



Greek Charitable Community of Odessa

Summary :

The Greek Benevolent Association of Odessa, (henceforth GBAO) was the premier civic association of Imperial Russia's Greek minority from the time it was created, August 25th 1871, until 1918 when most of its leaders left Russia following the Bolshevik takeover. The GBAO was mainly a philanthropic organization dedicated to helping Odessa's Greeks. Less known is the organization's political activities in both Russia and Greece.

Date

1871-1918

Geographical Location

Odessa

1. The Beginning

The Greek Benevolent Association of Odessa, (henceforth GBAO) was the premier civic association of Imperial Russia's Greek minority from the time it was created, August 25th 1871, until 1918 when most of its leaders left Russia following the Bolshevik takeover.¹

The GBAO was created at a fortuitous moment in Russian history. Traditionally, Russian authorities were suspicious of civic groups and limited their numbers as well as the scope of their action. This policy changed drastically after the death of Tsar Nicholas I in 1855; as a result a large number of civic organizations came into existence.²

The leaders of the Greek community petitioned the city authorities in 1867 for permission to form an association. Due to various legal and bureaucratic problems the petition took four years to be approved.³ The GBAO was created in order to address two main problems facing the Greek community. After the end of the Crimean War (1856) Odessa experienced a relative decline as a financial center and as a result many Greeks experienced a decline in their standards of living.⁴ At the same time more individuals [arrived](#) almost daily only to join the ranks of the ever increasing number of Greek poor. The Greek community needed to organize better in order to address the needs of its less fortunate co-nationals. Besides internal pressures the Greeks of [Odessa](#) were also under pressure from the outside. The Russian authorities, in an attempt to unify the country, implemented the policy of *Russification* which aimed at homogenizing Russian society by absorbing the various minorities in the Russian majority culture.⁵ Feeling threatened at the prospect of losing their cultural identity the leaders of the Greek community sprang to action. On August 25 1871 over one hundred influential individuals of Odessa's Greek community signed the founding charter of the GBAO.⁶

2. The Philanthropic Mission

The GBAO philanthropic mission can be divided into three categories:

- A) Support of the Greek Orthodox Church and other existing Greek educational and cultural institutions.
- B) Creation of new educational and other institutions as needed.
- C) Miscellaneous works of charity.⁷

Pursuant to its first goal the GBAO assumed financial and administrative responsibility of the community's two existing institutions: The Church of the Holy Trinity and the Greek Commercial School for Boys.⁸ In regards to its second goal the GBAO created three new institutions of which the [Rodokanaki Greek School for Girls and Kindergarten](#) was the most famous.⁹ By 1896 the enrollment of



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the School for Girls had reached 232 and was accredited not only by the Russian authorities but the Greek ones as well.¹⁰ In 1908 the GBAO created a craft school for Greek girls. The school accepted girls from the age of thirteen and offered a two year course in sewing.¹¹ The third new institution created by the GBAO was the Marasleion Nursing Home. As the name suggests, the nursing home was created mainly due to the generous contribution of the wealthy leader of the Greek community [G. G. Maraslis](#). The nursing home opened its doors on August, 1896 accepting 11 residents a number that increased to 31 by 1904.¹²

Besides the creation of various educational and philanthropic institutions, the GBAO attempted to meet the community's needs by addressing poverty on an individual, *ad hoc* manner. Any Greek resident of Odessa, and even those passing through the city, who found himself/herself in need of financial assistance, could apply for help at the GBAO. The GBAO provided the needy with regular cash payments distributed twice a year (usually Christmas and Easter).¹³ In many cases the GBAO provided monetary assistance (more often in the form of one time payment but sometimes as a monthly stipend) to needy while in others the organization provided the petitioner with the item he/she needed.¹⁴

3. The Political Aspect

Besides its purely philanthropic activities the GBAO also had a political function. While the association did not seek to influence general Russian policy it sought, and gained, preferential treatment from the government in some important matters such as exempting its educational institutions from the more onerous demands of the Russification policy. In this narrow sphere, the Greek diaspora of Russia as a whole became politicized and "lobbied" the government towards its own ends. The GBAO also helped various Greek patriotic endeavors by donating money to the [Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople](#) and the Greek state.¹⁵ Quite often the GBAO, and Odessa's Greek community as a whole, financed the transportation of volunteers from Russia to Greece in order to fight on the side of the regular Greek army.¹⁶

During the First World War the GBAO became involved in Greek political affairs in an unprecedented way. Political events in both Russia and Greece created a climate in which the Greeks of Odessa could voice their political beliefs openly, even though Russia was still governed by an autocratic regime. When disagreements between the King of Greece and Premier Venizelos concerning Greece's entrance in the war created the "National Schism" the GBAO was at the forefront of support for Venizelos's program.¹⁷ On December 21st 1915 the Board of Trustees of the GBAO agreed to send two representatives to Paris to participate in a pro-Entente, pro-Venizelist conference of the Greek diaspora.¹⁸

4. The End

The year 1917 marked the forty-sixth anniversary of the existence of the GBAO. During that time the association established a good track record as a charitable institution, the GBAO fulfilled, and even surpassed, the mandate given to it by its charter.¹⁹ The GBAO balance sheet for the year 1917 shows receipts of 98,647.46 and expenses of 95,731.75 rubles.²⁰ The total gross assets of the GBAO came to 529,693.18 rubles. From the numbers in the GBAO budget, and those of related institutions, it is clear that the organization was solid and, barring an extraordinary event, would have continued to exist and prosper.

These aspirations remained unfulfilled. As it turned out the well established GBAO, as well as the vast majority of Russia's Greeks, were forced out of the country due to the monumental events of October 1917. Hellenism in Russia was almost wiped out and the GBAO became a footnote in history as a result of Russia's change of regime following the October Bolshevik Revolution, the civil war and foreign intervention. With the supremacy of the communist regime established, the leaders of the Greek community and the GBAO, being themselves wealthy capitalists, escaped to the West leaving the field open to those communist or communist sympathizer Greeks who were now in position to assert their leadership on the community.²¹ Soon after, on an unspecified date, the GBAO (as quietly as it was created about fifty years before) ceased to exist.



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1. See Paradissopoulos, S., "Activities of the Greek Charity Society in Odessa 1871-1896", unpublished essay. p 3. The GBAO did not dissolve until some time in 1919-1920; however after the October Revolution of 1917 its integrity as an independent organization was compromised.
2. In 1855 there were only about 40 private benevolent associations in Russia; the number ballooned to 348 by 1880 and 3,700 by 1901. For more details see Lindenmeyr, A., *Poverty is not a Vice: Charity, Society, and the State in Imperial Russia* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996) pp.116-122 and "The Rise of Volunteer Associations During the Great Reforms: The Case of Charity" in Eklof, B., *Russia's Great Reforms 1855-1881*. (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994) pp. 265.
3. See Paradissopoulos, S., "Activities of the Greek Charity Society in Odessa 1871-1896" Unpublished essay. p 3.
4. For the commercial activities of the Greeks of Odessa see Harlaftis, G., "Ελληνικά Εμποροναυτιλιακά δίκτυα στη νότιο Ρωσία 1830-1914" (Greek Merchant Marine Networks in South Russia, 1830-1914), Conference "The Greeks in Ukraine (18th-20th Century) Social Life, Trade, Culture", Foundation for Hellenic Culture, Institute for Balkan Studies, Odessa State University, Odessa, 27 Sept. 1996.
5. "Russification in Tsarist Russia" *The Modern Encyclopedia of Russian and Soviet History* 1983 ed. 32: 205-211.
6. For the association's charter see Gosudartsvenyi arkhiv Odesskoï oblasti (State Archives of Odessa Province, GAOO) Odessa f. 765, op. 1, d. 1, ll. 12-19.
7. GAOO, f. 765, op. 1, d. 1, l. 17.
8. op. 1, d. 857 also in f. 765, op. 1, d. 2 and f. 274, op. 2, d. 13. For the relationship of the GBAO and the Boys School see GAOO, f. 765, op. 1, d. 2 also f. 2, op. 1, d. 857 and f. 274, op. 2, d. 13.
9. GAAO, f. 765, op. 1, d. 2, ll. 19ob-20. Th. Rodokanaki donated the 40,000 rubles needed for building the school in 1875.
10. Paradissopoulos, S., "Activities of the Greek Charity Society in Odessa 1871-1896" Unpublished essay, p. 7.
11. GAAO, f. 765, op. 1, d. 10, ll. 68-68ob.
12. See Paradissopoulos, S., "Activities of the Greek Charity Society in Odessa 1871-1896" Unpublished essay, p 9-10. See also GAAO, f. 765, op. 1, d. 17, ll. 38-59.
13. In the Easter of 1892 over 200 poor received monetary help totaling 711.95 rubles while during Christmas of the same year 207 poor received a total of 955 rubles. For Easter 1893 the GBAO dispensed 908.45 rubles to 345 individuals while for Easter 1897 the GBAO gave to the poor 600-650 rubles. See GAOO, f. 765, op. 1, d. 7, ll. 1-12. and GAOO, f. 765, op. 1, d. 8, l. 27.
14. GAOO, f. 765, op. 1, d. 2, ll. 23ob-24.
15. GAOO, f. 765, op. 1, d. 1, ll. 9ob-10. See Letter by Greek Premier Venizelos dated 31 January 1913. See GAOO, f. 765, op. 1, d. 22, l. 62.
16. For the activities of Odessa's Greeks during the Russo-Turkish War of 1878 see Piatigorskij, G., "The Revolts in the Greek Provinces of the Ottoman Empire in 1878 and the Greeks of Odessa", in the Conference "The Greeks in Ukraine (18th -20th Century) Social Life, Trade, Culture". Foundation for Hellenic Culture, Institute for Balkan Studies, Odessa State University, Odessa, 28 Sept. 1996. Also GAOO, f. 765, op. 1, d. 8, ll. 43-44.
17. GAOO, f. 765, op. 1, d. 24.
18. GAOO, f. 765, op. 1, d. 24, l. 23.
19. In 1917 the various Greek organizations in Russia created an umbrella organization in order to respond to the monumental events sweeping the



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country. All of the Greek philanthropic organizations (all south Russian cities with sizable Greek minorities had their own civic group) were represented and the GBAO was the driving force. See the Greek newspaper of Odessa *Αναγέννησις*, 14 May 1917: pp. 1-2.

20. GAOO, f. 765, op. 1, d. 26, ll. 184-187. This document is dated December 31, 1917 and given the political events of the era should be considered the last budget of a "normal" year.

21. The first mass exodus of Greeks from Odessa occurred on April 4, 1919. When the Greek army was evacuating the city 10,000-12,000 Greeks from Russia chose to leave with the troops. By 1921 the Greek population of Odessa was reduced to 1,439 from the 5,000-10,000 estimated in 1897. See Χασιώτης, Ι. (ed.), *Οι Έλληνες της Ρωσίας και της Σοβιετικής Ένωσης. Μετοικεσίες, Εκτοπισμοί, Οργάνωση και Ιδεολογία*, (Θεσσαλονίκη 1997), table 23, p. 564.

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