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Venetian subjects on the Russian service: Volunteers, Mercenaries or Pirates?

During the Russian-Turkish war of 1769-1774 the Russian Navy for the first time appeared in the Mediterranean. Inspired by the revolt of the Greeks of Peloponnese, hundreds of Greek and Slav volunteers joined Russian forces. Among them were numerous Venetian subjects, including soldiers and seamen from different parts of the Adriatic and the Ionian Islands. Several squadrons led and manned mostly by the Venetian subjects were operating in the Eastern Mediterranean. In 1773 city of Beirut was captured and occupied for four months by one of such squadrons. These auxiliary forces played an important role in interruption of the Ottoman sea trade and food supply of Turkey from the Ottoman dependences in the Northern Africa.

The Serenissima kept neutrality in the conflict. The authorities were afraid that participation of Venetian subjects in the military operations might provide the Ottomans with an excuse to attack Venetian possessions. The most active volunteers were outlawed by special decrees and their property confiscated. However, after the end of the war most of those, who served under the Russian flag returned home safely. Some Venetian subjects, both Greeks and Slavs, remained in the Russian service. They were encouraged to settle in Crimea and other newly established Russian provinces on the Black Sea shores.

During the next Russian-Turkish war of 1788-1789 these people became a core for an establishing of two squadrons of Greek privateers operated against the Ottomans in the Aegean Sea, first on behalf of Russia and then on its own after the war ended. Following the final defeat some of them escaped to Corfu. The Venetian authorities delivered many of them to the Ottomans.

Despite these prosecutions, veterans of the Russian service were not rare among the islanders. When the Russian-Turkish war of 1788-1789 started many Venetian subjects, merchants and sailors, were in different Russian Black Sea ports. They were invited to join the Russian Navy with their vessels and crews. Skippers were promoted to different ranks, their vessels bought by the Russian Navy and their service was later rewarded by special Committee, established by the direct order of Empress Catherine II in 1792. Most of these Greeks returned to their home islands after retire several years after the end of war. Number of the former Russian officers in Cephalonia alone was up to 30 people in 1798, when joint Russo-Turkish squadron arrived to the island in order to take it from the French. In many cases veterans on different islands organized and led local armed militias, which were of great help to the Russians, during the capture of the Ionian Islands in 1798-1799. Later the former Russian officers took active part in the founding of the Septinsular Republic.

The paper based on manuscript documents from Venetian and Russian archives, published diaries and eye-witness accounts and scientific literature.
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