

The role of the 1^e Bashkir Regiment in the Dutch Campaign

Ramil Rakhimov - Candidate of Science Institute, Head of the Department of Russian History, Historiography and Source Study, Bashkir State University (Ufa).

In order to highlight the role of the Bashkirs in the Dutch campaign, it is necessary to pay attention to their presence in the Russian imperial army. The Bashkirs are a semi-nomadic Turkic people professing Islam, who voluntarily became part of Russia in the 16th century. The main task was to protect the southeastern border of Russia from the raids of nomads. The Bashkirs bred horses, were warlike, so the state attracted them to participate in the campaigns of the Russian army. Together with the Kalmyks, Crimean Tatars and Mishars (Volga Tatars), they represented the national troops, close in their position to the Cossacks.

In anticipation of a war with Napoleon, Emperor Alexander I began to form a Large Army, which included not only regular troops, but also Cossacks, national units, and the militia. Only this way could the Great Army be resisted.

In 1812-1814. as part of the Russian imperial army, 20 Bashkir five-hundred regiments fought. The 1st Bashkir regiment took part in hostilities from June 1812 and passed the battle path from the Neman to Paris.

One of the most significant events of the Foreign Campaign 1813–1814 was Benkendorf's expedition to the Netherlands. It started as an ordinary cavalry raid, but eventually led to a transformation of the political map of the North-Western Europe and a return of the ruling family to the Netherlands.

The expedition took place from the 2nd (14th) November to 21st December 1813 (2nd January 1814). Benkendorf's troop included Tula infantry regiment, 2nd jäger regiment, Pavlograd hussar regiment, Don Cossack regiments: Melnikov's 4th, Melnikov's 5th, Andreyanov's 2nd, 1st Boug, 1st Bashkir regiments, 1st horse artillery company – in total 4619 men, 10 cannons. Under Benkendorf command were also colonel Narushkin's and adjunct general Chernyshov's flying squads that included Cossack regiments.

As Benkendorf wrote, their initial aim was to move to the river IJssel towards Deventer to resist French troops in Holland and protect this part of the country. But from the very start Benkendorf made a decision to “invade Holland”. He sent his agent to Amsterdam to check the situation and make contact with Dutch patriots, he informed Prussian commander Bullov and his general Vintsengerode about his intentions.

Advancing inside the Netherlands, Russian troops forced several fortresses and cities: Groningen, Kampen, Deventer. The latter was attacked on the 10th (22nd) of November by the 1st Bashkir regiment and 300 dismounted Cossacks. Deventer's garrison was blocked by Cossacks. Benkendorf separated his forces on several troops and sent them towards different cities imitating maneuvers of a big army. This caused rumors about the arrival of a “big Russian army”. Several Prussian troops were sent to the Netherlands in support of the Russian forces. A day later, on the 12th (24th) of November Benkendorf's regiment together with Naryshkin's regiment forced the fortresses of Zwolle.

The general sent his men to Amsterdam, and found out that Dutch were eager to bring prince Wilhelm Friedrich of Orange back to the country. In support of Dutch patriots he sent a group of Cossacks to Amsterdam, and they were welcomed by the residents. A new constitution was proclaimed and a government elected. At that time Benkendorf's troops were forcing one city after another: on the 14th (26) of November Naryshkin took over Harderwijk, on the 16th Amersfoort. Part of the troops moved towards Utrecht.

On the 20th of November (2nd December) Prince Wilhelm of Orange arrived to Amsterdam and declared the independence of the Netherlands. In Amsterdam he was accompanied by Benkendorf, Russian infantry and Cossacks. Benkendorf realized that the raid could turn into guerrilla, and his actions would simply remain unnoticed, so he decided to participate directly in diplomacy. At night he crossed IJssel (acting against the order) and on the 23rd of November (5th December) he arrived with his infantry to Amsterdam, where the act of restoration of Holland was proclaimed to people. Benkendorf marched through the city with music and drums. He declared that he risked everything for Holland's freedom. Afterwards Russian troops together with Dutch National Guard moved towards Muiden and Halweg (Гальвиг). Both forts were taken with 26 cannons and 900 captives. In the meanwhile, prince Gagarin, the commander of the 1st Bashkir regiment, together with Cossacks laid siege to Naarden and another Cossack regiment took the fortress Helder. One more Cossack regiment was in Utrecht, Stal's regiment pursued the enemy, who were retreating to Wijk, and Naryshkin's regiment was moving towards Rotterdam.

Benkendorf's commander – general of cavalry Vintsengerode (Northern Army of prince Bernadot) – finally realized the scope of Benkendorf's actions. They also realized that Emperor Alexander could be displeased that an ordinary raid had turned into a political action. Although the Emperor's intentions remained unknown, Benkendorf told Dutchmen that if they wanted to return Prince of Orange they could send a deputy to him. Benkendorf informed the Emperor directly about his actions (which was insubordinate) and asked for a support from Prussian general Bulov as a senior commander of the allied forces in Holland.

Benkendorf took part in war council in the city of Loo with the Prince of Orange, general Bulov and the British ambassador Clancarty, where he declared his plan to take Breda to control the major communications.

The Russian command however had different plans. Vintsengerode decided to counteract general Benkendorf's intentions. He withdrew Naryshkin's regiment and one of the Balabin's regiments to Northern Army.

Colonel Stal and his troops set out to Bemel and Gorinchem, and after that to Breda. On the 25th of November (7th December) Dutch volunteers took Brielle and Hellevoetsluis. Benkendorf's jägers took Dordrecht, 100 of Cossacks and Dutch volunteers took Hooge Zwaluwe. Benkendorf's troops were reinforced by Prussian partisan group of major Kolomb with 600 men of infantry and cavalry. Benkendorf sent his scouts to Wilhelmstadt and Geertruidenberg and headed to Breda. On the 27th of November (9th December) Breda was stormed by Stal's regiment. The city residents assisted the Russian troops. On the 28th of November (10th December)

Cossacks took Wilhelmstadt and Geertruidenberg, and Benkendorf arrived to Rotterdam and took prisoner a French admiral L. Truguet.

The situation changed with the landing of British troops on the 1st (13th) of December. The liberation of the Netherlands became a business of three countries (Russia, Prussia, Britain) and Dutch volunteers. Napoleon decided to attack the active Russian general and small British and Prussian forces. McDonald was ordered to narrow Bulov, general Roge was to leave Antwerpen and move to Breda to force it. Napoleon's plan was to push Russian troops back to river barrier, take Breda and control Holland again. The French troops numbered 6 thousand men, 800 cavalry, 25 cannons.

French followed Stal's regiment on its way to Breda. He retreated in order without loss. On the 7th (19th) of December Stal's regiment entered Breda and was attacked by French who went after them. At night prince Gagarin's troops (1st Bashkir regiment, hussar squadron and 2 cannons) broke into Breda. They took 200 prisoners in Terheijden. On entering Holland 1st Bshkir regiment under command of major prince Gagarin numbered 411 men. The regiment lost 7 men during the campaign.

The next day 18 cannons were brought to the besieged people through waterways. With them Dutch volunteers and Prussians fired French. On 8-9th (20-21th) of December Bashkirs also fought bravely at Breda fortress. They took part in cavalry attacks with Cossacks. To mislead the enemy at night they made campfires in the fields, showing "the presence of big army". A day before the fight for Breda, on the 6th of December cornets of the 1st Bashkir regiment Uzbek Akmurzin, Gilman Hudaiberdin and Buranbai Chuvashbaev were promoted to sotnik rank for their heroism, and Ikhsan Abubakirov was awarded the order of St. Anna 3rd class.

At that time 300 released Englishmen and major Kolomb's Prussian jägers arrived to Breda. Benkendorf fought off the French attack in the morning on the 9th (21th) of December and in the evening on the 10th (22th) of December. The citizen united in Dutch battalion also defended the city. During the last storm prince Gagarin and his Cossacks attacked French from behind. On the 11th (23) of December French began to retreat. At the same time Prussian and English battalions reached the fortress. Benkendorf's regiment was replaced by ally army and Dutch on the 21st of December 1813 (2 January 1814). This was the end of the famous expedition.

Benkendorf's campaign lasted for 50 days. Russian troops lost 460 men killed and injured. The expedition of the brave general and his courageous warriors led to the liberation of the Netherlands from Napoleon's supremacy and the restoration of monarchy of Wilhelm of Orange. It wasn't about the adventurism of the Russian general, all his actions were well-considered. He combined military action with diplomacy as well as communication with the Dutch people, aiming to organize Dutch army and reinforce allies' military presence in Holland. All his actions had a positive result.

