

ON THE EXISTENCE OF THE BUFFALO IN THE CAPITAL CITY OF ROMANIA

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For milk production, buffaloes were also raised in Bucharest. While around the middle of the 19th century there were several hundred specimens, in the interwar period buffaloes numbered in the thousands. However, after the Second World War, their numbers gradually decreased (there were 653 specimens in 1949 and only 130 in 1967), the last specimens being bred until 1985–1986.

Keywords: buffaloes, population dynamics, Bucharest, Romania.

INTRODUCTION

In Romania, buffaloes are mainly bred for their milk, which is a very important food source for human health. The main area where they are raised is in the center and northwest of the country (Transylvania). As a secondary breeding area, where nowadays the herd is much reduced, is the south of Romania, including the country's Capital, where buffaloes also existed for a while.

The connection between the breeding of these mammals and the great city of Bucharest becomes more pronounced the more the city has developed, and the more the needs of the urban population for fresh milk and its derivatives have increased.

Buffaloes were bred in the neighborhoods (former villages or communes) near the lakes of the Colentina valley (Plumbuita, Herastrău, Colentina, Băneasa, Tei, Mărcuța) or in the Dâmbovița valley (Dudești, Giulești-Sârbi). In fact, a large part of the peripheral area of the city was inhabited by cattle breeders, especially buffalo breeders, called “*milkmen*”. Many of them were Romanian, but there were also quite a few of Bulgarian origin. They “*brought the milk in ”garnițe”¹ placed in horse-drawn phaetons²*”, as Giurescu recalled (1979, p. 223).

¹ *Garnițe* = metal containers.

² *Phaetons* = a light, two-wheel carriage, on a spring suspension.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

In order to highlight the idea put forward, both fieldwork, as well as archival research was conducted.

The field research aimed to identify the territories in the Romanian Capital with households where buffaloes were being raised. The places where they used to graze were also taken into account, as well as the territories where there were bathing spots. At the same time, the method of distribution of the obtained products was also analysed.

As part of the archival research, the identification of statistical documents was also a main concern, in order to establish as accurately as possible the size of the buffalo population and the way its numbers fluctuate.

RESULTS

Aspects from the 1838–1940 period

The oldest statistical document also containing data pertaining to animals is the *Catagrafia* (census) of 1838. It mentioned the number of buffaloes in just to sectors:

- in the “Green” sector, where there were 40 buffaloes in the Mihai Vodă, Crețulescu, Schitu Măgureanu, Sfântul Elefterie areas, and
- in the “Yellow” sector, home to 73 head of buffalo, in the Amzei, Batiștei, Sfântul Silvestru, Obor areas (Georgescu, 1965).

In 1860, the Capital was home to 636 buffaloes, distributed along the existing sectors thus, according to colour: in the Green sector there were 266 head, in the Yellow one – 185 head, in the Red sector – 75, in the Black sector – 58, and in the Blue sector – 52 (Fig. 1).

In 1869, the then-villages of Băneasa and Colentina were home to 163 and 48 buffaloes, respectively.

In 1889, breeders in Dudești owned 386 buffaloes (56 bulls and 330 cows). There were many buffaloes, 262 in total (76 bulls and 186 cows), in Băneasa-Herăstrău as well, a commune which was made up of the villages of Dămăroaia, Floreasca and Pipera. Next in line was the buffalo population of Colentina-Fundeni commune (Plumbuita village), with 176 head (96 bulls and 80 cows). Additionally, there were 14 buffalo cows in Militari village as well. All these settlements are, currently, neighbourhoods in the Capital city.

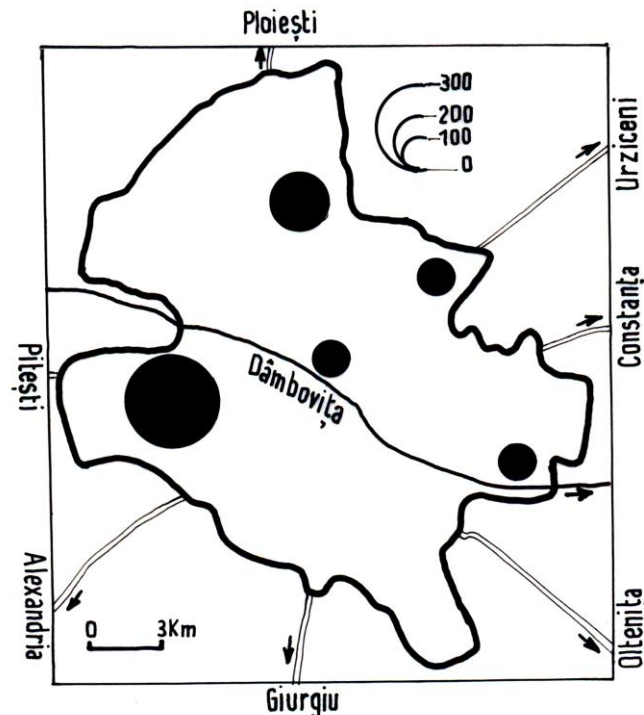


Fig. 1. The number of buffaloes in the sectors of the Capital in 1860.

During the end of the 19th century (1898) worth mentioning is the number of buffaloes in several neighbourhoods in Bucharest, namely: Dudești – 859 head, Băneasa – 336, Giulești-Sârbi – 149, Cioplea – 45, Herăstrău – 43, Militari – 37, Teiul Doamnei – 25, Plumbuita – 23, Colentina – 6, Mărcuța – 6. We would also add that, to this day, there is a street called *Lăptari* (*Milkmen*) in Tei neighbourhood which recalls the line of work the former inhabitants used to be in.

Many inhabitants of the Giulești-Sârbi neighbourhood were, actually, Bulgarian, and “took advantage of the fact that there were still vast grazing areas around, raising cattle (including buffalo cows) and supplying milk to the nearby market of Bucharest, where they went daily in their small two-wheeled carriage”, as Vasilescu remarked (1966, p. 163).

The statistics of domestic animals carried out in December 1900 mentioned for the Capital 4,451 buffaloes, 2,427 of which were within the city limits, and for the neighbouring villages (currently neighborhoods of the Capital) there were: 1,167 in Dudești-Cioplea (1,088 cows and 79 calves), 418 in Colentina (28 bulls, 370 cows and 20 calves), 412 in Băneasa-Herăstrău (4 bulls, 371 cows 37 calves), and 27 in Militari (2 bulls, 24 cows and one calf³).

³ *Malac* is the Romanian specific term for the buffalo calf.

Even where Libertății Park is located today, 120 years ago there were ponds where buffaloes bathed (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Buffaloes bathing in waterbodies existing in 1900 in the area of present-day Libertății Park (Georgescu, 1959).

In 1905, Paltzer noted that the buffaloes “lived mainly out in the open, at night, and during bad weather they took shelter under rudimentary coverings” (p. 4).

Diaconu mentioned in 1909 that Bucharest was, at the time, the most important centre in Romania for milk buffaloes.

There were only 3,299 buffalo cows in Bucharest in 1907, 2.4 times more than regular cows.

At the beginning of the 20th century, in the Ghencea and Obor areas, there was a significant number of breeders who owned 30-40 buffalo cows each. They used to buy them from Ilfov and Vlașca counties. “The milkmen keep only good buffalo cows, which could, due to their milk, cover both maintenance expenses and provide some extra income” (Diaconu, 1909, p. 20).

However, “the raising of buffaloes in Bucharest has become more and more difficult with every passing year, due to the reduction of grazing areas and the increase in the price of dry fodder. That's why the large dairy farmers, who used to cover the plains around Bucharest with their cattle, are now forced to take them 20–30 km away during the summer in order to find more favourable grazing conditions” Diaconu also mentioned in 1909 (p. 20).

They would remain there until the first snows, when they would bring the cattle back to their enclosures. In winter the animals were fed wheat straw, oats, sorghum etc.

During each milking session, they were given a few handfuls of wheat bran or yeasty leftovers from the breweries. At that time, producers in Bucharest would only sell the buffalo milk.

“Milkmen who owned buffalo cows abounded in the slums (mahalale)⁴ of Ghencea and Obor” recalled Fillip in 1912 (p. 226).

The census carried out in April 1916 counted out 6,216 buffaloes, 3,430 of which were within the city limits, and in the neighbouring villages (present-day neighbourhoods of Bucharest) there were: 2002 in Dudești (13 bulls, 1,867 cows and 122 calves), 459 in Colentina (5 bulls, 408 cows, 46 calves), 290 in Băneasa (2 bulls, 252 cows, 36 calves) and only 35 in Militari (2 bulls, 23 cows and 10 calves).

In the Capital area, the buffalo cows were generally *“kept in poor conditions”* (Vaida, 1926, p. 76), although the same author also mentioned that they were specimens who would provide up to 12 litres of milk on a daily basis.

The milkmen *“started to raise more regular cows than buffalo cows, since regular cows provide more milk. Thus, the number of buffalo cows would decrease”* Vaida also mentioned in 1926 (p. 99).

In 1930, Ionescu and Florescu mentioned that, in the inter-war period: *“The neighbourhoods on the outskirts make up an immediate supply area around Bucharest, whence milk is taken directly by producers to consumers' homes”* (p. 112). In 1928, there were 581 milkmen among the inhabitants on the outskirts of the Capital *“who will, most certainly become extinct, due to the sky-high rent on houses and lands”* (p. 112).

Among the streets inhabited by milkmen in 1928, we would mention: Calea Dudești, Basarab Road, Mihai Bravu Road, Petre Ispirescu Street, 13 Septembrie Street, Moș Ajun Street etc. Buffaloes bathed in the Dâmbovița river, even after the first improvements to the latter's course (Fig. 3).

For the 1931–1936 period, we have also identified the number of buffaloes sold at the Capital market (“obor”): 5 buffaloes in 1931, 9 buffalo cows in 1932, 4 buffalo cows and 1 buffalo in 1933, 34 buffalo cows and 15 buffaloes in 1934, and 8 buffalo cows in 1936.

Here is also a significant paragraph regarding the buffaloes in the city, included in the article with the relevant title of “Buffaloes on the sidewalks of Bucharest”, published in the Universul newspaper (no. 180) of July 3, 1935: *“Herds of buffaloes walk along Calea 13 Septembrie, in the morning and in the evening, raising clouds of dust and producing an indescribable filth. When these herds of animals pass, the circulation of travellers and vehicles becomes impossible. Children cannot go anywhere, not even to school, for fear of these buffaloes. The few owners of herds left on a main thoroughfare infect the whole neighborhood with the garbage wagons they store near the stables. We urge anyone who won't believe this to come and see the herds of buffalo on Calea 13*

⁴ *Mahalale* = old Romanian term for neighbourhoods.

Septembrie starting from Sebastian Street and moving upwards, to convince themselves how well we are doing here and how modern life has become here, too.” (p. 3).



Fig. 3. Buffaloes bathing in the Dâmbovița River in 1928
(the N. Ionescu collection, the Library of the Romanian Academy).

Cârlănescu (1936) mentioned the fact that, in a household with 15 buffalo cows (between 3 and 10 years of age) on Mihai Bravu Road, between 1.3 and 7.9 kg of milk/day/animal were obtained. The shelters (stables) varied in size (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Buffalo shelter in Bucharest – photograph from the interwar period (after Cârlănescu, 1936).

In the interwar period, “*the milkmen around Bucharest, not finding enough buffaloes in Giurgiu, started to buy them from Transylvania, so almost every dairyman had buffaloes from the Kingdom of Romania (the Muntenia region) and some from Transylvania.* There were some who only had buffaloes from Transylvania” (Vaida, 1926, p. 19).

Of the milk produced, 70% was sold raw and the rest in derivatives (cheese, yogurt – also called “curdled” milk –, butter, cream). The milk was distributed to the population in two ways: directly to consumers' homes, and indirectly by being sold in markets.

In 1937, in the Dâmbovița Valley, between Dudești-Cioplea and Popești-Leordeni, buffalo cows were grazing “*in numerous herds*” (Popescu, 1938, p. 50). They were tended to by “buffalo herders”, poor, yet hardworking people. Some came from Bessarabia. The buffaloes were taken grazing by the children, as well (Fig. 5).

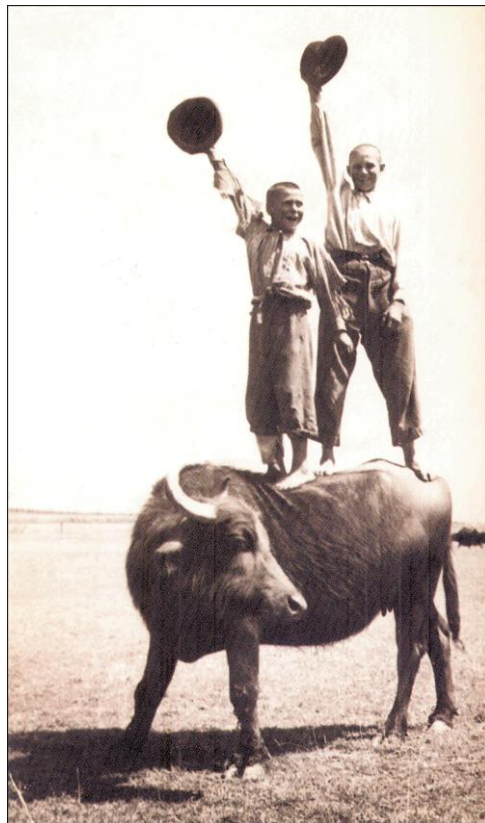


Fig. 5. Children riding a buffalo waving to tourists in cars in the Bucharest area. Photograph from the interwar period by I. Berman.

Raising buffaloes after 1940

Although “*in the time between 1940 and 1944, the number of these milkers had become significant*”, as noted by Giurescu (1979, p. 223), the decline in the growth of buffaloes in Bucharest had begun to be noticed in the interwar period. Thus, Cârănescu mentioned the following in 1936: “*If until now the lands around the city allowed for the raising of buffalo cows, today it is done more at the expense of regular cows*” (p. 63).

In 1947 there were still 635 buffaloes in the Capital, 424 of which were in Dudești neighborhood (66.8%) and 211 in other neighborhoods (33.2%).

Below is also the situation of milk buffalo breeders in 1949 (when there were 653 head of buffaloes):

- in Tudor Vladimirescu commune (present-day Ghencea neighbourhood) there was one breeder who owned 2 buffalo cows;
- in 16 Februarie 1933 commune (present-day Giulești neighbourhood) there were 2 breeders (one had 1 buffalo cow, and the other had 3);
- in Dudești there were 137 breeders owning 626 head of buffalo;
- in Băneasa there were 10 breeders owning 20 head of buffalo and
- in Colentina there was just one breeder owning one buffalo cow.

For example, in Băneasa, out of the 10 existing breeders, one owned 5 buffaloes, another owned 4, three breeders owned 2 each, and five others owned 1 buffalo cow each.

By the early ‘50s, the milkmen around Bucharest would come to town in phaetons, carrying containers of milk (20 kg each), and would go to customers’ houses. Oftentimes, buffalo milk was mixed with regular cow milk before being sold.

After 1960, by emphasizing the intensive breeding of animals in certain complexes in areas close to Bucharest, the locals gradually began to give up buffalo breeding. For example, between 1966 and 1968 alone, the buffalo population declined by 67.8%.

The categories of buffaloes reviewed in 1966 and 1967 are shown in the Table 1.

Table 1

The number of buffaloes existing in the districts of Bucharest, by category, for 1966 and 1967 (no. of specimens)

District / Year	Total	Breeding buffaloes	Working Buffaloes	Buffalo cows	Calves
V. I. Lenin - 1966	4	-	-	4	-
V. I. Lenin - 1967	3	-	-	3	-
T. Vladimirescu - 1966	70	-	-	65	5
T. Vladimirescu - 1967	42	-	7	35	-
16 Februarie - 1966	24	-	-	10	14

Table 1 (continued)

16 Februarie – 1967	13	-	-	7	6
1 Mai - 1966	12	-	-	8	4
1 Mai - 1967	19	-	-	11	8
23 August - 1966	69	-	3	53	13
23 august - 1967	50	1	-	33	16
30 Decembrie - 1966	4	1	-	3	-
30 Decembrie - 1967	3	1	-	2	-
Total 1966	183	1	3	143	36
Total 1967	130	2	7	91	30

In 1968 there were only 59 buffaloes in the Capital, divided among 5 districts (Table 2).

Table 2

The number of buffaloes according to the census of 1968, by category, in the districts of the Capital (no. of specimens)

District	Buffalo bulls	Buffalo cows	Calves over 1 y.o.	Calves under 1 y.o.	Total
Tudor Vladimirescu	-	27	-	3	30
23 August	-	8	2	-	10
1 Mai	-	5	3	1	9
16 Februarie	-	5	2	1	8
30 Decembrie	-	2	-	-	2

In 1969 there were 88 buffaloes in Bucharest (68 of which were cows), while the following year there were 108 head (90 of which were cows).

The census of domestic livestock on January 3, 1972 recorded 107 buffaloes (92 of which were cows) in 4 of Bucharest's sectors at the time (Table 3, Fig. 6).

Table 3

The number of buffaloes existing in 1972, by category, in the sectors of Bucharest (no. of specimens)

District	Buffalo bulls	Buffalo cows	Calves over 1 y.o.	Calves under 1 y.o.	Total
3	-	21	-	8	29
4	-	67	2	3	72
5	-	-	-	1	1
7	-	4	-	1	5

In Bucharest, aside from the few breeders who still existed, there were also another 14 buffaloes in 1981 which had been part of a former State Agricultural Enterprise (IAS) (1 buffalo cow, 1 breeding bull and 12 calves), as well as 11 buffaloes on the farm owned by the Carpați Central Economic Office.

The last buffaloes existed in Bucharest until 1985–1986, in Dudești neighbourhood.

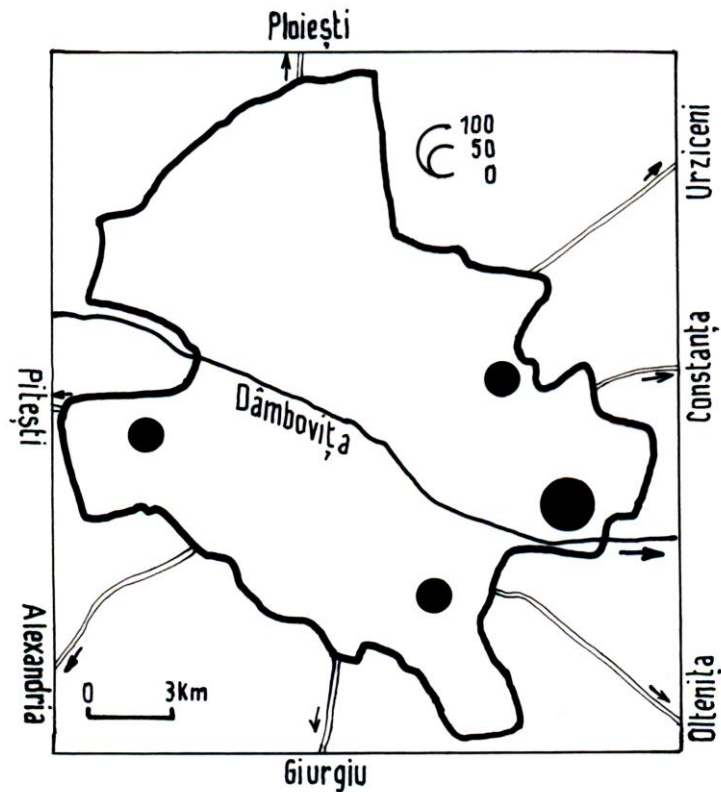


Fig. 6. The number of buffaloes in the sectors of the Capital according to the 1972 census.

Case Study – Raising buffaloes in Dudești neighbourhood

Initially, this was a village near Bucharest, integrated into the Dudești-Cioplea commune. By 1949 it had already become a city, which was then included into the Capital, as it was located in the latter's southeastern part.

While in 1889 there were 386 buffaloes, only a decade later their numbers had increased 2.2 times. At the beginning of the 20th century, there were more than 1000 buffalo cows alone, and in 1916 their herd was close to 2000. After the Second World War there were 424 head, and at the beginning of 1949 there were 626 buffaloes raised throughout 137 households.

For 1949 we have identified precisely the number of buffaloes in households divided by streets, such as: Libertății street – 81 head, Caporal Caragea street – 59, Vânători street – 55, Eroilor street – 49, Ecaterina Teodoroiu street – 38, Teodor Sasu street – 32, Dumbrava Nouă street – 28, Grădinari street – 27, Zorilor street – 21, Primăverii street – 16, Grăniceri street – 6, Ulița Credinței street – 5 buffaloes.

Thanks to systematization actions, some of these streets no longer exist. They were in the Sălăjan (today Grigorescu)-Trapezului area. We have found their modern-day counterparts for only a few: today Libertății street is called Prevederii, Zorilor street is called Vlăhița, Eroilor street is now called Patrioțiților, Ecaterina Teodoroiu street is called Ilioara. Others still bear the name they once had (Credinței, Caporal Caragea, sector 3).

In early 1949, of the 137 breeders, only one owned 16 head, 2 had 15 buffaloes each and 2 had 14 each. At the time, there were 3 households with 12 buffalo cows each, 4 households with 11 head each, and another 5 households with 10 each. However, most households (28) only had one buffalo cow each.

In the Dâmbovița Valley, the buffaloes would bathe in Balamaua pond. The place where they would gather was called Malăcărie. They also bathed in Stuful pond, west of Ilioara street. Balamaua pond at the eastern end of Prevederii Street was round in shape and about 1 ha in area.

At the end of April or the beginning of May, buffalo breeders would leave for the marshy pastures along the Dâmbovița (to the east/southeast), to Pițigaia and Plătărești (today part of Călărași county), along a 17-km-long road, where they grazed until the beginning of October. The pastures were rented from the owners (only those with good grass that also had places for buffaloes to bathe were rented). They went there because these conditions no longer existed in Dudești. The buffalo keepers would live in one-room wooden huts with tin roofs (called “*odăi*”). The huts could be folded and unfolded. First, they brought their huts by car, then they brought the buffaloes. Surprisingly, in 1956 there was a family that had 40 buffaloes. In the pasture areas, the breeders from Duda would have employees and wells, and the gutters would be set up in the spring and taken down in the fall. The same went for the wooden sheds called “*coșerețe*” (baskets), where they would keep their “milking” necessities.

From the areas where the animals grazed, the milk was brought by car to Bucharest, where they distributed it using phaetons and carts. They would milk, yogurt, butter, and whipping cream in confectioneries (including Capșa, Nestor, Scala, until around 1952-1954 when they were all nationalized). Cheese was made from only 15-20% of the milk. In the markets (at Hala Traian, Piața Vitan, Piața Domenii, the former Piață Raion etc.), members of the owners' families sold only cheese, cream and yogurt. In the winter, they would take all the milk obtained directly to the customers' homes. The phaetons were equipped with ice chests. Out of the total volume of distribution, the milk delivered to customers' homes prevailed. Butter was sold in 250-gram “blocks”. Veal meat was also sold.

In order to have good specimens, the breeders from Dudești went to Transylvania where they bought buffaloes of both sexes used in the improvement of the breed (from the counties of Cluj, Sibiu, Alba, Harghita), which were sent in carriages, on the railway, to the Bucharest-Obor station. From there to Dudești, they were taken on foot.

There were 5–6 bulls in all of Dudești in the '60s. For the buffaloes' winter feed the breeders would grow sorghum (fodder feed).

One by one, breeders gave up on raising buffaloes because they no longer had grazing areas in the Dâmbovița Valley; they were also required to keep them enclosed in their yards during winter, and also faced difficulties in procuring fodder for the wintertime. Once they made this decision, most of the buffaloes were taken to the Capital's slaughterhouses, and only a small part were sold to breeders from villages in Călărași and Giurgiu counties.

There were buffaloes in Dudești until 1985-1986.

In 2022, in a single former breeder's household, stranded between 10-story blocks of flats, there was still a buffalo stable that had been built in 1900!

CONCLUSIONS

Buffaloes for milk production were also raised in Bucharest, the Capital of Romania.

While the *Catagrafia* (census) compiled in 1838 already recorded 100 head, the number had already increased more than 6-fold by 1860. Due to the development of the city and the increase in milk and dairy products consumption the number of buffaloes had reached 4,451 by 1900. The largest number of buffaloes in Bucharest was recorded during the census of April 1916 – over 6,200 head (Table 4).

Table 4

The dynamics of the buffalo population in Bucharest between 1860 and 1981 (no. of specimens)

Year	1860	1900	1916	1947	1949	1966	1967	1968	1969	1970	1972	1981
N.s.	636	4451	6216	635	653	183	130	59	88	108	107	30

After the Second World War, however, the population of this mammal decreased abruptly, so that between 1947 and 1949 there were just over 600 head. Later, due to the worsening of the conditions for raising large animals in the Capital during the communist era, in 1966 there were but 183 buffaloes, and in 1968 only 59. This means an 11-fold population decrease in just two decades (between 1949 and 1968). The last buffaloes were raised until 1985-1986.

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