. The climatic, housing, dietary and social conditions, especially poverty and lack of adequate medical care, as well as a couple of town's characteristics were seen as a breeding ground for the multiplication of diseases. "Wet winter and food, especially fish, hot wine, sewage, stale bad air and sudden change of weather" made people, especially the Jewish population, prone to scurvy or scrofula. The damp, poorly heated autumn barracks, as well as the lack of clothing and food, proved fatal for many of the Turkish soldiers who had been transferred to Hotin from places with a warmer climate. "Tight" houses without proper air circulation explained the deaths amid Christian peasantry. Further, the cemeteries in Hotin were too close to the houses, burial of corpses was not deep enough, and the butcheries were within town limits. The enumerated factors contributed to the appearance of "morbid effects," better known in the contemporary medical theory as miasmas, disease–causing vapors.[38] The medical evaluation did not go unheeded but found practical implementation in Hotin, where "manure started to be burned and sewage

35 More on Ottoman garrisons in the fortress and the town itself, see: Denys Pozniakov, Ottoman Military Units on the Territory of the Hotin Nahiye in the 18–19th Centuries. Structure, Number, Dislocation, Symbols. In: Novi doslidzhennia pamiatok kozatskoi doby v Ukraini 27 (2018), p. 431–439.

36 DAKhmO, PVU, d. 6, p. 2–4ob.

37 Nikon Karpinskii, Description of Yellow Fever, With an Indication of Its Appearances, Causes, and Methods of Treatment and Protection, St. Petersburg 1805, p. 13.

38 More on the miasma theory in the European and Russian contexts in Maria Pirogovskaya, Miasmata, Symptoms, and Evidence. Smells in Russian Culture, 1850–1900s. Between Medicine and Morals, St. Petersburg 2018, specifically, p. 42–90.

taken from the fortress."[39] It would not stop the diseases from obtaining contagiousness, though,[40] and neither would the Podolian province be spared from plague, where it spread in several districts in autumn, gradually decreasing to the localized outbreaks.[41]

These Russian and previous Polish examples of epidemic assessment, although occurring in different political contexts, show how knowledge of epidemic danger was at the intersection of medicine and diplomacy, where both influenced perceptions of danger. Knowledge of contagious diseases moved across the Dniestr but was also part of the broader circulation of knowledge, reaching Warsaw and later St. Petersburg, where it may also have been shaped by political considerations that influenced the practical implementation of precautionary measures. Occasionally, the movement of knowledge stabilized and was created locally by the expeditions sent to the right bank of the Dniestr. The expeditions were a practice characteristic of the Middle Dniestr as a contact zone, marked by a certain continuity from the Commonwealth to the imperial period, and, importantly, this practice equally required cooperation between officials on both sides of the river. The topic would benefit from further study of Ottoman and Moldavian material pertaining to epidemic danger in the region. There were many more cross-border practices, including, for example, trade or travel protection, which were briefly mentioned in the essay. Their analysis also allows us to consider the Middle Dniestr as a contact zone.[42]

39 DAKhmO, PVU, d. 6, p. 2–4ob.
40 Ibidem.
41 DAKhmO, PVU, d. 2 Journal of the Board Meetings for 1797, p. 204, 267–285.
42 A potential of exploring diverse connections across the Dniestr, especially in light of new diplomatic history, has recently been convincingly demonstrated by Mariusz Kaczka and Dariusz Kołodziejczyk in their critical edition of correspondence between the pasha of the *sandjak* of Hotin and Polish nobility from the 1730s. See Kaczka/Kołodziejczyk, A Turkish Pasha and Polish Nobles, specifically, p. 67–112.