

**Wednesday, November 17, 2021**

**Webinar “November – December 1813 –  
Netherlands liberated from Napoleon”**

**Yury Bavykin, Moscow**

**“The role of Emperor Alexander I in the liberation of the Netherlands  
and his letters”**

Good afternoon, distinguished colleagues!

First of all, I would like to thank the Organizing Committee of the International Scientific conference scheduled for the year 2022, Dr. Jurn Buisman, director of Museum Geelvinck, Dr. Ramil Rakhimov from the State University of Bashkortostan, for inviting me to this international webinar for the experts.

The importance of common history of our two countries – Russia and the Netherlands – cannot be overestimated. Today’s topic for discussion is very essential for the knowledge of history, of real events of the liberation of Holland in November – December 1813. We all should keep in mind that Russia was not just one of great powers which saved the Netherlands from French oppression. This liberation was a question of consistent and persistent policy pursued by Russian emperors together with allied powers.

From the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Russia, following its foreign policy goals, tried hard to stop French expansion in Europe which began after the French revolution in 1789. The idea of liberation of peoples of Europe from French oppression, aggressive activities of France was one of the foreign policy priorities both of Russian Empress Catherine the Great and Russia’s next emperor, her son Paul the 1<sup>st</sup>. The first attempt to liberate Holland from France was undertaken in August of 1799 during a joint Anglo-Russian military expedition to Den Helder as a part of wars of Second anti-French coalition. Unfortunately, this attempt was not a success.

We should mention that since the occupation of the Netherlands by France in 1794 and the departure of stadtholder of United Provinces, Prince of Orange William

the V with his family from Scheveningen to London on January 18, 1795 Empress Catherine the Great and later, Paul the 1<sup>st</sup> of Russia maintained constant correspondence with the Prince of Orange. We know it from their letters found in archives, both in the Hague and in Moscow and Saint-Petersburg.

Next Russian emperor Alexander the 1<sup>st</sup> gave his struggle against France and Napoleon, who became emperor in 1804, a deeper liberating meaning. But unfortunately, he had to delay the realization of this great ambition after the defeats of the 3<sup>rd</sup> anti-French coalition, as at the Battle of Austerlitz in December, 1805.

The real wave of admiration towards Alexander the 1<sup>st</sup> was felt in Europe, including Holland, when it became known that the Russian Tsar defeated Napoleon in the Russian Patriotic War of 1812. In Holland which was since 1810 a part of the French empire, he was considered as the main defeater of Napoleon. This event led to creation of anti-French organizations and movements in different cities of Holland. The Prince of Orange, the elder son of stadtholder Willam the V, who passed away in 1806 in Braunschweig, exiled from his own country, had now opportunity to restore his dynasty as a reigning dynasty in the Netherlands. His motherland could be finally liberated and become independent. Therefore in March 1813 the Prince of Orange went to the city of Breslau (nowadays – Wroclaw, Poland) to meet there Russian emperor Alexander the 1<sup>st</sup> and informed him about his desire to restore the independence of the Netherlands under the auspices of the House of Orange. Alexander the 1<sup>st</sup>, who was consistent in supporting the independence of the Netherlands from the beginning of his reign, approved the Prince's endeavours and expressed his full support to him.

Another powerful blow for Napoleon was his defeat from the Allied Armies at the Battle of Leipzig in October 1813. The Headquarters of the Allied Command was situated in Frankfurt am Main. And now I would like to tell you about the first archival document from which we got to know about the Tsar's exact plan, direct proof of his initiative to liberate Holland. It was the Note of the Russian emperor he wrote from his Headquarters in Frankfurt on November 8<sup>th</sup>, 1813:

“Herewith we outline a plan for further military operations: the Army under the command of the Swedish Crown Prince Charles John (*known earlier as Marshal Bernadotte of the French empire*) estimated at 105 thousand men crosses the Rhine in the area of Cologne, seeking to cut Holland off from France...”

On November 10, 1813 Russian emperor writes another letter to the Commander of the Northern Army Swedish Crown Prince Charles John:

“Dear sovereign, my brother and cousin, I was going to share with you some thoughts about future operations. Here is my proposed plan that was fully agreed to by the Austrian and Prussian military authorities. I want it to receive Your Highness’s enlightened approval as well. All for Armies that is the Blucher’s army, the Main army, the Italian army and the Wellington’s army will close in a single formation.

Your Highness wished to take over the operations for the liberation of Holland. The abovementioned plan is set out to facilitate this task for Your Highness by forcing Napoleon to concentrate most of his forces against the troops located on the left flank. If Your Highness will move in the direction of Cologne or Dusseldorf and from there to Antwerp, you will cut Holland off from France... I earnestly ask Your Highness without delay to order the movements of Your army, which are necessary to facilitate our general plan... I have no doubt that Your Highness will make every effort for the triumph of the cause, common for you and for all mankind – the cause of the freedom of peoples”.

The Crown Prince of Sweden accepted the Russian Emperor’s plan and its implementation is very well described in the works of such Russian historians as Vadim Roginsky, Alexander Sapozhnikov, Panteleimon Grunberg, the editor of Memoirs of general Alexander Benckendorf.

The Crown Prince Charles John gave his orders to the commander of the Russian corps of the Northern Army general Ferdinand Winzingerode who formed 20 Cossack regiments for this operation. The command of the Northern Army of the Allied Forces determined that the liberation of Holland could be carried out by light troops thanks to the support of Dutch population and their desire to get rid of the

dominion of the French. General Winzingerode could then organize so-called «flying squads», Cossack cavalry detachments that could implement special military operations rapidly and with supreme quality. These “flying squads” were headed by Russian prominent military leaders who showed their military talent during the Patriotic war of 1812. Their names are General Ivan Ilovaisky, General Alexander Benckendorf, Colonel Lev Naryshkin and General Alexander Tchernyshev, a close friend of Prince of Orange of the Netherlands, who accompanied the Prince during his trip to Russia for his marriage with Grand Duchess Anna Pavlovna.

The military actions General Benckendorf for the liberation of the Netherlands are best known thanks to the works of the abovementioned historians and to Benckendorf himself who wrote his Memoirs in 1813 – 1814. However I think that in order to provide a fair picture of the liberation of Holland we all should remember that only very well and strictly organized plan by several Army’s leaders made this liberation successful.

I will not go into detailed chronology of events in those heroic years, because it’s not the topic of my speech and it was already widely described in historic researches. I’d just like to highlight the certain Dutch cities, dates of their liberation and names of Russian generals and officers who made this idea a reality.

According to the archival materials the first Cossack squad who reached the Dutch border was led by Colonel Lev Naryshkin. The Cossacks approached the gates of the fortress Coevorden (Province Drente) on November 14, 1813 and demanded the surrender of the fortress, but the French commander initially refused. Later, on November 16 Lev Naryshkin succeeded in gaining control over province Drente what he reported to the Allied command.

General Ilovaisky sent colonel Lopukhin to Delfzijl and colonel Rozen to Groningen. On November 15 Groningen was liberated from French troops. On November 23 colonel Rozen entered Leeuwarden. And after the siege of Delfzijl the city was liberated on November 24-25.

Only on the 20<sup>th</sup> of November general Winzingerode let Benckendorf move to Deventer, there were 10 regiments under the command of general Benckendorf, some

of these regiments were Cossack regiments, including Pavlograd and 1<sup>st</sup> Bashkir regiment. 2 Cossack brigades of colonel Melnikov and major Fedor Gagarin went to Deventer. The 1<sup>st</sup> Bashkir regiment led by major, Prince Fedor Gagarin crossed the river Ijssel on November 21-22.

On November 25 Alexander Benckendorf in his report to the commander of a Russian corps general Winzingerode wrote about “the successful operation of major Prince Gagarin with the 1<sup>st</sup> Bashkir regiment on the left bank of Ijssel”. On the 26<sup>th</sup> of November there was a bloody battle. One major of Bashkir regiment was killed in the battle, 14 cossacks were killed and wounded but the battle ended victoriously and the city of Deventer was liberated. Prince Gagarin was awarded Order of Saint George of the 4<sup>th</sup> degree.

On the night from November 30 to December 1, 1813 General Benckendorf reached Amsterdam from Harderwijk on fishermen boats and his 600 soldiers. At 8 A.M. he was in Amsterdam and captured with his squad the fortress Muiden. By that time the Prince of Orange came from England by British military ship and he invited general Benckendorf to the City Hall of Amsterdam where there was an Address to the Dutch Nation about the restoration of independence and in the presence of general Benckendorf the Prince of Orange was proclaimed the Sovereign prince of the Netherlands. Russian Cossacks were on the streets together with Dutch militia in guard of honor.

On December 5, 1813 in the Hague the Military council took place headed by Prince Sovereign of the Netherlands, William Frederik. There were also general Benckendorf and Prussian general Bulow. They agreed about further military actions until full liberation of Holland.

After the Military council on December 6 the Prince of Orange wrote a letter to Russian emperor and sent baron Voorstonde to the Headquarters of the Allied Command in Frankfurt am Main to deliver his letter personally to Alexander the 1<sup>st</sup>.

The Prince wrote that he “was called to rule in the United Provinces by unanimous will of the Nation which its courage and victorious armies of Your Imperial Majesty have just restored among the independent peoples of Europe. Sir,

it is another proof of constant attachment of people to my House and their confidence in me. I beg Your Imperial Majesty to favourably agree to communicate this event and to receive my assurances that my primary objective is with all my efforts to effectively contribute to the common cause of the High Allies, gloriously defended by Your Imperial Majesty. Very devoted cousin of Your Imperial Majesty, William”.

On December 27 (December 15 by Russian style), 1813 Alexander answered Prince of Orange from Freiburg, and it becomes evident even before the Congress of Vienna that the Netherlands will play a special, important role in the new, post-Napoleonic system in Europe:

“My cousin, let me express our hope that Your Royal Highness will make every effort for the well-being and independence of the state which would take an important and brilliant place in the political order of Europe...I assure Your Royal Highness that I will support such important cause by all means”.

Dear colleagues, I would also like to cite one more letter of Alexander the 1<sup>st</sup>, which he wrote to his Ambassador in London Prince Christofer Liven on the 6<sup>st</sup> of December, 1813 from Frankfurt am Main. Thanks to it we can better understand the motives of the Emperor’s activities to liberate the countries of Europe:

“The war against France has as a main objective to ensure the independence of governments and nations which ...became enslaved or threatened by the ambition and military power of the enemy. This noble motive which from the very beginning was the main principle of the resistance, accompanied by the brilliant victories, united the peoples and their sovereigns... Now Holland threw off the yoke of France... The entire Europe is interested in the liberation of Holland and reestablishment of its independence”.

Alexander I wished that the liberation of the Netherlands and its independence with the Prince of Orange as its sovereign was enshrined in the international treaties of the Allied powers, and he reached it before the Final Act of the Congress of Vienna in June 1815. The provision of the Congress in Chatillon-Sur-Seine in February 1814 stipulated that “Holland becomes an independent state

under the sovereignty of Prince of Orange”. It says about the success of consistent policy of Alexander I, pursued by him from the beginning of his reign.

By continuing its liberating military campaign in Europe, pursuing Napoleon all the way to France, Emperor Alexander I with allied coalition forces supported establishment and independence of the liberated Netherlands without interfering in its domestic affairs, regarded the country as strategically important ally for Russian empire.

Later, the ties between Russia and the Netherlands became even closer because of the dynastic marriage of the elder son of the King of the Netherlands William I – the Prince of Orange – with the Emperor’s younger sister Grand Duchess Anna Pavlovna, a future Queen of the Netherlands, in February 1816. This marriage gave the relations between the two countries a warm and trustful character for a long period in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Thank you very much for your attention.