Authoring : *Selekou Olympia*
Translation : *Ροβίθη Χαρά*

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Summary :

The Amazon Company is related to Catherine the Great's renowned journey in Crimea (1787) and despite the fact that its appearance was short-lived and not associated to belligerent action, it is placed among the most legendary episodes of Russia' s Greek Diaspora towards the close of the 18th century.

Date

1787

Geographical Location

Crimea

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1. The historical context of the company's formation

The formation of the Greek Amazon company in 1787 is connected with Catherine the Great's renowned "Greek plan" and, in particular, with her inspection tour in Tauris which was organized in order to demonstrate to England and France Russia's fighting trim and readiness for a potential war against the Sublime Porte in the Black Sea. The officially stated reason for the costly and meticulously planned journey[1] that lasted from January to July 1787 was empress Catherine's keen aspiration to obtain a closer view of the recovered economy and defensive ability of Southern Russia' s newly acquired territory. In the empress' official suite, apart from her numerous high retinue, there had been invited to take part the diplomatic delegates of England, France and Austria, Stanisław Antoni Poniatowski, king of Poland, and Austria's emperor Josef II.

Grigori Potemkin (Potyomkin), who had remained in St Petersburg for the preparation and planning of the journey in the territories of New Russia, addressing to Catherine, praised, among other things, Sevastoupolis' (Sevastopol) maritime armoring and the Black Sea new-established fleet and extolled Greeks' high combative morale[2] exaggerating somehow with reference to their spouses. Catherine expressed doubts on women's overemphasized fighting ability considering the view put forward by Potemkin an exaggeration. Potemkin, in order not to prove himself unreliable, remembered the mythological tribe of the warlike women who used to fight on horseback headed by a queen. Thus he sent from St Petersburg an urgent order to the colonel Konstantinos Georgiou Zaponis (1759-1829)[3], first commander of the Greek battalion of Balaklava, asking him to recruit straightaway Greek women from the community in order to establish a separate female mounted company. Konstantinos Zaponis, in concert with his friend Pavel Sarantov (Pavlos Sarantis, Sarantinos), the old experienced Lieutenant-Colonel of the Balaklava Battalion, who was assigned the task of maintaining the public order in Karasu Pazar and Bahçe Saray, invited all the wives and daughters of Balaklava Battalion's men to enlist under their command.

Women turned out in great numbers and the Battalion's numerical force amounted to a hundred of wives and daughters of Balaklava's "warlike" Greeks; the women declared themselves being of "noble birth". The battalion was headed by the thirty three years' old Eleni Ivanovna Sarantova, the Greek Ioannis Sarantis' wife. Ioannis Sarantis, being Potemkin's faithful friend and protégé, was appointed councilor in Crimea's Court[4] after demobilization with the help of an influential letter of recommendation by his political and military superior.

All through the months of March and April 1787 intensive military training took place and women were offered adequate practice in riding, swordplay, firing practice and firing guns' salvo. On the 24th of May (4 June) 1787, when Catherine and her suite departed from Sevastopolis, where she had inspected the maritime infrastructure, and was heading for Balaklava entering the closest village Kadıköy, at nine in the morning she was given an official reception[5] by the new-established women's battalion. One hundred "Amazons" on horseback, armed with long barrel rifles were arrayed on both sides of the artificial orchard made of orange trees, lemon trees and laurels. The orchard was three to four versts long (1 verst = 1.0668 kilometres), was covered with laurel leaves and ended in a magnificent vaulted expedition tent. At that point the Amazon company joined the Greeks from the nearby Balaklava,

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"peaceful" men, women and children, several of which were carrying baskets with bread and salt. In the reception ceremony the leading part was played by Ananias, the Greek priest of the Balaklava battalion, who blessed Catherine and her retinue raising a Gospel and a Cross. The Amazons were dressed with green short pelisses decorated with gold braid and deep red velvet skirts, while their heads were covered with snow-white turbans with golden tinsels and ostrich feathers.

Amazons' costumes were inspired from a festive type dress of Greek women but the selection of their colors was a variation of the men's costume of the Balaklava Greek infantry battalion. From the reserves of the latter, the Amazon company had taken their supply with weapons for the occasion.

Amazon's company impressive, spectacular and solemn appearance filled the state dignitaries with enthusiasm. Josef the II who participated in the tour under the pseudonym "count Falkenstein" expressed his gratification with warm embraces and a personal visit to the military camp of the Amazons. Catherine, with the assistance of the Greek interpreter, had a conversation with them and gave Eleni Sarantova the military rank of captain, while in a few days she sent her as she used to from Aqmescit (Simferopol) a 1,800 rubles' worth diamond bracelet and rewarded the whole battalion with the amount of 10,000 rubles.[6]

The Amazon battalion escorted as a mark of honor the imperial suite until Bahçe Saray, the first capital of the Khanate of Crimea. Following Catherine's departure and the completion of the festive tour, the company dissolved as there was no more reason for its existence.

2. The repercussion of the company's emergence

The short-lived appearance of the Amazons' battalion was later recorded in the memories published by several diplomats, who had participated in Catherine's luxurious and idealized tour. Among them one may see the French ambassador count Louis Philippe Ségur and the Austrian prince Charles Joseph Lamoral de Ligne. The emergence of the Amazons' battalion was considered to be an inseparable part of the curious aspect of the spectacle Potemkin had planned for Catherine and her guests. Together with the so-called "Potemkin's villages", the firework festivals, the illumination of cities and military or commercial ports, the obelisks, the mountaintops and the gardens, the ships' celebrating cannonades, the formation of the Tatars' cavalry, the maneuvers of the Balaklava Greek battalion infantry, the Amazons' company theatrical presence is also mentioned. For quite a lot of Russian functionaries and diplomats, especially the ones who opposed Potemkin, with Minister A.A. Bezborodko and General P.A. Rumyantsev, the governor of Little Russia (*Malorossiya* in Ukraine*)*,[7] as leading figures, the understanding of the nature of these events was similar.

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7. Pantshenko, A.M., "Potemkiskie derevn" *i kak koultournii mif* (Moskow 2006).

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