

## Bearing Arms for the Empire: Crimean Tatars as Soldiers and Subjects

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*This paper is drawn from a larger study of the impact service in the Russian army between 1783 and 1853 had on the structure of Crimean society and on the relationship between the empire and its newly-acquired subjects. The annexation of Crimea marked the first time in over two hundred years that a significant Muslim population had been introduced into the imperial community and unlike their predecessors, the Crimeans stood to benefit from the recently declared policy of religious toleration. Indeed, Empress Catherine II and Prince G. A. Potemkin were intent on securing the loyalty of the inhabitants of the former khanate. This was no small task from the Russian point of view. Not only were the Crimeans non-Christians; until 1774 they were nominally subjects of the Ottoman sultan, and they still maintained a web of social, economic and cultural connections to that part of the Black Sea world. In order to shift the allegiance of the Crimeans northward toward St. Petersburg, Russian officials offered them the opportunity to serve in the Russian army with the expectation that this would cultivate a healthy sense of subjecthood. However, in the two episodes described here, military service did not have the desired effect. Decades of reluctance, betrayal, repentance and heroics on the part of the Tatar horsemen did little to change the minds of Russian officials who felt these borderland Muslims did not belong in the imperial community. For their part, the experience of serving in the Russian army did not persuade the Crimeans that they desired such acceptance.*

In early October 1853, the *kâtib* of the Friday mosque in Evpatoriia delivered a remarkable sermon. Seit Ibrahim Efendi proclaimed that in the seventy years since Empress Catherine I annexed the khanate, the Crimean Tatars “not only had never broken their holy oath of subjecthood, but [had] thrived under the scepter of the Russian monarch,” who “blessed us with personal freedom and guaranteed our faith, customs and property, but also granted us privileges over other estates.” Now however, on the eve of the Crimean War, Seit Ibrahim explained that “things are difficult for loyal Tatars, who come under suspicion because of the religion they share with the enemies of our Sovereign.” In this difficult time, the beys and mirzas loyal to Russia had come together on behalf of the Tatar people to beg Tsar Nicholas I “to

accept a new oath of our unshakeable loyalty, knowing that should any man break it for whatever reason, he will be disowned by the Crimean Tatar people.” The text of the speech, signed by fourteen of the most powerful beys and mirzas (including members of the Sirin, Krimtay, Khunkalov, Argin and Kipchat clans), made its way to the imperial capital. Shortly thereafter, the kâtib received commendations from Admiral A. S. Menshikov and War Minister V. A. Dolgorukij, along with assurances that the tsar had never questioned Crimean loyalty.<sup>1</sup>

In truth, Russian sovereigns had questioned the loyalty of the Crimean Tatars since the moment of annexation in 1783, and they would continue to do so until the fall of the empire in 1917. In the mind of many imperial and local officials, the practice of Islam linked the Crimeans to their coreligionists in the Ottoman Empire and thus represented a political as well as an administrative challenge to Russian rule.

The idea of Muslims as subjects was not novel in 1783, though the ambivalent nature of imperial policy toward them was. In the wake of her famous 1773 proclamation of the “toleration of all faiths” it became clear that Catherine’s intention was not simply to tolerate confessions such as Catholicism or Islam, but to use their respective institutions to exert control over and perhaps even elicit loyalty from non-Orthodox populations.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, while outwardly committed to protecting Muslim institutions, Russian officials sought to minimize what they perceived to be irregular or deviant religious practices – indicative of disloyalty and therefore disorder – by integrating the groups like the Crimean Muslims into Russian institutions.

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<sup>1</sup> GARK 26-4-1396: 1-13 (“On the expression of feelings of devotion to Russia by Crimean mirzas”).

<sup>2</sup> On Russian policy toward Muslims, see Alan Fisher, “Enlightened Despotism and Islam Under Catherine II,” *Slavic Review* 27, no.4 (1968): 542-553; Robert D. Crews, “Empire and the Confessional State: Islam and Religious Politics in Nineteenth-Century Russia,” *American Historical Review* 108, no.1 (2003): 50-83; Danil’ Azamatov, “Russian Administration and Islam in Bashkiria (18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> Centuries),” in eds. Michael Kemper, Anke von Kugelgen, Dmitriy Yermakov, *Muslim Culture in Russia and Central Asia from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries, vol. 1* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1996); Ivan Aleksandrov, “K istorii uchrezhdeniia Tavricheskago Magometanskago Dukhovnago Pravleniia,” *ITUAK* 54 (1918). Etc...

The army had immense potential as an integrative institution. Its influence seemed to extend into every nook and cranny of Russian life: military norms provided the foundation (at least in part) for the famously pervasive emphasis on rank in Russian society; military symbols were deployed liberally to impress the strength of the state upon domestic and foreign audiences. Officers often served as diplomats, reformers, administrators, judges, and even kingmakers. Deployment, provisioning, and billeting practices determined the structure of many social, fiscal, and administrative relationships within the empire and conscription was, along with taxation, one of the primary sites of interaction between government officials and private individuals.<sup>3</sup>

In the non-Russian borderlands the army had two potentially contradictory purposes: to establish and maintain imperial control over the local population and, as Mark von Hagen puts it, to act as “an engine of possible political integration.”<sup>4</sup> It fulfilled the latter part of this dual mission with varying success. Military service was critical, for example, to what Bruce Menning describes as the transformation of the “highly volatile Don Cossack host into an obedient and pliant instrument designed to meet the military needs of the Imperial Russian state.”<sup>5</sup> And many Baltic Germans, Finns, Poles and Georgians found a place among the officer ranks, thus easing

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<sup>3</sup> John Keep, Richard Hellie, Josh Sanborn, Elise Kimmerling Wirtschafter, David Schimmelpennick van der Oye and Bruce Menning have all made important English-language contributions to the field of military history. See also Eric Lohr and Marshall Poe’s introductory essay in *The Military and Society in Russia 1450-1917*, edited by Eric Lohr and Marshall Poe (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 1-18; and the volume edited by Frederick W Kagan and Robin Higham, *The Military History of Tsarist Russia* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), particularly Bruce W. Menning’s chapter, “The Imperial Russian Army, 1725-1796.” For an excellent introduction to modern work on Russian military history see the essays in *Reforming the Tsar’s Army: Military Innovation in Imperial Russia from Peter the Great to the Revolution*, edited by David Schimmelpennick van der Oye and Bruce W. Menning, especially David M. McDonald’s concluding essay, “The Military and Imperial Russian History.”

<sup>4</sup> Kappeler, 129; Mark von Hagen, “The Limits of Reform: The Multiethnic Imperial Army Confronts Nationalism, 1874-1917,” in eds. David Schimmelpennick van der Oye and Bruce Menning, *Reforming the Tsar’s Army: Military Innovation in Imperial Russia from Peter the Great to the Revolution* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2004): 34.

<sup>5</sup> Bruce W. Menning, “The Emergence of a Military-Administrative Elite in the Don Cossack Land, 1708-1836,” in eds. Walter McKenzie Pintner and Don Karl Rowney, *Russian Officialdom: The Bureaucratization of Russian Society from the Seventeenth to the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980): 130-161.

their transition into Russian subjecthood and solidifying their collaborative relationship with the state.

One of the most effective methods of drawing newly acquired non-Russian, non-Christian populations into such relationships was by establishing “native units.” These voluntary irregular units, in which non-Russians served under their own officers, could function as “both a symbol of allegiance to Russia and,” Robert Baumann argues, “a tool for the weaving of subject peoples into the social fabric of the empire.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, service in such native units was the most successful engine of social integration Russian officials would apply in the former Crimean khanate. This might not seem surprising considering the prominent role horsemanship and skill with the bow and arrow played in Crimean culture. For centuries, travelers described the Crimean Tatars as fearsome steppe warriors. And while some, like Swedish historian and geographer Hans Erich Thunmann, felt that by the early 1780s the Tatars had “lost that fierce valor which made them so formidable when they first appeared in Europe”, even Thunmann conceded that “every Tatar [was] a soldier,” the rich armed with sabers and pistols, the poor with bows and arrows.<sup>7</sup>

The size and structure of the Crimean army prior to 1783 is difficult to pin down, both because of source discrepancies and the nature of the army, which varied according to the purpose of any given campaign. While the khan might muster a full-strength force to campaign alongside or on behalf of the Ottomans, much smaller contingents often rode out on raids across the steppe.<sup>8</sup> Three crucial elements appear to have held relatively constant. First, military

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<sup>6</sup> Robert F. Baumann, “Subject Nationalities in the Military Service of Imperial Russia: The Case of the Bashkirs,” *Slavic Review* 46, No.3/4 (Autumn-Winter 1987): 490.

<sup>7</sup> Francesco Becattini, *Storia della Crimea piccolo Tartaria ed alter Provincie circonvicine* (Venezia: Pressa Leonardo Rassaglia, 1785), 27; Hans Erich Thounmann, *Description de la Crimée* (Strasbourg: chez J.G. Treuttel, 1786), 18 & 21.

<sup>8</sup> When Mengli Giray I (1478-1514) claimed in a letter to Grand Prince Vasilij III to command over two hundred thousand men, he may well have been exaggerating as much as Vasilij himself did when making the same claim.

service was the right and responsibility of all (Muslim) males of age. The sons of mirzas and common Tatars alike trained from youth to master the skills of horseback riding and weaponry, and to withstand all manner of weather and fatigue. Second, military service under the khans was irregular. Men mustered to go on campaign and then returned home, their pace slowed by loot or battle wounds. The only standing force was the khan's own *sekban* guard of roughly 1,000 cavalry provided and funded by the Porte.<sup>9</sup> Third, the khan could not raise an army of full strength without the assistance of the elite clan leadership. The beys seldom led the army on campaign, but they were capable of raising a force as large as, or perhaps even greater than, that of the khan – the Sirin and Mansur beys had as many as 20,000 men each at their disposal, and the Sicivüt and Dair beys could each field 10,000.<sup>10</sup> As the khan's power declined in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Girays became increasingly dependent on clan leaders to muster an army worthy of the field of battle.<sup>11</sup>

Sahin Giray, the infamous last khan of Crimea, found this arrangement unacceptable. Anxious to have a regular army under his own command, he set about creating an elite cavalry guard, which he called the *besliler*, or *besli* regiment.<sup>12</sup> His initial recruitment efforts yielded approximately 800 volunteers, and he used them to conscript several thousand additional men. Sahin envisioned a standing, well-trained army 20,000-strong, with 1,000 beslis and 2,000 sekban. Undeterred by the disapproval of his Russian patrons, the khan outfitted his fledgling

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Sahib Giray brought 70,000 men with him when he invaded Muscovy in 1541 (a contemporary Frenchman put the estimate slightly higher), and English ambassador Giles Fletcher estimated that the khan rode with over 100,000 men in the late sixteenth century. See Diulichev, 279; Seidamet, 17-18; Thounmann, 22; Brian Davies, "The Foundations of Muscovite Military Power, 1453-1613," in eds. Frederick W. Kagan and Robin Higham, *The Military History of Tsarist Russia* (New York: Palgrave, 2002): 21.

<sup>9</sup> Alan Fisher, "Les rapports entre l'empire ottoman et la crimée: l'aspect financier," 24-25; Beatrice Forbes Manz, "The Clans of the Crimean Khanate, 1466-1532," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 2, no. 3 (1978): 295.

<sup>10</sup> Evliya Chelebi, 104-105. Manz offers evidence that the Sirin bey commanded 20,000 men in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century as well (285).

<sup>11</sup> Manz, 294; Fisher, *Crimean Tatars*, 23.

<sup>12</sup> *Besli* is Crimean Tatar for horseman.

army in western military uniforms, and trained them “in the way [he] had observed Russian guard units training in St. Petersburg.” Most shocking for the Crimeans was Sahin’s decision to include Christians in the ranks alongside Muslims. Although he consulted the mufti regarding his right to enforce these measures and received the mufti’s *pro forma* approval, Sahin’s reforms were soundly rejected by the Tatar population. In fact, they contributed in no small amount to the resentment that fueled the rebellion plaguing his reign. Undaunted by the lack of support, the khan used his depleted besli force to take revenge against those who betrayed him, executing and imprisoning so many that Catherine and Potemkin were compelled to restrain him.<sup>13</sup>

Given this state of affairs, Potemkin might have easily decided to bring an end to the long history of military service in Crimea. After all, the majority of beys and mirzas had fought against Sahin Giray and his Russian patrons. If the Crimeans could be made into reliable soldiers, they would first have to become trusted subjects.

In the weeks after Catherine proclaimed the annexation of the Crimean khanate Potemkin began implementing his carefully devised plan for establishing Russian rule. One of the most critical challenges he and his lieutenants faced was to secure the allegiance of the Crimean population. “We must ascertain who among the residents of the peninsula harbors ill intentions toward Russia and who receives us favorably,” Potemkin wrote in May 1783. “We must examine each individual, especially those who wield power and influence over the masses, rather than simply taking the sum of their opinions.”<sup>14</sup> Military commander de Balmen and his successor, Governor Baron Osip A. Igel'strom, took great pains to assess the sympathies of the bey and mirza clans, and despite the fact that the loyalty of many remained in doubt, Catherine

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<sup>13</sup> Fisher, “Sahin Giray,” 360-361; Fisher, *Russian Annexation*, 120-127; RGVIA 52-1-295: 5-8.

<sup>14</sup> “Rasporiazheniia Potemkina,” 262 (Order to Count de Balmen, 16 May 1783).

was anxious for Potemkin to administer a formal oath of allegiance to the entire population.<sup>15</sup> In an addendum to the annexation manifesto, Catherine informed Potemkin that he should compose the oath such that it would be “in accordance with [Crimean] law.” The prince agreed that the oath – the political institution that would transform Crimeans into Russian subjects – must integrate what he called “the customs of the Muslims.” He was adamant that invoking the rituals of kissing the Koran and affixing seals in the traditional manner would imbue the oaths of the mirzas and ulema in particular with legitimacy and strengthen the bond between sovereign and subject.<sup>16</sup> It seemed for the moment that the empire did not consider “Muslim” and “loyal subject” mutually exclusive terms.

Did its subjects share this sentiment? Officially, all Muslims owed their allegiance to the caliph – a title possessed by the Ottoman sultan since his conquest of Egypt and the Hijaz in 1517. The Ottoman claim to the caliphate was thin however, and the Porte did not make too much of it until 1774.<sup>17</sup> As a result of the treaty of Küçük Kaynarca, Russia began claiming authority to protect Orthodox Christians in the Ottoman Empire. The Porte responded in kind, citing the acknowledgment in Article 3 that while the Crimean khanate would henceforth be independent in all other respects, its Muslims remained under the influence of the sultan in his capacity as “Supreme Caliph of the Muslim law.” Crimean Muslims continued to include the

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<sup>15</sup> On the steppe traditions of oath-taking see Michael Khodarkovsky, *Russia's Steppe Frontier*, 43-44, 52. On the use of oaths as a tool of empire-building, see Virginia Martin, “Kazakh Oath-Taking in Colonial Courtrooms: Legal Culture and Russian Empire-Building,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 5, no.3 (2004): 483-514; and Austin Jersild, *Orientalism and Empire*, 17-19.

<sup>16</sup> *SIRIO* vol. 27: 245; “Rasporiazheniia Potemkina,” 266 (Potemkin to de Balmen, 14 June 1783).

<sup>17</sup> According to Amhet Yasar Ocak, “Ottoman Islam bestowed sacredness on the concept of sovereignty” and “a means of governing,” but was not the sole source of the sultan’s legitimacy. Nor did it exclusively define the relationship between the sultan and his subjects: non-Muslims were an important part of the imperial population from its inception. See “Islam in the Ottoman Empire: A Sociological Framework for a New Interpretation,” in *Ottoman Borderlands: Issues, Personalities and Political Changes*, ed. Kemal H. Karpat (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003): 188; and Ira M. Lapidus, “The Separation of State and Religion in the Development of Early Islamic Society,” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 6, no. 4 (1975): 363-364.

sultan in Friday prayers, and they retained the right to mint coins with his stamp.<sup>18</sup> But beyond this, the sources do not shed much light on the intimacy of their connection to the sultan. In fact, Alan Fisher argues convincingly that Crimeans were – for much of their history anyway – far more concerned with defending their autonomy than with forging a binding connection to the Porte.<sup>19</sup>

Whether the Crimean Tatars defined themselves first and foremost as members of the *umma* or not, Russian authorities saw their Muslim identity as the most important factor in defining their relationship to the empress. Potemkin described members of the Giray house as “Muslim princes (*magometanskii kniazia*)” rather than Chingissids or khans of the steppe, and threatened severe punishments for any soldiers who showed disrespect toward members of the *ulema*, disrupted prayer services, or desecrated sacred places. He instructed the early military governors to encourage Russian soldiers to treat the Tatars gently, “as they would their own brothers and any other of Her Majesty’s loyal subjects.” There was no doubt in Potemkin’s mind that the situation was delicate, and that any insult to Islamic institutions could precipitate severe unrest in Tavrída and even war with the Porte.<sup>20</sup>

Thus when Governor Igel'strom administered the oath of allegiance at Ak Kaya in early July 1783, each of the assembled members of the secular and religious elite swore before Allah to “submit [him]self in eternal subjecthood and accept the blessing of being as one people before

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<sup>18</sup> *PSZ* 1<sup>st</sup> series, vol.19, no.14,164 (10 July 1774); *PSZ* 1<sup>st</sup> series, vol.20, no.14,851, Art.1. pt.2 & Art 3 (10 March 1779); Markevich, *K voprosu o polozenii protiv-musul'manskoj missii v Tavride* (Simferopol': Tavricheskaia gubernskaia tipografiia, 1911), 6; A. I. Tret'iak, *Severnoe prichornomor'e v politiko-pravovom prostranstve Evropy kontsa XVIII veka* (Odessa: Optimum, 2004), 17. For an excellent summary of the terms of the treaty of Küçük Kaynarca, see LeDonne, *The Russian Empire and the World 1700-1917* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 105-106. The Aynali Kavak convention, which both imperial powers signed in 1779, confirmed many of the terms of Küçük Kaynarca and acknowledged Sultan Abdulhamid I's spiritual authority as caliph.

<sup>19</sup> Fisher, “Crimean Separatism in the Ottoman Empire,” 79-92. On the elaboration of the sultan's role as caliph under Abdulhamid II, see Selim Deringil, “Legitimacy Structures in the Ottoman State: The Reign of Abdulhamid II (1876-1909),” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 23, no. 3 (1991), 345-359.

<sup>20</sup> *SIRIO* 27: 246; “Rasporiazheniia Potemkina,” 262 (July 1, 1783), 264 (26 May 1783), 265 (31 May 1783), 272 (1 July 1783), 287 (16 October 1783). Of course, Potemkin's best intentions did not always translate into practice. I discuss the gap between policy and practice in my dissertation.

the empress.” “I therefore swear in the name of the One Lord and All-powerful God, and the prophet [Mohammad],” read the oath, “to try not only to fulfill [the empress’s] sublime will, but also to sacrifice my soul and life for Her Majesty... In pledging this oath,” it concluded, “I kiss the Koran... and in so doing I [agree to] submit to the cruelest of punishments as an example to all people, should I commit any crime or disobedience.”<sup>21</sup>

The empire made a series of promises in return. Because of the delicacy of the political situation along the southern frontier, any instance of perceived repression of Crimean Muslims, such as forced conscription into military service, resettlement, or prohibition from pilgrimage, was likely to evoke serious protests from Istanbul as well as resentment from the empress’s newly acquired subjects. Therefore, Catherine’s annexation manifesto did not contradict the Ottoman claim to religious authority over Crimean Muslims. Instead, it guaranteed them the privilege of practicing their faith and maintaining their mosques, preserved the social and economic privileges of the ulema, and exempted the Tatars from conscription or taxation.<sup>22</sup>

Catherine hoped to thus create an environment in which simultaneous loyalty to the Orthodox sovereign and to the caliph was not a contradiction in terms. But the precarious nature of this system of loyalty, which theoretically allowed Crimean Muslims to look to Petersburg for the source of political authority and to Istanbul for religious guidance, was apparent from the start. In fact, the subsequent fate of the Crimean Tatars within the Russian empire cannot be understood without taking the larger geopolitical context into consideration: war between the

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<sup>21</sup> RGVIA 52-1-295: 70 (“Raporty general-poruchika de Bal’mena o politicheskom polozhenii v Krymu, o privedenii krymskikh tatar k prisiage na poddanstve Rossii, o “sudoproizvodstve” mezhdru khanom Sahin Gireem i tatarskim narodom i dukhovenstvom...”); RGVIA 52-1-336, ch. 3: 74 (“Raporty komandira Krymskago Korpusa O. A. Igel’sroma o vyvode chasti vojsk korpusa iz Kryma...”).

<sup>22</sup> See Potemkin’s order regarding the protection of Islamic institutions, 16 October 1783 in “Rasporiazheniia Potemkina,” 286-287.

rival Black Sea powers, particularly the Russian-Ottoman wars of 1787-1791 and 1806-1812, brought the shifting, unstable nature of Crimean loyalties into stark relief.

In the spring of 1787, as relations between Petersburg and the Porte deteriorated, rumors began to circulate in Crimea about – in the words of Governor V. V. Kakhovskij – the immanent arrival of “the false prophet Mansur,” who was coming to deliver Crimea from Christian rule. This “false prophet,” known as Ušurma or Sheikh Mansur, had styled himself a holy warrior and the leader of a rebellion against the expansion of the Russian empire into the Caucasus since 1785. Rumors of his feats, let alone of his appearance, were quite enough to set local officials on edge, particularly after the Porte declared war on Russia in August. Throughout the autumn the governor’s staff nursed fears of a revolt. “The local Tatars have begun to whisper among themselves,” Kakhovskij wrote to the Russian envoy in Istanbul. “They are deriving prophecies from their books, giving credence to the rumors and turning their hopes to [Mansur].”<sup>23</sup>

In an effort to stem the disorder that erupted wherever Mansur’s name was proclaimed, Kakhovskij deemed it necessary to summon a large number of local mullas to Simferopol, where he could evaluate their “political unreliability.” Such work was, after all, critical to Kakhovskij’s ability to control the province on behalf of Potemkin, whose authority as governor-general was both military and administrative. In his report to Potemkin, Kakhovskij admitted that he found the mullas worthy of a certain kind of respect. “The strong impression that the words of the Koran make on them,” he explained, “compels them to consider dying to protect their faith and the hatred and loathing they harbor toward us is similar to that of our own *raskol’niki*.” The

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<sup>23</sup> “Pis’my Kakhovskago,” 289; Aleksandrov, “Sheikh Imam Mansur,” 26. Mansur may have been one of the first Naqshbandi to preach in the North Caucasus. See Alexandre Bennigsen, “Un Mouvement Populaire au Caucase au XVIII<sup>e</sup> Siècle: La “Guerre Sainte” du *sheikh* Mansur (1785-1791),” *Cahiers du Monde Russe et Soviétique* 5(2): 159-205; Alexandre Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush, *Mystics and Commissars: Sufism in the Soviet Union* (London: C. Hurst & Company, 1985), 18; Arslan Krichinskij, *Očerki russkoj politiki na okrainakh, tom 1. K istorii religioznykh pritesnenij krymskikh tatar* (Baku: Soiuz musul’manskoj trudovoj intelligentsia, 1919)

influence they wielded among the Muslim population was formidable, and particularly worrying in the context of Russian-Ottoman hostilities. Kakhovskij feared the ulema might even be more powerful than the “fanatical” Catholic priests Russia was encountering in the Polish provinces; certainly they were creating “bad” Muslims – the kind that betrayed oaths and caused disorder – at an alarming rate. Within a year he had exiled more than fifty of them, together with their families.<sup>24</sup>

Cracking down on the ulema was a relatively effective form of exerting control over the local population, but it drove a wedge between the local community and the Russian administration. As if to compensate for this, Potemkin devoted considerable energy to the other guiding principle of the army’s borderland function – to facilitate integration. The prince considered drawing the secular leadership – the beys and mirzas – into a collaborative relationship a critical step in the process of establishing the legitimacy of Russian rule. The empress had granted him permission to award officer ranks to members of the elite, and he took it upon himself to create a distinct voluntary structure for Crimean military service. On 1 March 1784, Catherine approved his proposal to form a light horse regiment composed of five squadrons loosely structured along the lines of irregular Cossack units (Table 1). It was known as the *besli* regiment.

*Table 1: Structure of the Besli Regiment, 1784<sup>25</sup>*

Rank	Salary (rubles)	Per Squadron	Total (rubles)
Major	300	1	5
Captains ( <i>rotmistry</i> )	200	2	10
Lieutenants	150	2	10
Ensigns	120	2	10
NCOs	40	10	50

<sup>24</sup> Krichinskij, 9; “Pis’mu Kakhovskago,” 294. Druzhinina, 101.

<sup>25</sup> PSZ 1<sup>st</sup> series, vol.43, no.15,945 (1 March 1784). Also reproduced in Gabaev, “Zakonodatel’nye akty i drugie dokumenty o voennoj sluzhbe krymskikh tatar v riadakh vojskovykh chastej, predkov nyneshniago Krymskago Konnago Eia Velichestva Gosudaryni Imperatritsy Aleksandry Feodorovny polka,” *ITUAK* 51 (1913): 136.

Privates	35	<u>190</u>	<u>950</u>
Total salaries (rubles)		8,290	41,450

Potemkin and his lieutenants had little trouble enlisting squadron commanders from elite clans: men such as Mustafa mirza Kiiatov, Abdul Velisa mirza Khunkalov, and Batyr aga Krimtay. Filling out the rank-and-file proved far more challenging. Despite the prospect of a respectable salary, grants of land and villages, the right to wear a military uniform and to enjoy the status of men-at-arms, the lack of volunteers for the besli regiment was so pervasive that by January 1785, only two of five squadrons had formed, neither at full strength. Because few volunteers were forthcoming, Kakhovskij enlisted the help of clan leaders, in hopes that their influence in the community might encourage participation. The strategy enjoyed some success. In September 1784 for example, Bek mirza, a resident of Perekop district, submitted a petition requesting officer rank in Abdul Velisa's squadron. Governor Kakhovskij granted his request on one condition: that Bek mirza produce thirty privates, complete with uniforms and arms, in return for the rank of captain.<sup>26</sup> A 1788 list of horsemen in Mustafa Kiiatov's squadron also suggests that personal connections between officers and privates were critical to filling the regimental roster. Of the ten NCOs in Kiiatov's squadron, six came from the same town or village as nine or more of the privates they led. Sergeant Mehmet bey of Baçal village in Feodosiia, for example, served alongside eleven privates from the same village, while Mengli Adabasi served with twelve men from his native Bahçesaray. Those responsible for enlisting volunteers often received subaltern or NCO rank in return for their efforts.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> RGVIA 52-1-332: 179-180. Bek mirza parlayed his successful petition into both military rank and civil office. In 1793 he was elected deputy to the higher land court, served his term and was reelected in 1796. He may well have been the head of the Dair clan of Perekop, although there is some ambiguity in the sources – his 1820 petition does mention Bek mirza Dair's military rank, although many mirzas did not include Russian rank in their petitions for noble status. See GARK 49-1-6504: 1-9.

In spring 1787 the besli regiment – now composed of six light horse divisions under the command of Colonel Mehmetza bey Kantakuzin – escorted the empress across the Crimean peninsula during her much celebrated tour, and observers found it remarkable that “yesterday’s enemies” demonstrated such devotion to Catherine, even taking care to steady her carriage on the precarious roads. But as the relationship between sovereign and subject soured that summer (Sultan Abdulhamid I declared war on 13 August), Potemkin balked at deploying the Crimean horsemen. Instead, he ordered Kantakuzin and his men to execute the resettlement of all Tatars dwelling along the southeastern coast to the interior of the peninsula. The motivation for enlisting Tatar chieftains to implement such an unpopular policy is clear: suspicious as they were of the Crimean leadership, Russian officials needed them to control rest of the Crimean population. Indeed, Potemkin exhibited an admirable creativity when it came to keeping the mirzas busy: in December the military governor of New Russia, M.M. Kakhovskij, ordered Kantakuzin to select one hundred and twenty of the most loyal and capable Tatars to remain under his (Kantakuzin’s) command. These men, dressed in green kaftans, white *kamzols* and cornflower blue trousers, would serve as a special provincial escort for Potemkin, while the remaining beslis received orders to disband.<sup>28</sup>

It was only in early 1790, with several major victories under his belt, that Potemkin decided to put the besli regiment through its paces. This time around, the horsemen mustered quickly and were promptly dispatched to Pereiaslav. Before long, orders came for Kantakuzin’s men to present themselves in Kiev. According to a 32-year old captain called Mehmet bey, almost immediately an officer named Mehmetcha mirza began spreading word among his men that the Russian general in Kiev intended to convert the beslis into regular army soldiers – a change that would entail the loss of their semi-privileged status and imperil their chance of ever

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<sup>28</sup> Masaev, 108-115 & 141-144.

setting foot again in Crimea. The only way to avoid this fate, the officer counseled his men, was to flee across the border to Poland, and thence to the protection of the Ottoman sultan.

Mehmetcha convinced approximately 250 men that this was the opening salvo in a wave of repression Catherine intended to launch against her Muslim subjects. On the eve of their scheduled departure for Kiev, he gathered his followers and went to the house of a Russian officer from whom they stole a small sum of rubles, several fur coats, gold watches and other valuables. With goods in hand, Mehmetcha crossed the Dnepr river. Whether the Polish commander there was bribed or simply found the prospect of embarrassing Russian forces by taking in the Tatars appealing, he gave the order to ferry the Tatar horsemen across the river. Much to the latter's chagrin, the Poles promptly confiscated their horses and weapons.

The deserters spent an uncomfortable two years in Poland until finally news of their predicament reached Colonel Alexander Ulan, commander of the Polish-Lithuanian Tatar regiment. Himself a Tatar, Ulan took pity on Mehmetcha's men and had them transferred to his command. He eventually allowed the disillusioned deserters to return home, and according to one of the wayward horsemen, "From that point we scattered in all directions, each according to his own desire." Many went straight to Crimea, but as many as half detoured through Moldavia, other parts of Rumelia, and Anatolia.

Their eventual repatriation posed a serious challenge to Russian officials, not least because on 23 June 1786 Potemkin had issued a decree stipulating that no Crimean who fled to Ottoman lands to escape Russian subjecthood be allowed to return. What should authorities do with men like Ali Begali, a besli who sailed from Anatolia to Evpatoriia in the company of five others? Upon hearing of their arrival, the anxious vice governor had each man questioned to determine "in what manner and when exactly they left and whether they have passports." After

months of paperwork and many consultations with Field Marshal Suvorov, the governor approved the petitions of all six men to join their relatives in Perekop, Evpatoria and Molochnye Vody. Thus when Mehmet bey, who provided the sole account of the beslis' escapades, was apprehended crossing the Dnestr a year later, a precedent had been established. Field Marshal Rumiantsev-Zadunajskij himself heard the beslis' testimony that they desired nothing more than the opportunity to prove themselves loyal subjects of the empress and concluded, much like his colleagues, that it was inexpedient to punish repentant Muslims.<sup>29</sup>

By the turn of the nineteenth century then Russian officials were no closer to solving the problem of what to do with the Crimeans – tapping into their military tradition had thus far not generated a sense of imperial community. Instead, reports of “suspicious behavior” and a steady stream of Tatar emigration to Ottoman lands made their way to the capital. Again, the Tatars' desire to abandon Russia drew the ire of authorities. The mirzas in particular, reported the provincial marshal, “seem as yet dissatisfied” under Russian rule. “They exhibit a tendency toward treachery and hatred of Christianity that destroys their loyalty and negates the oaths they swear,” he wrote. “Now, after [so many attempted emigrations] can we rely upon their external displays of allegiance? Can we accept the validity of oaths which they would break to bring harm to Christians, especially when they might profit from such acts?”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Masaev, 268-274, 297-301 & 256-257. The repatriation of beslis continued into 1794. When the four divisions that had remained loyal returned to Tavrida in early 1792, Catherine dissolved the regiment, maintaining two squadrons until 29 March 1796.

<sup>30</sup> In an 1803 report to Alexander, Senator I. V. Lopukhin explained that inspired by the fanaticism of their faith and stubborn adherence to their “barbaric ways,” members of the ulema, mirzas, and common Tatars alike were in fact committing acts of treason in collusion with Ottoman agents and even wearing the symbol of the Janissaries. Curiously, the tsar responded that registering as a Janissary “meant nothing more than being inscribed in Our merchantry or *meshchanstvo*. It negates neither one's service obligation nor his status as subject (*poddanstvo*).” See *PSZ 1<sup>st</sup> series*, vol.27, no.20,663 (13 March 1803). On the Janissaries, see Godfrey Goodwin, *The Janissaries* (London: Saqi Books, 1994); Donald Quataert, *The Ottoman Empire 1700-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 44-46.

The intrusion of political and military affairs determined thousands of miles away from Simferopol pushed Russian officials to do just that. The early nineteenth century was a particularly busy time for Russian armed forces: between 1804 and 1813 they fought a war in Iran, between 1806 and 1812 they were engaged with the Ottomans as well. And 1806 brought Russia's involvement in the Fourth Coalition against Napoleon – a struggle that would not end until 1815. In the context of this massive military effort, Emperor Alexander I summoned a militia to defend the interior provinces. Tavrida's inhabitants were exempt from providing recruits, but a number of Christian landowners petitioned to form a provincial militia. The tsar quickly approved the petition, ordering the formation of two militia regiments under the command of the military governor, Armand Emmanuel Duke de Richelieu. This militia, composed of Russian settlers and other Christian landowners, was charged with preserving order and protecting the inhabitants of Tavrida against Ottoman incursions. But the militia had another task as well: it was to prevent the province's Tatars and Nogays from engaging in any "dangerous activities" that might assist their coreligionists.<sup>31</sup>

Apparently taken aback by the doubt so prominently cast on their allegiance, an assembly of Tatar elites declared their desire to form volunteer cavalry regiments to fight the French. They drew up a formal petition:

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<sup>31</sup> See *PSZ* 1<sup>st</sup> series, vol.29, no.22,374 (30 November 1806); Markevich, "K stoletiiu otechestvennoj vojny," 5-9.

We, the noble class here in Tavrida who follow the law of Mohammed and yet are loyal subjects of HIS IMPERIAL MAJESTY, here in the town of Simferopol announce our complete readiness to serve HIS MAJESTY the Padishah, not only at our own expense but also with our lives. Our sons too, who are not bound by obligation, are loyal to the throne and those who can ride a horse do not hold back: all must go to war against the common enemy, the Frenchman.<sup>32</sup>

Faced with this declaration of allegiance from the Muslim inhabitants of the sensitive southern frontier, a debate emerged in St. Petersburg between those who felt that arming so many Tatar horsemen posed a threat to the security of the empire, and those who feared that snubbing the Crimeans would push them into Ottoman arms. The minister of internal affairs, Count Kochubej, considered the establishment of Tatar units an ill-fated endeavor, and the tsar was of a similar, though somewhat more flexible, mind. He concluded that the Crimeans might serve in the existing *Lithuanian* Tatar regiment – or perhaps in other regiments led by Russian officers – if they so desired. But he insisted that “under no circumstances would [the Crimean Tatars] be allowed to form a regular regiment” of their own.<sup>33</sup>

Provincial governor Dmitrij Mertvago feared that this decision would not go over well with the Crimeans, whom he believed wanted nothing more than a chance to demonstrate their sincere devotion to the tsar...albeit on their own terms. In a letter to Richelieu, the governor elaborated on the difficulties of implementing the proposal. The linguistic barrier alone, he pointed out, rendered the use of Russian officers impractical. Moreover, separating Tatar soldiers from their native chiefs would leave them vulnerable to the pernicious influence of Ottoman agents and jeopardize the security of the Black Sea coast.<sup>34</sup>

There Mertvago struck a chord – officials from Odessa to St. Petersburg were gravely

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<sup>32</sup> Skal'kovskij, “untitled excerpt,” *Tavricheskiiia Gubernskiiia Vedomosti* 1851, Nos.32 and 33, translated by Mark Conrad; D. B. Mertvago, *Avtobiograficheskiia zapiski Dmitriia Borisovicha Mertvago 1760-1824* (Moskva: Izdanie Russkago Arkhiva, 1867), 199-200.

<sup>33</sup> Markevich, “K stoletiiu otechestvennoj vojny,” 10; *SIRIO* 14: *Le Duc de Richelieu. Correspondence et documents 1766-1822* (St. Petersburg: Tipografiia I.N. Skorokhodova, 1887), 242-43 & 252; Gabaev, 145-146.

<sup>34</sup> Mertvago, 200-201.

concerned with finding a way to guarantee the wartime loyalty of the Tatar population. Upon further consideration, they came around to the governor's point of view. Count Kochubej was suddenly quite taken with the idea of having "at our disposal a hundred young men from the best Crimean families who would in essence serve as hostages."<sup>35</sup> Mertvago took his cue from the minister and began describing the proposed regiments as elaborate devices for extracting hostages. "The Tatars are a true and good people," he wrote to Richelieu in July. The opportunity to serve would benefit them, "but also the army, as well as the situation here in Crimea, for the sons of the great mirzas will serve as *amanaty*."<sup>36</sup>

The reference to this steppe tradition of hostage-taking was anything but arbitrary. Michael Khodarkovsky has described how Muscovite officials constantly adapted the *amanat* institution to suit their own political and ideological needs, often attempting to present the handing over of hostages as an act of submission to Moscow. The tradition did not die in the imperial period. In 1742 the governor of Orenburg took hostages from among the legitimate sons of the Kazakh elite, informing the khan and mirzas that their sons had been invited serve as officers in the Russian army. In fact, the Kazakh hostages resided at the imperial court, received education, military rank and honors, and many joined the distinguished ranks of the Russian nobility. "By the late eighteenth century," Khodarkovsky points out, such men "were becoming the empire's privileged subjects."<sup>37</sup>

Couched in these terms, the Tatars' proposal appealed even to Alexander, and he approved the formation of four irregular Tatar regiments to be led by mirza officers and accompanied by imams. By early summer 1807 the Crimean elite had selected four of its wealthiest and most influential members as commanding officers – Majors Kaya bey Balatukov

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<sup>35</sup> *SIRIO* 14: 243; Markevich, "K stoletiiu otechestvennoj vojny," 11.

<sup>36</sup> Mertvago, 201.

<sup>37</sup> Khodarkovsky, *Russia's Steppe Frontier*, 56-60.

(Simferopol) and Ahmet bey Khunkalov (Perekop), Captain Abdulla aga Mamaj (Evpatoriia), and Lieutenant Ali Sirin (Feodosiia) were all considered to be “personages of demonstrated experience, loyalty and exemplary behavior... from among the most well-respected mirzas of Crimea.” Perhaps more importantly, the governor reported that volunteers simply poured in and “There was not one mirza family from whom a son or nephew had not come forward.”<sup>38</sup> The Crimeans, it appeared, had committed themselves to the imperial cause.

In May 1808 the regiments received their orders, and for the next six years they patrolled borders and fought in campaigns against French troops from Mogilev and Smolensk all the way to Paris. Everywhere they went, the Tatar horsemen won acclaim. One general reported that the men of the Simferopol regiment “were a miracle of bravery and in every way deserved to be called the best cavalymen of their time.”<sup>39</sup> Lt.General Platov, ataman of the Don Cossacks, was especially impressed with the regimental mullas who, “by instilling in everyone the duty of their oath, themselves serve as constant examples of courage.”<sup>40</sup> More than half of the regimental officers distinguished themselves. The commander of the Perekop regiment for example, Prince Ahmet bey Khunkalov, received a promotion to colonel, a golden saber, and the Orders of St. Vladimir and St. Anna. Khunkalov was one of two dozen Crimean officers who returned from the war as cavaliers of the empire. Each of those silver medals, inscribed with the words “not for ourselves, but for You,” signaled the recipient’s service to, and therefore bond with, the tsar.

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<sup>38</sup> The governor may have exaggerated the mirzas’ participation. A list of nobles who came forward to join the regiments in 1807 submitted by the treasury bureau to the noble assembly included only twelve mirzas, none identified by clan/surname (in other words, not from elite clans). It is possible that the elites came forward earlier in order to claim choice positions, but I have not been able to locate the regimental rosters to confirm this. See Mertvago, 202-203; GARK 49-1-237: 1-3; Markevich, “K stoletiiu otechestvennoj vojny,” 11-14; Mertvago, 203-204; *PSZ* 1<sup>st</sup> series, vol.30, no.22,772 (24 January 1808); Muftizade, 7-8; Gabaev, 138.

<sup>39</sup> *Krymskij Konnyj Polk*, 19.

<sup>40</sup> Platov recommended awarding the regimental mullas medals of distinction of the Order of St. George, which were established in 1807 for soldiers and NCOs. Recipients received higher pay and freedom from corporal punishment along with their medals. See Alexander Mikaberidze, *The Russian Officer Corps in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, 1792-1815* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 2005), lv-lvi; *Krymskij Konnyj Polk*, 20; Masaev, “Krymskie tatory,” chapter 3, part 3, 7.

Most horsemen received medals of distinction as well, and decades later one scholar reported meeting “Crimean warriors who retired from this force and who still kept their former uniform as a memento of their deeds.”<sup>41</sup>

Not all Crimeans returned from the field of battle to treasure those memories. In the course of the numerous battles waged in the late summer and early fall of 1812, the Simferopol regiment suffered so many casualties that the Commander-in-Chief of the Russian army, M. I. Kutuzov, instructed Richelieu to make whatever special arrangements might be necessary in order to maintain a critical mass of bodies in the regiment. By January 1813 the regiment had suffered 250 casualties: one in four Tatars had been killed or wounded.<sup>42</sup> According to the only published history of the Crimeans in the Russian army, even these casualties did not dampen the Tatars’ enthusiasm for battle. When young men hesitated to take the place of their fallen comrades, officers like Abduraman çelebi Il’iasov took it upon themselves to rally volunteers. Badly wounded and sent home to recuperate, Il’iasov busied himself proclaiming the brave deeds of the Tatar regiments to all who would listen and the Tatar youth supposedly “responded to Il’iasov’s call to join the ranks with delight,” convinced that they too would inspire great fear in the hearts of the enemy. The archive of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, however, reveals that in 1812 and 1813 the governor of Tavrida reported significant resistance to recruitment efforts: only after the Tatars were “forced to obey” did reinforcements present themselves.<sup>43</sup>

There were many reasons would-be horsemen might not heed the call to arms. In addition to contagious disease, adverse weather conditions and the economic challenges of

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<sup>41</sup> In the opinion of one of the foremost pre-revolutionary scholars of Crimea, the Tatars’ service was illustrative of the loyalty of a newly annexed people despite the hardships and challenges of war. See Markevich, “K stoletiu otechestvennoj vojny”; Muftizade, 13-14; *Krymskij Konnyj Polk*, 21. The Order of St. Anna second class was commensurate with hereditary noble status (ranks 5-8); third class with ranks 8-10. The Order of St. Vladimir fourth class was commensurate with ranks 5-11. *PSZ* 1<sup>st</sup> series, vol.34, no.26,836 (7 May 1817); Skal’kovskij, “untitled excerpt”; Muftizade, 12; *Krymskij Konnyj Polk*, 21.

<sup>42</sup> Masaev, “Krymskie tatary,” chapter 3, part 3, 3-4 & 8.

<sup>43</sup> *Krymskij Konnyj Polk*, 20-21; RGIA 1281-11-132: 106.

wartime, the former khanate experienced a major demographic shift during the wars with Napoleon and the Porte. As they had been in 1787, all Tatars inhabiting the coast from Balaklava to Feodosiia were forcibly resettled inland in March 1807 in order to prevent collaboration with Ottoman forces. Resentful of such treatment, many of these men, women and children joined a contingent numbering over 3,000 that emigrated to Ottoman lands between 1806 and 1812.<sup>44</sup>

Courageous on the battlefield but unwilling to tolerate poor treatment at home, the Crimeans continued to frustrate imperial officials. Not surprisingly, the emperor disbanded the light horse regiments on 7 May 1817 and the history of Crimean Tatar military service might have ended in 1817 were it not for the efforts of one man. Major General Kaya bey Balatukov entered Russian service in 1786. He served in both military and civil posts within Tavrida before becoming commander of the Simferopol Tatar light horse regiment in 1807. He led his men through countless battles and earned the rank of major general in December 1813.<sup>45</sup> Along the way Balatukov made many highly-influential friends at court, and as a highly decorated officer himself and extremely influential member of the Crimean elite, he benefited from personal access to the emperor – during Alexander’s sojourn on the peninsula in 1825, Balatukov was a constant fixture in the tsar’s entourage, accompanying him wherever he went.<sup>46</sup>

Balatukov began lobbying the tsar to create a new, permanent Crimean Tatar guard regiment in 1818.<sup>47</sup> For him, the question of military service was intimately linked with that of

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<sup>44</sup> Iunusova, 124-126; Markevich, “K stoletiiu otechestvennoi voiny,” 19-21; Williams, *The Crimean Tatars*, 142; *SIRIO*, 14: 347-348; RGIA 1281-11-132).

<sup>45</sup> He was one of only two men of Crimean Tatar origin who reached the elite level of military rank in the imperial period. See Muftizade, 13-14; GARK 49-1-607: 5-6; V. M. Bezotosnyi, “Rossijskij Titulovannyj Generalitet v Voinakh Protiv Napoleonovskoj Frantsij v 1812-1815 godakh,” *Otechestvennaia Istoriiia* 2 (1998): 183; Masaev, “Krymskie tatory,” chapter 4, part 1, page 5-6.

<sup>46</sup> Muftizade, 14.

<sup>47</sup> RGIA 1409-1-3041: 2-3.

status and privilege. Voluntary service, he felt, was preferable to conscription; irregular status with the army was a privilege.

When Alexander died at Taganrog in November 1825, the prince had already convinced him of the value of a Crimean Tatar Guard regiment. Luckily for Balatukov, the tsar's brother found the plan appealing as well.<sup>48</sup> In 1826 Nicholas I approved the proposal, and on 20 June 1827 he issued an imperial decree announcing the formation of the Crimean Life Guard Squadron within the Cossack Life Guard Regiment. The squadron was composed of three units, two residing in St. Petersburg and one in Crimea on a three-year rotation. It was staffed with one colonel and nine subalterns (all with imperial guard rank), four NCOs and 192 privates. The cost of equipping and maintaining the soldiers stationed in Crimea eventually fell to the non-noble Crimean Tatars, though the imperial treasury subsidized soldiers on duty in the capital.<sup>49</sup> The unit passed its official military reviews with flying colors, and promptly made its debut in the Russian-Ottoman war of 1828-1829. Uniformed in dark-blue jackets and traditional mirza-style hats decorated with gold braids, the Crimeans were positioned near Nicholas on the march from Petersburg to the Black Sea, signaling the trust he placed in this newest addition to the imperial guard.

That trust derived from the service record accrued by the Crimean Tatars during Alexander I's reign. Many officers were decorated veterans of the war of 1812, and presumably many of the privates fought in the Napoleonic wars as well. True to their reputation, they fought

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<sup>48</sup> The timing of the creation of the Crimean Tatar Life Guard Regiment is significant. On the eve of the war of 1828-1829, Tsar Nicholas devoted much time and consideration to the question of raising irregular forces, particularly from among the Balkan population. Balkan irregulars had been used many times in the past, and many generals favored the idea of using Bulgar and Serbian forces to protect the Russian flank, assist in mountain crossings, and perform the police duties usually assigned to the army's now under-strength Cossack units. Most insisted that the irregulars be commanded by Russian officers and that no attempt be made to introduce Russian military discipline or order among them. See Alexander Bitis, "The Russian army's use of Balkan Irregulars during the 1828-1829 Russo-Turkish War," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 50 (2002): 540.

<sup>49</sup> *PSZ* 2<sup>nd</sup> series, vol.2, no.1258 (20 July 1827); Krymskij *Konnyj Polk*, 22.

well again, this time against their former overlords and coreligionists. The entire squadron received silver pipes in recognition of their bravery and when they returned to Petersburg, Khunkalov and his fellow officers settled into lodgings built at the treasury's expense specifically for them: the top floor consisted of one spacious, well-lit room meant for religious services, complete with a mihrab.<sup>50</sup>

Still the squadron's place in the army was not yet assured. In the wake of this most recent Russian-Ottoman war, the Committee of Ministers paused to reconsider imperial policy toward the Crimean Tatars and the privileges accorded them by Catherine II. The conscription exemption was a pressing issue: disease and plague, together with the attrition caused by campaigns against Persia (1826-1828), the Ottomans (1828-1829), and the Caucasus had reduced the strength of Russian army units by more than one-third. Half of the remaining armed forces were deployed along the empire's borders, and military recruiters were hard pressed to fill the gaping vacancies. As Alexander Bitis points out, "exemptions for various estates, regions and ethnic groups meant that only c. 16.5 million men [out of a population of 47 million] were liable for conscription." Of these, four million were fit for service, meaning that one in every five of these were needed to staff a standing army of 850,000 in the early to mid-nineteenth century.<sup>51</sup>

The need for soldiers was acute, and in the mind of many a minister it rendered Crimean privileges obsolete. Moreover, Governor A. I. Kaznacheev assured the Committee of Ministers of what he described as the Tatars' overwhelming desire to serve in the ranks of Russian army. He suggested that the army enlist Crimean volunteers without requiring them to convert – a step that might otherwise have put a damper on potential recruits' enthusiasm – but the ministers

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<sup>50</sup> *Krymskij Konnyj Polk*, 22-23.

<sup>51</sup> Bitis, "The Russian army's use of Balkan Irregulars," 546; Bitis, "Reserves under Serfdom? Nicholas I's Attempts to Solve the Russian Army's Manpower Crisis of 1831-1832," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 51 (2003): 191.

recommended that they be subjected to the same military recruitment standards set for other state peasants.<sup>52</sup>

Before making his final decision, Nicholas turned to Governor-General M. S. Vorontsov for his opinion. Vorontsov expressed doubts about the practical benefits of maintaining irregular Tatar regiments. The Crimean Tatars had no experience with Western-style military service, he explained, and had long since shed their military propensities and “acquired a preference for living peacefully.” Yet he felt that Nicholas could not simply forge ahead with his ministers’ plan to impose conscription, for this policy would most certainly be “misunderstood” by the Crimeans as a revocation of their traditional privileges. Vorontsov therefore concluded that the guard squadron should be preserved – if not for military purposes, then for the sake of preserving order in the province. Nicholas agreed. While the recruitment regulation of 28 June 1831 did not include a specific exemption for them, noble and non-noble Crimean Tatars retained their immunity from conscription.<sup>53</sup>

When the Crimean War broke out in 1853, the portion of the squadron stationed in Crimea under Umer bey Balatukov took part in the famous defense of Sevastopol. They earned accolades from Prince A. S. Menshikov, commander of the Admiralty, for having crossed the Black river under cover of night on 25 September 1854 and routed the British dragoons on the opposite bank.<sup>54</sup> But for most Tatars, instead of military glory the war brought hunger, disease, Cossack depredations, accusations of treason and, ultimately, confirmation of their long-held fear that the tsar would forsake them in favor of Russian landowners and settlers. Between 1859 and 1861 as many as 200,000 Crimeans emigrated, leaving a trail of distrust and antagonism in their wake, and in May 1864 Alexander II disbanded the squadron.

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<sup>52</sup> Masaev, “Krymskie tatory,” chapter 4, part 2, page 3.

<sup>53</sup> Masaev, “Krymskie tatory,” chapter 4, part 2, 5.

<sup>54</sup> *Krymskij Konnyj Polk*, 23; GARK 49-1-125: 64.

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From the point of view of Russian authorities, the purpose of the various Tatar military units was to contribute to the security of the empire by limiting the Tatars' involvement in the Russian struggle with the Ottomans for control of the Black Sea and integrating them, however ambiguously, into the Russian hierarchy. Potemkin created the besli regiment, for example, not because he wanted to capitalize on the military skills of the Crimeans, but in order to emphasize Catherine's position as the sole source of authority and secure the loyalty of the beys and mirzas. He knew of course, that doling out military ranks would not transform the mirzas into loyal Russian subjects overnight. Thus, when war with the Ottomans broke out in 1787, he ordered the regiment to assume border patrol duties on the Polish frontier rather than risk the defection of hundreds of armed and well-trained horsemen at Ochakov or Bender. The four regiments of Alexander I's reign followed in the same mold, this time serving with distinction against Napoleon from Moscow to Paris. In each case the units proved an effective way of removing hundreds of armed and experienced horsemen from the Black Sea coast for the duration of hostilities with the Porte.

The life guard squadron was the first Tatar unit trusted to engage Ottoman forces, marking a shift in the nature of Crimean military service. Moreover, though it was a "nationality unit" (*inorodnoe vojsko*)<sup>55</sup>, Nicholas declared squadron officers the equivalent of regular guard officers and opened the doors of the Noble Regiment of the Second Cadet Corps to young mirzas.<sup>56</sup> Because proximity to the imperial court was a critical ingredient for a successful

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<sup>55</sup> This category of non-Cossack irregular units included the Balaklava Greek infantry battalion and Georgian volunteer infantry detachment, the Dagestani and Transcaucasian Muslim horse regiments, and a Bashkir-Meshcheriak force. See Beskrovny, 18. "Nationality unit" is Baumann's term.

<sup>56</sup> Prince Petr Shuvalov established the Second Cadet Corps (previously the Artillery and Engineer Corps) in 1758 and the institution boasted a curriculum developed by Mikhail Lomonsov. Along with the First Cadet Corps and Moscow University, it was one of the few eighteenth-century institutions created not only to "train students in

military career, one of the most important benefits of admission to the Noble Regiment was that it brought mirzas to the imperial capital. After all, advancement beyond subaltern rank to that of major elevated an officer to the level at which further appointments were theoretically made by the sovereign himself. A handful of young men were able to cash in on this opportunity to enter the social and cultural world of the Russian officer corps: nineteen (10.7%) reached the level of staff officer, while 157 (88.2%) remained subalterns (Table 2).

*Table 2: Distribution of Mirzas with Officer Rank, According to Reign<sup>57</sup>*

Highest Rank Attained	1783-1796		1802-1825		1825-1855	
	Military #	Civil #	Military #	Civil #	Military #	Civil #
1 through 4	0	0	1	0	1	0
5 through 8	7	14	9	4	3	0
9 through 14	40	13	61	27	56	7
Total:	47	27	71	31	60	7
% of Reign Total:	63.5%	36.5%	69.6%	30.4%	89.6%	10.4%
With Hereditary Rank:	47	14 (51.9%)	71	4 (12.9%)	60	0

Considering that there were nearly 27,000 officers in the Russian army on the eve of the Crimean war, it is clear that Crimean Tatars did not have a significant presence among the imperial military elite. Nor did they represent a significant part of the military establishment within Tavrida itself. Since before annexation, the region had played host to large numbers of Russian soldiers. Between 1782 and 1783, Suvorov's fifth corps maintained order in the khanate, and from April 1783 until November 1784 at least 20,000 soldiers were stationed there at any given time. Large infantry and Cossack forces moved into the province during each of the Russian-Ottoman wars, and by 1811 over 20,000 Black Sea Cossacks were in residence. Meanwhile, Sevastopol had emerged as an important harbor and naval base populated with

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necessary skills, but to mould character and develop qualities of leadership" among the young nobility. See Madariaga, 82; Mikaberidze, xxv-xxvi; xxix.

<sup>57</sup> Compiled from my mirza database.

Englishmen, Frenchmen, Jews, Greeks, Sardinians, Italians, Swedes, Germans, and Ottomans, but no Crimean Tatars.<sup>58</sup>

But the various incarnations of Tatar regiments were not created in order to alter the composition or function of the Russian army. They were created in an attempt to guarantee order in the province, either by winning the allegiance of indigenous elites with rank and accoutrements, or by providing a mechanism for removing the potentially anti-Russian leadership in time of war with the Ottoman Empire. The regiments were certainly intended to have an integrative function as well. In the years following annexation Russian officials scrambled to elicit the loyalty of their newly acquired Muslim subjects and were even willing to overlook the treasonous desertion of the besli regiment. In the early nineteenth century many still felt it was imperative to merge Tatar interests with those of the empire. “This [was] all the more important,” wrote one optimistic (if not terribly original) local official in 1809, because “Their devotion to Russia, their acclimation to our way of life secured, they might in the future prove very useful in political, military and trade relations with Turkey.”<sup>59</sup> But by then the burden of proof had shifted to the Tatars, and neither public declarations of loyalty on the part of their secular leaders nor the accomplishments of their horsemen on the battlefield in 1812 seemed sufficient to dispel Russian doubts about the feasibility of bringing the Crimean Muslims into the imperial fold.

As the Ottoman threat to Russia’s Black Sea possessions waned, the motivation for allowing the Crimeans a unique venue for military service changed. Originally a conciliatory,

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<sup>58</sup> Druzhinina, *Severnoe Prichernomor’e*, 133, 185-193 (on Potemkin’s efforts to raise peasant soldiers in New Russia); RGIA 1281-11-132: 54-64; Zakrevskij, 53-54; N. Iu. Bolotina, “Glavnaia krepost’ dolzhna byt’ Sevastopol’: dokumenty o sozdanii bazy Chernomorskogo flota. 1784 – 1793 gg.,” *Istoricheskij Arkhiv* 1997, No.2: 201-213.

<sup>59</sup> RGIA 994-2-473: 1-8 (also reproduced in *AGM* vol.3, no.891: 532-43). The extant copy of this letter does not say when it was written or to whom. The editor of the Mordvinov archive suggests it was written in late 1809 to Secret Councilor and Senator Count S. O. Pototskij, who became a member of the State Council in January 1810 and served alongside Mordvinov in the Department of State Economy.

even empowering gesture toward a population defined by their political and confessional ties to the Ottomans, the Crimeans' status as semi-autonomous irregulars eventually reinforced their separation from the rest of imperial society. To an extent, the Crimeans themselves perpetuated this state of affairs. Instead of flocking to the imperial capital, they sought for the most part to enhance their authority at home, using the ranks they earned to enrich and empower themselves and their kinsmen within Tavrida. Their strategy paid off. Unlike the Kalmyks, Bashkirs, or Russians themselves, the Crimean Tatars never rendered obligatory service. In that sense they preserved the fragile veil of privilege that defined them as a discrete entity within the imperial community.