ΙΔΡΥΜΑ ΜΕΙΖΟΝΟΣ ΕΛΛΗΝΙΣΜΟΥ

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Summary :

The history and activity of the Greek Balaklava Infantry Battalion (1774-1859) began in Russia after the Russo-Ottoman war of 1768-1774. During its time of service, the battalion exhibited remarkable combat skills. At the same time, it was integrated to the Greek diaspora of Russia and stands as an example of military typology and assimilation process of immigrants in their re-location area.

Date

1774-1859

Geographical Location

Balaklava, Crimea

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1. Terms and grounds of foundation

The Greek infantry and naval troops that had participated actively in the first Russo-Ottoman war (1768-1774)[1] during the reign of Catherine II were used by the Russian political and administrative authorities after their re-location in Russia as an organised military force, which greatly contributed to the completion of the Crimea conquest. The forces of the Greek Infantry Regiment (it was renamed Greek Balaklava battalion in 1797) contributed to the definite expulsion of the Ottomans from the area and crushed the anti-Russian Tatar uprising (1777-1778), which was instigated by the Ottoman Empire. Moreover, its contribution was crucial in the fierce battles for the capture of Kaffa (Theodosia) and the siege of Sudak, since these troops were already familiar with guerilla tactics from their areas of descent within the Ottoman Empire. After the annexation of Crimea to Russia (1783) and by right of the imperial decree of February 10th 1784, which included the foundation of fortresses, custom houses and custom stations in key areas of defensive and commercial interest, the Greek Infantry Regiment undertook as permanent frontier garrison the coastguard from Sevastopol to Theodosia, which stretched along 300 versts (ca. 318 km) in order to fortify the area from land and from sea and to fight contraband trade in the south of Russia.

With the imperial decree of February 18th 1784, Balaklava[2] was chosen as the Greek Infantry Regiment quarters. Its total force, including experienced infantry and naval officers of all ranks (higher, lower and staff officers, as well as soldiers) with or without their families constituted the strictly military core of the Greek community[3] in the – until then Tatar deserted town.[4] The new inhabitants of Balaklava owned 121 houses in 1778; among their ranks were 268 men and 246 women, a total of 514 people, while in 1802 their total population increased to 1,693 people. As their place of descent they stated the Peloponnese, the Aegean Archipelago, the Ionian Islands and the Venetian dominions in Albania and the western Balkans. For the Greek Regiment's billeting needs barracks, accommodations areas, storehouses and shops were constructed; moreover, all military ranks, besides receiving a regular state salary, were distributed lands both within the Balaklava city border and its outskirts (Kadiköy, Karan, Kamar). According to the same decree, all residents in Balaklava were prohibited from owning landed property, with the exception of those belonging to the Greek Infantry Regiment force. The Regiment's commander was endowed with 240 desiatins of land (262,2 hectares), officers with 60 and soldiers with 15 (they were later increased to 20). 11,000 desiatins (12,017.5 hectares) were ceded in total.[5] Furthermore, a supplementary mandate from the Commander in Chief Prince Potemkin (Potyomkin) defined that those serving in the regiment were exempt from taxation. At times of war they were obliged to remain in the city of Balaklava and during peaceful periods served as coastguard and civic militia. At the same time, they were allowed to occupy themselves with small trade, agriculture (tobacco plantations, viniculture, arboriculture), fishery, apiculture and cottage industries.

2. The reign of Emperor Paul

With the January 30th 1797 decree of Emperor Paul, the Greek Infantry Regiment was renamed Greek Balaklava battalion and was

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disengaged from the jurisdiction of the Taurida Governorate, since as an integral part of the Russian army it came under the Ministry of War. With the next imperial decree (April 4th 1797) the following were regulated: the battalion was composed of three companies; each company had 100 soldiers; consequently, the battalion numbered 396 people including the commander, the higher command officers, the staff officers and sanitation officers.[6] Additionally, it obtained distinct insignia; the men were issued red and green military uniforms and weaponry of the same type, all of which were maintained until 1883. The battalion's organisation and operation was modeled on the armed divisions of the Cossacks of Don, since Greek character and ethnic traditions had to be counted in for its orderly function. Captain Stefanos Beis Mavromichalis (1775-1779, 1794-1801), Major Konstantinos Zaponis (1790-1794), General Theodosis Reveliotis (1809-1831) and Lieutenant Colonel Lykourgos Katsonis (1831-1859) had served, among others, as the Greek battalion's commanders.

3. The battalion's activity and the assessment of its role

The Balaklava Infantry battalion participated in all the warfare and military conflicts on both land and sea that occurred during its time of service. In the Russo-Ottoman war of 1787-1789 it re-enforced the crews of the Dnieper oared flotilla and the Black Sea fleet, and it defeated the Ottoman fleet in the sea battle of Kinburn. It took part in the landing on Bulgaria, in the raids on the coast of Anatolia, as well as the naval engagements of Yeni Kale, Tendra and the Kaliakria Cape.[7] In the Russo-Ottoman war of 1806-1812 it participated in the landing on Platon. At the outbreak of the 1812 "Patriotic War" against Napoleon it squashed the Tatar rebellion in Crimea. Between 1812 and 1830 it was assigned the sanitary protection (quarantines) of Crimea from the successive cholera epidemics. The battalion also excelled during the Crimean War (1853-1856). Fighting with unrivalled courage it defended the city, port and fortress of Balaklava (September 13th-14th 1854) forcing the British to retreat. After the war ended and due to contemporary circumstances, there was no reason for the battalion to continue to exist neither a special role for it to play, so by decree of Alexander II it was dissolved. Those of the men who wished to continue their service in the Russian army were transferred to other regiments, while those who were discharged occupied themselves with peaceful activities, remained however in Balaklava and its outskirts, which at the time numbered 2,000 Greek residents.

The significant and versatile activity of the battalion was recognized by an honourable mention issued by Alexander I and the provision of various benefits towards men of all ranks: rise in pay for officers, right of decoration with the medal of the 4th order for officers with a consecutive service of 25 years, right of decoration with the St Anne insignia for soldiers with an honourary service of 20 years, distribution of lands to landless soldiers, pensions to widows of petty officers and officers, care and provision for the education of orphan underage sons of lower officers and, lastly, right for the practice of maritime or overland commerce and enlistment in the first- and second-class commercial rank for discharged officers.

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2. Tatar place-name meaning "fish nest"; it was called "Palakion" in ancient Greek and "Cembalo" in Genoese.

3. Σελέκου, Ο., «Ελληνικές παροικίες και κοινότητες στην Κριμαία (18ος-19ος αιώνας). Τυπολογία και εννοιολογικές αποσαφηνίσεις», *Επιθεώρηση Κοινωνικών Ερευνών* 104-105 A-B (AAthens 2001), pp. 250-253.

4. Kondaraki, B.X., *Ounivershalnoe opishanie Krima. V pamjat stoletija prisojedinenija Krima* (Sankt Petersbourg 1875), pp. 78-80.

5. Shaphonov, C.B., *Ostatki gretsheskich legionov v Rossii, ili nineshnee nashelenije Balaklavi. Istoritsheski otsherk. Zapiski Odesskovo Imperatorskovo obshestva istorii i drevnostei* (Odessa 1844), p. 210; Mosxouri, I.B., *Greki v istorii Sevastopolja* (Sevastopol 2005), p. 36.

6. Shaphonov, C.B., *Ostatki gretsheskich legionov v Rossii, ili nineshnee nashelenije Balaklavi. Istoritsheski otsherk. Zapiski Odesskovo Imperatorskovo obshestva istorii i drevnostei* (Odessa 1844), p. 225.

7. *Novie Dokoumenti Souvorova, Ushakova, Potemkina Tavritsheskovo* (Simferopol 1947), pp. 45-47.

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