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THE FINNISH DETACHED CORPS OF THE RUSSIAN ARMY (1815–1831)

Abstract. The article is devoted to the military formations of the Russian army that were located in the territory of Grand Duchy of Finland in 1815–1835. The Army was a very important tool for the consolidation of the Russian Empire. With the help of this instrument, Russian authorities sought to prevent invasion of the Swedish army and control political life of Grand Duchy of Finland. This was achieved by combining the administrative (Governor-General) and military power (the Detached Corps of Finland) in the hands of one person. Owing to this system, Finns enjoyed autonomy, but at the same time were subject to continuing control of the Governor-General. The disbandment of the Detached Corps of Finland was caused by the absence of a military threat from the Kingdom of Sweden, as well as by the loyalty of the Finns themselves to the Russian administration. However, the Governor-general continued to use the power of the Commander of the Detached Corps for political purposes.

Keywords: Finland, Russian army, autonomy, Independent corps, Finnish troops

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ОТДЕЛЬНЫЙ ФИНЛЯНДСКИЙ КОРПУС РОССИЙСКОЙ АРМИИ (1815–1831 гг.)

Аннотация. Статья посвящена формированиям российской армии, дислоцированным на территории Великого княжества Финляндского в 1815–1831 гг. Для российского правительства армия выступала в роли важнейшего инструмента по поддержанию целостности империи. С помощью армии российские власти стремились не только не допустить вторжения в страну шведской армии, но и контролировать политическую жизнь самого Великого княжества Финляндского. Это достигалось путем соединения административной (генерал-губернатор) и военной власти (командир Отдельного Финляндского корпуса) в руках одного человека. Благодаря подобной системе в Великом княжестве Финляндском местные жители пользовались широкой автономией, однако при этом находились под постоянным контролем генерал-губернатора. Реформирование Отдельного Финляндского корпуса было связано отсутствием военной угрозы со стороны Королевства Швеции, а также лояльностью самих финнов к российской администрации. Тем не менее на протяжении последующих трех десятилетий генерал-губернатор продолжал пользоваться правами командира Отдельного корпуса в политических целях.

Ключевые слова: Финляндия, российская армия, автономия, Отдельные корпуса, финские войска

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As a result of the Finnish War (1808–1809), the eastern part of the Kingdom of Sweden was established as the autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland, being part of the Russian Empire. The Diet of Porvoo (1809) established the political system of the state. The Administration of the Duchy was subordinated to the Russian Emperor and consisted of Finnish officials. The Administration performed legislative, executive and judicial functions. Citizens and the bourgeois class preserved their privileges; the Lutheran Church was not subjected to any restrictions, farmers were not subjected to serfdom. Russian authorities managed to reach a compromise with the elite of the local society, i.e. nobility, clergy, bourgeoisie and landowners [6, p. 107]. Moreover, Russian Emperor Alexander ordered the establishment of three Finnish infantry regiments, each having strength of 1,200 men [17, p. 244–245].

The Governor-General was the highest representative of the Emperor and received his instructions directly from the Imperial Government in Saint Petersburg. He controlled armed forces and police in Grand Duchy of Finland. Nevertheless, he did not have absolute power, being rather a high-ranking official [1, p. 33].

Despite the seeming vastness of the Finnish autonomy, in practice it had a number of limitations. First, Russian authorities never believed that local legislation should be observed without fail. Russian authorities always treated local laws according to considerations of political expediency and political interests of St.

Petersburg Government [7, p. 116]. Second, Russian authorities did not wish to lose military control over the region. Russian authorities had to build a specific military and political system that would allow to control Finns discreetly, without violating their rights.

Russian authorities created a flexible system that allowed to control the autonomous regions of the empire through military legislation. This system was founded in 1812, when the Regulation for the Administration of a Large Active Army (1812) was adopted. This document gave the commander of a Large Active Army absolute power over civilian population in the territory where the troops were stationed [14, p. 196–197]. The aim of this law was to solve the problem of insubordination of officials and generals to the Commander-in-Chief. If the commander of an army corps operated separately from the main army, he was also conferred the rights of the commander of a Large Active Army. The formation of the Detached Corps was caused by a strategic necessity: protection of remote provinces within the empire was ineffective under the traditional system of military management. Firstly, the Detached Corps Commander waged war some considerable distance from the capital city of the state. That is why it was necessary for him to make quick decisions without wasting time on consultations with Russian government in St. Petersburg. Secondly, the war required complete subordination of civil administration to the Commander of the Army. This, in turn, meant making important social and economic decisions, which conflicted with applicable laws. Third, commanders of the Detached Corps often had to play the role of diplomats when negotiating with neighboring states. So this feature was supposed to give military commanders certain authority in order to conduct diplomatic activities.

Detached Corps continued to exist in the Russian army even in the peacetime. Commanders of Detached Corps have retained the power given to them by the Regulation for the Administration of a Large Active Army, however, with certain restrictions. As an example, in peacetime a Commander-in-Chief had no power over the civilian population of the region where the army was stationed. However, he could regain the unlimited power in case of hostilities or by special orders of the Emperor [9, 1815, № 26.022]. Five Detached Corps were established in the Russian army: the Finnish Corps (1815–1831), Siberian Corps (1815–1865), Orenburg Corps (1816–1864), Lithuanian Corps (1817–1831) and Caucasian Corps (1820–1857) [12, p. 240].

The establishment of Detached Corps in time of peace was caused by both military and political necessity. On the one hand, establishing Detached Corps in Siberia, Caucasus and Orenburg was dictated by the desire to ensure military control over remote areas of the Russian Empire. Their commanders were representatives of the Emperor and had the right to make independent decisions in military, socio-economic and diplomatic spheres. But reasons for the creation of Detached Corps in Finland and Lithuania were quite different. They were stationed at the European border of the Russian Empire, so their location was not distant from other military units. These regions were similar due to a specific political situation: the Grand Duchy of Finland and former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth have recently been incorporated into the Russian state. They retained their characteristic religious, social and legal features. Therefore, the Russian government faced the problem of integration of these regions. It was necessary to create there a system of control that would take into account local peculiarities and, at the same time, strengthen Russian authorities here. Commanders of the Detached Corps of Finland and Lithuania held the position of Governor-General at the same time. On the one hand, this system served to provide specific legislative privileges to the inhabitants of Finnish autonomous region. On the other hand, its General-Governor, having powers of the commander of a Large Active Army, could use troops against the civilian population in case of an armed uprising, ignoring Finnish laws. This system gave the Russian government the opportunity to make concessions to the Grand Duchy of Finland and at the same time enabled it not to lose control over the region.

The Detached Corps of Finland was founded on December 21, 1815 [2, vol. 10, p. 48] and included one infantry division, one artillery brigade and Vyborg and Sveaborg Garrison Battalions (starting 1829). The 23rd Infantry Division consisted of two infantry Brigades and one Jaeger Brigade. The 1st Brigade included Vyborgsky and Petrovsky Infantry Regiments. The 2nd Brigade included Neishlottsky and Petrovsky Infantry Regiments. The 3rd Brigade consisted of 47th and 48th Jaeger Regiments.

Commanders of the Detached Corps of Finland were General of Cavalry Count Fabian Gotthard von Steinheil (1815–1823) and Lieutenant General Count Arseny Andreyevich Zakryevsky (1823–1831) [8, p. 284, 806–807].

Commanders of the Detached Corps of Finland held at the same time the position of the Governor-General of Finland. Finnish troops were subordinated to the Governor-General [15, p. 15].

Battalions of the Detached Corps of Finland and Finnish troops were quartered along the Baltic coast of the Grand Duchy of Finland. Only a few battalions were located in the inland territory. It should be noted that five of the seven Finnish battalions were stationed together with the units of the Detached Corps of Finland [15, p. 49]. Such deployment of troops explains the two main objectives that were set for the Detached Corps of Finland: protection of the coast from enemy amphibious landing and ensuring public order within the Grand Duchy of Finland. The Kingdom of Sweden was the chief external threat to Finland at that time. The Finnish war ended in 1809 and, despite the peaceful policy of the government with regard to the Russian Empire, general public in Sweden demanded the return of Finland [16, p. 45]. Moreover, Russian government feared a possible insurrection of Finnish troops. Therefore, Finnish military units were controlled by battalions of the Detached Corps of Finland due to their joint dislocation.

Similar system of military control was used by Russian authorities not only in the Grand Duchy of Finland. For example, the Government of the Emperor Alexander I tried to control the army of the Kingdom of Poland (1815–1831) through the Russian Reserve Corps which was quartered in Warsaw in 1823–1831 [11, p. 117–140].

A distinctive feature of the history of the Detached Corps of Finland was the peaceful character of its military service. This military unit never participated in combat against armies of foreign enemies, nor against rebels within Finland. Nevertheless, the Detached Corps of Finland played an important political role: the commander of the Corps had the right to establish emergency laws regime in case of a situation unfavorable for the Russian authorities. According to researcher F. Elentsev, for many years the Army had remained the only link between the Grand Duchy of Finland and the Russian Empire [3, p. 264].

Reasons for the reorganization of the Detached Corps of Finland were the reform of the Russian army by the government of Nicholas I, as well as changes of the empire's foreign policy. The main purpose of this Corps was to confront military threat from the Kingdom of Sweden. This threat seemed quite real in the 1810s, but by the end of the 1820s, the situation had changed dramatically. Swedish King Charles XIV John adhered to the Policy of 1812 at that time. This policy implied peaceful coexistence with the Russian Empire and rejection of the idea of the return of Finland. This policy manifested itself clearly during the Polish uprising (1830–1831). Failures of Russian army in battles against Polish soldiers created favorable conditions for Charles XIV John to regain lost lands. However, Charles XIV John adhered to strict neutrality and thus won the trust of Emperor Nicholas I [16, p. 44]. At the same time, a major military reform took place in the Russian Empire. The main aim of this reform was to create a smaller, but a much more efficient Russian army [4, p. 198]. The desire to carry out planned reforms, as well as the policy of Charles XIV John forced the Russian Government to take a new look at the troops stationed in the Grand Duchy of Finland.

In 1830, Finnish troops were dissolved. According to Finnish historians, fiscal reasons were the main cause for the reduction of quantity of the Finnish units [17, p. 65]. Perhaps, negligible threat on part of the Kingdom of Sweden influenced the disbanding of the Finnish troops. This is supported by the fact that Russian authorities deliberately reduced their military contingent in the region. They did not establish any new infantry units instead of disbanded infantry regiments.

On November 19, 1831, the name of the Detached Corps of Finland was abolished. According to the decree, only the name of the location was changed, but the 21st Infantry Division and an artillery brigade continued to be subordinate to the Governor-General [10, 1832, № 4952]. It is noteworthy that the Governor-General has retained the powers of Commander of the Large Active Army in peacetime, despite the absence of the Detached Corps. The reasons for these changes are still unclear. It is possible, that the Government of Nicholas I only tried to follow their own standards. Traditionally, a corps in the Russian army included a minimum of two divisions and an artillery regiment. The Detached Corps of Finland (only one Infantry Division and an artillery brigade) did not meet these standards. In fact, the Detached Corps of Finland continued to exist, since the Governor-General continued to enjoy special privileges.

According to the policy of reducing costs of the enormous Russian army, the infantry division in Finland was reduced in 1833 to two brigades, each consisting of two regiments; the latter consisted of three battalions and one reserve battalion each [15, p. 15]. As a result, the number of troops was reduced.

Faced with an acute threat of the war between the United Kingdom and the Russian Empire, and with the possibility of a British fleet entering the Baltic Sea, Sweden hastily decided to declare itself neutral [13, p. 42–43]. This meant a sharp decline in threat of outbreak of hostilities on the Russian-Swedish border. That is why in 1835 infantry and jaeger regiments of the 23rd Division (renamed 21st Division) were transformed into line battalions, six in each brigade. Line battalions were a special category of troops in the Russian army. They were not included in military leaders' strategic calculations in case of warfare and were intended to strengthen borders of the Russian Empire in remote areas. Moreover, the artillery brigade was disbanded, but a few field guns were assigned to the local fortress artillery to serve line battalions in case of need [15, p. 61].

As can be seen, the armed forces, located in the Grand Duchy of Finland, had undergone dramatic changes by 1835. In 1829, about 15, 000 Russian troops were quartered there, including an artillery brigade, and about 4,000 Finnish troops. The significant number of soldiers and officers, as well as composition of these troops allowed them to conduct both defensive and offensive operations. However, in 1835 only 12,000 Russian troops and about 1,000 Finnish sailors were quartered in the Grand Duchy of Finland [5, p. 112]. Significant decrease in the number of armed forces, as well as the absence of artillery no longer permitted these troops to conduct offensive operations. Finally, they were transformed into second-rate troops, whose purpose was to protect the rule of law and state borders. Therefore, the year 1835 should be considered as the date of actual disbandment of the Detached Corps of Finland, when army units capable of conducting active offensive operations ultimately disappeared.

Despite the disbandment of the Detached Corps of Finland, it should be noted, that it had left a certain 'heritage' in the political life of the Grand Duchy of Finland. Given the absence of any real external threat, it must be concluded that they needed the unlimited power to control the population of the Duchy in case of emergency (uprising of civilian population or a deep political crisis). The status of the Commander of the Corps in the Grand Duchy of Finland happened to shift from a purely military field to an administrative one.

Thus, the Grand Duchy of Finland had its own legal system, armed forces and administration. However, the Governor-General could bend existing laws of the region as the Commander of the Detached Corps and act only in the interests of the central government. Deployment of the Detached Corps of Finland made it possible to keep Finnish armed forces under control and to counteract a possible invasion of the Swedish army. The lack of real military threats led to the transformation of the Detached Corps of Finland into second-rate troops. However, the Governor-General retained the status of the Commander of the Detached Corps in case of emergency within the Grand Duchy of Finland.

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