



Summary :

Odessa, the gate of Tsarist Russia to the Black Sea, was an important merchant centre of the 19th century orientated towards the trade of grain. The presence of the Greeks in the city and their activities played a vital role in the emergence of a national movement in the eve of the Greek War of Independence in 1821. The Greeks founded flourishing merchant houses there, whereas they also played a very important role in the city's social and intellectual life.

Other Names

Odesa, Одеса, Одесса

Geographical Location

Northern coasts of the Black Sea

Historical Region

Novorossiya

Geographical Coordinates

Odessa Oblast

1. The city's foundation

The treaty of Jassy (1792) marked the validation of the successes of the Russian army in the war against the Ottomans (1789-1792). According to this treaty, the lands of the northern coast of the Black Sea were ceded to Russia and, more specifically, the whole region between the rivers Dniester and Bug. Catherine the Great, who, right after the signing of the treaty of [Küçük Kaynarca](#) (1774) had launched the famous plan for the settlement of populations in the recently occupied lands, understood that in this region a city should be built –a bastion of the Russian dominion, a gate of the vast empire to the Black Sea and through it to the Mediterranean too. After all, the empress' firm concern to expand the Russian influence towards the south required the formation of an administrative centre politically powerful and capable of enforcing Russian dominance, but also of directing the general developments in the region of the Black Sea. The presence of a permanent and powerful adversary, the Ottoman Empire, which naturally had an eye for the return of the lands lost in the two previous wars, demanded from the Russian command a special forethought in order to secure the southern borders of the dominion. As a consequence, the creation of a big city constituted a vital need for the Russian interests.

The selection of the site for the establishment of the new city was not difficult. The old Turkish fort of Hadjibey (Hacıbey), near the ruins of an [ancient Greek colony](#), was at an opportune position. The city which was founded in the same year, 1792, confirms also the forethought of the Russian leadership, which was naturally concerned with the support of the financial activity of the new lands. Thus the empress from the beginning made sure to clarify in a letter to the governor of Novorossiya (New Russia) Zubov the financial perspectives of the new city: "We decide that Hadji-bey should allow the free entrance of the merchant ships of our subjects, as well as of the foreigners, who have acquired, through contracts with our empire, the right to navigate in the Black Sea, a right which allows them to import and load for export merchandize not restricted by la, by paying custom duties according to the Black Sea tariffs".¹ The special reference to shipping and trade of course reflected the expectations of the Russian command from the exploitation of the main merchant product of the hinterland: grain.

The future of Odessa was to be proven totally dependant on the evolution of international trade and of the transportation of grain to the markets abroad. This was the reason for the city's flourishing and the richness of its inhabitants. This rendered Odessa a modern city of the 19th century, offering an extrovert character to the inhabitants and the urban environment.

In this city hundreds of Greeks of the Ottoman Empire came to settle hoping to take advantage of the favourable conditions of the offers of land, tax exemptions, and funding of merchant activities; in other words, to live in a perfectly friendly environment. The



evidence reports that in 1795 the Greek population of Odessa reached the percentage of 10% in a total population of 2,349 inhabitants. In 1910, shortly before the Bolsheviks prevailed, the report of the Greek consul calculated the Greeks of the city in 10,000 in a total population of 500,000. This only proves that the Greeks dominated Odessa not because of their number, but due to their powerful presence in trade.

2. Climate and place

The mild climate of the region certainly played an important role in the fast population and urban development, which was also the aim of the Russian command.² Winter, in contrast to the ices it causes in the hinterland of northern Russia, is mild in Odessa, with the average temperature hardly ever falling under -3° C. This had a positive impact on the harbour's activity, since navigation was possible during the whole year, thus facilitating the unhindered ship traffic. In the summer months heat does not surpass the average temperature of 23° C in July.

The problem was created by the winds which blew in Odessa all year long. The neighbouring flat hinterland favoured the strong northern winds in the winter months, whereas accordingly the south winds of the Black Sea blew strong in the summer months. All these contributed to the creation of clouds of dust which suffocated Odessa, especially during the summer. People on the pavements hid their faces to protect themselves from the sultry atmosphere. Merchandise, establishments and material were exposed to the gloomy dust. The carts that, loaded with wheat, literally invaded the city from the hinterland to unload their cargo at the harbour, made the atmosphere suffocating. The local authorities had to frequently wet the streets, in order to limit the results of the dust. The situation was only improved after the paving of the streets of the city with stone.

The limestone ground clearly favoured the works of the builders and in general the infrastructure works of the city. This became visible after 1804, when under the command of Duke Richelieu the general development of Odessa began.

Another advantage for the future of the city was the natural morphology of the sea coast. The comfortable entrance to the natural harbour from land, but also the easy anchoring of ships, formed favourable conditions for the progress of merchant transportations, in contrary to most of the harbours of Novorossiia and most of all the [Sea of Azov](#), which had the problem of shallow waters, something which formed a great obstacle for the commanders of the merchant ships and consequently for the whole network of trade and transportation of the grain cargos.

3. Richelieu government

Odessa's development was spectacular. The desolated place of 1792 had been transformed in the end of the 19th century into a city with the urban characteristics of a great town of the West. Boulevards, squares, huge public buildings, luxurious private houses, great granaries and a buzzing harbour with ships waiting to be loaded with their precious cargo, were the characteristics which caused the visitors' admiration.

The initial phase of the city's formation (1792-1802) was connected to its development as an administrative centre. Less than 10,000 inhabitants were desperately looking for a habitation, whereas the establishment of the administration obligated the authorities to erect public buildings. At the end of this first decade Odessa numbered 28 government buildings and just 1,000 houses. The delay in the construction of houses during this first decade was probably caused by the difficulty of communication with the sources of material. Practically Odessa, in a great distance from the places which produced wood at the north, had to seek every necessary building material abroad, and this without any doubt made fast construction development difficult.

The appointment Duke Richelieu, a French émigré and follower of *ancien régime*, as the governor of Odessa in 1803 greatly influenced the future character of the city.³ Richelieu encouraged external and internal migration by offering land for free, financing and loans, tax exemptions and the actual establishment of religious freedom. These measures resulted into the settlement of foreign immigrants (Greeks, Germans, Swiss, Bulgarians, Italians and others), but also of Russian subjects from the north, mainly of Jewish origin.



Richelieu, leaving Odessa and Novorossiya in 1814, when Waterloo and Napoleon's fall allowed the return of the royalists to France, left behind him a modern city in a financial prosperity with a prevalent neo-classical architecture in private and public mansions. The transformation of Odessa into a great merchant centre with the foundation –under his auspices- of a merchant bank of loans and insurances to aid the trade, with the building of huge granaries in the harbour area, with the creation of a wharf and other harbour installations and, finally, with the formation of a chamber of commerce, must be credited to his activity. Influenced by the ideas of the European Enlightenment, Richelieu naturally placed great emphasis on the creation of the “ideal city”. His initiatives and decisions led to the compilation of a modern urban plan with emblematic public buildings, stone-paved boulevards, wide pavements and alleys. Meanwhile, one of his initiatives was the construction of a theatre, which immediately started its activity.⁴

4. The Greeks: Economy and society

The end of Richelieu's service in Odessa coincided with the beginning of a huge economic development of the city. Indeed, the period 1814-1854 is the most thriving phase of the local economy. It is characteristic that in this period the exports of grain exclusively through Odessa's harbour surpass the average 60% of the total grain exports from all the harbours of the Black Sea.⁵ Important merchant houses, with the Greek ones leading the way, had established themselves in Odessa, controlling the export of grain to the market of Western Europe. This is the period during which Odessa dominates the Russian exports, exploiting in the best possible manner the flow of grain produced in the hinterland of southern Russia. Buying the harvests in advance, timely shipment of specimens to the main merchant market of London, and contracted loading of merchant ships were the favourable practices of the export procedure. Commercial banks and insurance companies created with private capitals helped the function of the merchant network.

Odessa's prosperity owed a great lot to the Greek merchant houses. Family relationships and common origins were a vital element for the formation of the merchant houses. The **Chians** were definitely the most prosperous category amongst them. They were active merchants, bold entrepreneurs, but above all ready to take advantage of a peculiar know-how, the knowledge of commerce techniques they had acquired in the past at their places of origin in the Ottoman-ruled areas. Buying the goods in advance directly from the producer in advantageous prices, the current account of the bills between the company branches and, consequently, the economical management of liquid capitals were comparative advantages which helped Greek merchant houses of Odessa in their struggle against their rivals. Furthermore, they had enough merchant connections to allow them collaboration with the branches of the house in the markets of East and West. The dominance of the Greek merchant houses in the exports of grain is confirmed by the data available for the period 1833-1860,⁶ from which we conclude that the Greeks transported a percentage reaching 50% of the total of grain exports from the city's custom house.

In order to promote further their powerful and intense activity in grain trade, Greek entrepreneurs chose to invest their capitals in ship-owning, so they could transport grain cargos and other merchandise with ships of their own and thus to raise their profits. Operating towards the same direction, they also founded stakeholder [insurance companies](#) dealing with the insurance of cargos and ships. It is obvious that such business practices demanded and required mutual trust between merchants; this made the strengthening of the merchant houses even easier. In conclusion, the Greeks became the dominant financial and social stratum in Odessa; practically they were the heart of the developing bourgeois class.

The most important position amongst the grain-trade houses was held by the houses of [Rallis](#) and [Rodokanakis](#). The Rallis house maintained one of its main branches there –under the name Rallis Brothers- of the famous Ralli Bros house of London. The oldest of the 5 brothers-founders of the house, Zannis Rallis, had settled in Odessa shortly before 1820. He was also serving as the consul of the United States in Odessa, something which testifies the wide recognition of his authority in the international market. The description of an American traveller at the end of the decade of 1830 concerning his meeting with Zannis Rallis is characteristic: “Rallis is rich and respectable; he became the vice-president of the chamber of commerce and is proud for being the consul of the United States because this is what gives him a certain authority amongst the officials of the city”.⁷

The position and the influence of Theodoros Rodokanakis in the local economy and society were similar. Settled in Odessa since



1819, he managed to rise to the top of the grain-trade houses. He was the consul of the Great Duchy of Tuscany, pioneer and president of the [Greek Community](#) and a dominant figure of the Greeks of Odessa mainly with the foundation of the [Rodokanakeio School for Girls](#).

5. The community and the political presence of the Greeks

The organization of the Greek community in Odessa was based on the foundation of the Greek Orthodox church of The Holy Trinity (Agia Triada). Already in April 1795 a substantial amount of money had been gathered for the erection of the church, thanks to the contributions of the Greeks of the diaspora, but also to the donations of the empress Catherine. Works were completed within twelve years (1807) with the aid of the Greek grain-trade houses, which contributed 2.5 kopeks for each **chetwert**, in order to gather the amount of the money required. At the south-western end of the city, near the Greek quarter, the church became the nucleus of the community organization, since it definitely strengthened the bonds between the Greeks. In 1814 some merchants from Odessa assumed initiatives which had direct consequences to the political and intellectual life of the community, and, as it will soon be proved, to the developments of the Greek national movement. The [Filiki Etaireia](#) (Society of Friends), the [Greek commercial School](#) and the theatre formed three activities which marked the life of Odessa, but also of Greeks in general.

The peak of the political activity of the Greeks was the foundation of the Filiki Etaireia, which had a decisive contribution to the Greek War of Independence . The creation of a conspiracy organization was decided by three petty merchants of the city: [Tsakalof](#), [Skoufas](#) and [Xanthos](#). The movment of [Greek enlightenment](#), the development of trade and most of all the French Revolution ignited the procedure for the national formation which led to the outbreak of the Greek Revolution. The foundation of the organization in Odessa corresponds to the general mobility of liberal ideas in the city. In the same period other national groups (Italians, Bulgarians) of the city presented a similar behaviour, creating organizations which diffused views in favour of national liberation and foundation of national states. The Filiki Etaireia found a fertile ground amongst the Greeks of the city. Connoisseurs of the international political situation, which after all directly influenced their trade activity, participants in the development of Modern Greek Enlightenment, since they financed editions of the Greek scholars' books, they became ardent supporters of the Greek national cause. The most important merchants of the Greek community of the city became members of this secret society, and some of them, such as Alexandros Koumbaris and Ioannis Amvrosiou, developed an important activity.

Meanwhile, the Greek merchants proceeded in the foundation of the Greek Commercial School. In the spirit of the innovative ideas of Greek Enlightenment, the School adopted modern teaching programs. Mathematics, geometry, physics, geography, but also register-keeping and techniques of the trade were addressed to the sons of the merchants. The school survived until the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 and the departure of the Greeks from the city. In its more than 100 years long course, even with its occasional wavering, the school became a centre for the cultivation of Greek letters under the guidance of important teachers. [Georgios Gennadios](#), Ioannis Makris, [Konstantinos Vardalachos](#) and the multifarious [Georgios Lassanis](#) were distinguished for their educational contribution in the early stages of the school. Later [Synodis Papadimitriou](#), Christos Voulodimos, Lyssandros Hatzikonstas directed the Greek school. The merchants formed the **ephorate** of the school since they were also the sponsors of its operation. For example, apart from the private contributions, the insurance companies of the Greek merchants undertook the obligation to offer a stable amount of their profits in order to cover the salaries of the teachers, the operational expenses and the tuition fees of the poor students.

In the same year (1814) the [Greek theatre](#) was founded. The rise of patriotism, the promotion of the history of the Greeks and the communication with the Enlightenment movement were the issues which occupied the theatre in Odessa. Voltaire's tragedies, translations of ancient drama from Greek scholars, modern plays of the time were presented to the Greeks of the city, but also to the wider public. References to the ancient Greek past strengthened national identity, whereas Modern Greek plays described the everyday life of the Greeks in the Ottoman-ruled areas as gloomy; the works of the great authors of western Europe were a link to innovative ideas.

The Rodokanakeio School for Girls started its educational operation in 1872. Theodoros Rodokanakis undertook the cost of its construction, whereas he, Stefanos Rallis (son of Zannis), [Grigorios Maraslis](#), Alexandros Zarifis and other great merchants were the sponsors of its function. Kalliroi Paren, the pioneer of the emancipation of women in Greece, Athina Kyprianou and Eleni Detzortzi illuminated with their presence the position of the director of the school.



Behind every beneficent activity of the merchants was the [Greek Charitable Community of Odessa](#). When, in 1871, its foundation was approved, the great merchants which participated in the administrative board placed the Greek Orthodox Church of the Holy Trinity, the Greek Commercial School, the Rodokanakeio School for Girls, the [Marasleio Home for the Aged](#) and other institutions created by the initiative of the Greeks under their auspices.

But the political and social activity of the Greeks led them to occupy themselves with the local political issues. Richelieu entrusted the duties of the mayor to Ioannis Amvrosios. In the middle of the century, Greek merchants participated in the city's municipal council, in the urban planning board, in boards for the supervision of the customs house and of the market inspection. However, the best example is the term of Grigorios Maraslis at the position of the mayor of Odessa during the period 1879-1895. Maraslis, an aristocratic bon-viveur with a rich education, literally changed the city's face. Either on his personal expense either on state funding, Maraslis made sure to build an opera, a library, a museum, a home for the aged, a home for the poor, a psychiatric clinic, a gardening school, a microbiological laboratory, a municipal market and many other institutions. His contribution to the foundation of the famous Maraslis Library with the outstanding Greek editions is huge.

In the last quarter of the 19th century, when Odessa and Russia in general lost their dominance in the grain trade in the international market against the United States, whereas rivalry from the Jewish merchant houses undermined the profits of the Greek merchant, these entrepreneurs turned towards the acquisition of real estate. Magnificent neo-classical buildings in the Primorsky Boulevard and great tracks of land in the nearby hinterland gave substantial incomes to their rich owners.

In this phase the pressures of the state authorities for the Russification of the Greeks of Odessa intensified. Panslavism, which was adopted in the last quarter of the 19th century from a part of the Russian intelligentsia as well as from the state policy, and Russian nationalism limited the autonomy of the Greek community, but also of the Greeks of Odessa as individuals too. Indicatively we can mention the efforts to change the program of studies in the Greek Commercial School with the obligatory establishment of the teaching of the core lessons in Russian. Also the acceptance of the Russian citizenship was a strong lure, since important tax exemptions had been established for the Russian subjects concerning the undertaking of merchant business. Finally, the incorporation in the Russian social hierarchy brought various administrative gains. The evolution of the descendants of Zannis Rallis is characteristic. His grandson Petros became a captain of the imperial guard, whereas his granddaughter married a Russian prince and senator.

However, the tempest of the political events soon appeared in the horizon due to the chronic dead-ends of the wide masses of Russian society. The route of the Greek colony succumbed to the hurricane of the October Revolution of 1917, of the unwise intervention of foreign military forces (along with them the Greek expeditionary force) and of course of the unfortunate handlings of leaders of the Greek community. The Greek of Odessa finally left en masse in 1919 leaving behind them fortunes which were gained with diligence and labour. Nevertheless the traces of the Greek presence remain unchanged, magnificent masterpieces which reveal the past prosperity of the Greeks in the hospitable Odessa of the past.

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1. Καρδάσης, Β., *Έλληνες ομογενείς στη Νότια Ρωσία, 1775-1861* (Athens 1998), p. 78.
 2. Herlihy, P., *Odessa. A history 1794-1914* (Cambridge Mass. 1996), p. 10.
 3. Richelieu became governor of Odessa in 1803. Two years later he was also appointed general governor of three provinces of the administrative unit of Novorossiia.
 4. On the effectiveness of Richelieu's government see Herlihy, P., *Odessa. A history 1794-1914* (Cambridge Mass. 1996), pp. 21-48.
 5. Καρδάσης, Β., *Έλληνες ομογενείς στη Νότια Ρωσία, 1775-1861* (Athens 1998), pp. 170-171.



6. Relative data published in Καρδάσης, Β., *Έλληνες ομογενείς στη Νότια Ρωσία, 1775-1861* (Athens 1998), pp. 196-197, were taken from the local newspaper *Odesskii Vestnik*.

7. *Incidents of travel in Greece, Turkey, Russia and Poland*, 2 (New York 1855), p. 260.

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Glossary :

	board of schools The board of schools (ephoreia) consisted of members either elected by the community or nominated by a commission. They were authorized to supervise the proper functioning of the educational institutions.
	chetwert The chetwert is a measure for capacity for grain, mostly wheat. Its weight varies according to the different commodities of grain and the humidity. A chetwert corresponds to 5.77 bushels (1 bushel = 60 litres).
	Chian network The network was comprised by the Greek merchants who were active commercially in the Black Sea, in the Mediterranean and in Western Europe during the period 1830-1860. The most important merchants originated from the island of Chios and very often were connected with kinship ties. These merchants combined trade with shipping and their companies were characterised by discipline and cohesion. The most important families were those of Rodokanakis, Ziziniadis, Rallis, Dromokaitis, Petrokokkinos, Agelastos. The network's importance declined with the changes in Black Sea trade after the Crimean War (1853-1856), in connection with the technological changes in sea transport.

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Chronological Table

1792: Jassy treaty, end the Russian-Turkish war of 1787-1792: Russia gains access to the Black Sea and conquers Crimea

1792: Odessa founded with the decision of the empress Catherine II at the location of the old fort Hacibey, a place conquered by De Ribas, vice-admiral of the Russian fleet; Greek migrants and refugees settle there, mainly from the Peloponnese and the Aegean, after the failure of Orlov's movement.

1795: Greeks comprise 10% of the total population of Odessa (224 people in a total of 2,349 inhabitants); the construction of the Greek church of the Holy Trinity begins.

1800: The great trade activity of Odessa begins. Greek merchants have a dominant role in the city's trade.

1802: The city has 8,000-9,000 inhabitants.

1803: The French royalist refugee Duce Richelieu is appointed as the city's governor.

1804: The general development of Odessa begins.

1812: By now Greeks form the most important group amongst the rich merchants of the city; Greek merchants financially contribute to the organization of the defense against Napoleon's army.

1814: With the initiative of the rich Greek merchants the Greek Merchant School of Odessa is founded, aiming to the education of the children of the Greek families; the Greek theatre of Odessa is founded; the Society of Friends is founded in Odessa. Richelieu leaves Odessa. Count Lanzeron is appointed as the new governor.

1818: Dimitrios Inglesis is appointed by the Russian authorities as the mayor of Odessa; the Richelieu Lyceum, later to be Odessa's university, is founded, which amongst others K. Paparrigopoulos and A.-R. Rangavis will attend.

1854: The Greeks of Odessa form the voluntary corps of the Greek Legion, which will take part in the Crimean War next to the Russian troops.

1864: The Odessa Greek Brotherhood "Agia Trias" is founded.

1866: A commission is organized in order to gather money for the Cretan revolt; in this commission I. Voutsinas plays a major role.

1871: The Greek Charitable Community is founded.

1872 or 1874: The Rodokanakeio School for Girls begins its function.



1879 Grigorios G. Maraslis is elected mayor of Odessa, a position which he will keep for 16 years; during his term Odessa will be embellished with the construction of important public buildings (opera, museum, gallery, library, schools etc.).

1885: The Greek painter Kyriakos Konstantis becomes director of the School of Art of Odessa; he will remain in this position for 25 years.

1892: Synodis Papadimitriou, director of the Greek Merchant School, is elected as a lecturer of Greek Literature at the University of Odessa.

1905: Odessa plays a major role in the revolt against the regime.

1907: G.G. Maraslis dies; the Greek actress Kyveli performs in Odessa after an invitation of the Greek community.

1917: The Russian Bolshevik Revolution.

1919: Venizelos sends Greek troops to fight against the Revolution along with the westerners' allied troops; the campaign will be a total failure; the great majority of the Greek population of Odessa (28,000 out of 30,000) will be loaded on ships and leave the city, an event that will mark the end of the long and illustrious presence of the Greeks in Odessa.