History

The RUSSIANS AT HASLAR 1808/9
The Admission of Russian Military to the Royal Hospital
Haslar from November 1808 to August 1809.

Eric C Birbeck MVO and Robert Goetz.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In 1808 and 1809, a large number of Russian sailors, along with some Russian cavalrymen, passed through the naval hospital at Haslar near Portsmouth. The story of how they got there and how they eventually returned to Russia constitutes a fascinating and little-known chapter in the Napoleonic wars, one that took Russian sailors on a five-year journey from Kronstadt in Russia (near St. Petersburg) to fight French in the Adriatic Sea and Turks in the Aegean before surrendering to the British in Portugal. The story spans a period of Russian military activity in the Mediterranean, initiated by a mentally unstable Tsar and concluded on a raft in the middle of the Niemen River near the town of Tilsit.

Russian interest in the Mediterranean had been sparked when Tsar Paul of Russia had been selected for the honorary position as Grand Master of the Order of Malta. The subsequent seizure of Malta in 1798 by French troops under the command of General Napoleon Bonaparte, en route to Egypt, had prompted Paul to join the alliance assembling to oppose France. The French seizure of Egypt placed France in opposition to the Ottoman empire, and in an unlikely alliance, Russian and Turkish forces joined together to fight the French. The result was the expulsion of French troops from the Ionian islands, formerly Venetian territory that had been occupied by the French in 1797, as well as the support of a rebellion in Naples that would expel French forces from southern Italy. While subsequent actions would see Paul withdrawing from the war, Russian interests in the area remained.

The Ionian islands were organized as the “Septinsular Republic” under Russian protection, while the Tsar pledged his support for the restored Kingdom of the Two Sicilies (often referred to simply as Naples) composed of Sicily proper and the southern end of the Italian peninsula.

Russian interest in the Mediterranean would continue even after Paul’s assassination in 1801. Paul’s son and successor, Alexander, viewed Russia as protector of the Septinsular Republic and Naples. When hostilities erupted between France and England again, Napoleon Bonaparte, now head of state in France, moved to seize Italian ports to close them to British shipping. This prompted Alexander to begin a corresponding buildup of land and naval forces in the Ionian Islands to oppose them. By June of 1805, French activities had become sufficiently alarming that Britain was able to assemble a new coalition to oppose France, composed of Britain, Russia, Sweden and Austria.

Since 1804, Russian forces had been assembling in the Ionian islands, sailing from Sevastopol and Odessa (the diplomatic situation with the Turks remaining cordial for the moment), and also from Riga and St. Petersburg. Three separate squadrons had been sent from the Baltic, the Squadron of Captain-Commodore Alexi Samuelevich Grieg departing Kronstadt (main base of the Russian Baltic Fleet protecting St Petersburg) on 25th October 1804, that of Rear Admiral Dimitri Seniavin departing Kronstadt on 22nd September 1805, and a third squadron commanded by Captain-Commodore IA Ignatyev departing Kronstadt on the 31st
August 1806. Admiral Seniavin assumed overall command of Russian forces in the Mediterranean upon his arrival.

From 1805 to 1807, Seniavin's forces coordinated activities with British forces in the Mediterranean to oppose the French, successfully sweeping the Adriatic of French vessels and seizing several islands from the French while the British asserted their naval supremacy with Admiral Lord Nelson's legendary battle of Trafalgar in 1805, crushing the Franco-Spanish fleet and permanently thwarting any French plans for an invasion of Britain. But by 1807, Napoleon had trampled all over Europe. His military genius had brought about the victories at Austerlitz, Jena-Auerstädt and Friedland. His eagles had flown over Berlin and Vienna, the capitals of two of Europe's most powerful nations, Prussia and Austria. On the diplomatic front, he had convinced the Turks to oppose Russia.

Unable to launch an invasion of Britain, Napoleon planned to beat the British through economic warfare by closing all European ports to British trade, proclaiming the blockade in Berlin on November 21, 1806. The blockade extended to all ports controlled by the French, France’s allies and any other states that could be convinced, intimidating or coerced into joining the blockade. After the decisive battle of Friedland on June 14, 1807, where Napoleon rolled up the Russian lines and threw them back into the river Alle, the turn came for Russia to join the blockade.

The Treaty of Tilsit, signed by Napoleon and Alexander on July 7, 1807, radically changed the geopolitical situation of Europe. With the treaty, Russia changed sides, becoming an ally of France and an enemy of Britain. Under the terms of the treaty, Russia would turn over the Ionian islands to the French and vacate the Mediterranean. Admiral Seniavin immediately began preparing for the long voyage back to Kronstadt.

News of Tilsit prompted the British to take drastic action to prevent the French from again challenging British command of the seas. The Danish Navy was the second largest in Europe at the time, and it was imperative to the British Admiralty to keep it from falling into the hands of Napoleon. The British issued an ultimatum to Denmark, demanding that they turn over their fleet. Admiral James Gambier was sent to the Baltic with 24 ships-of-the line and 22 smaller vessels, and troop-transports carrying 30,000 troops to enforce the ultimatum. Gambier first put into Öresund, Sweden, before descending on Copenhagen, where he received the Danish refusal to surrender. On the evening of September 2 1807, the Royal Navy commenced bombardment of the Danish capital. Houses and churches were destroyed by cannon and shot and in flames, women children and elderly were killed. The bombardment continued for twelve hours. On September 5, Denmark surrendered and the Royal Navy sailed off with the remnants of the Danish navy in tow. The effects of the bombardment were immediately made clear. Denmark allied itself with Napoleonic France. For the rest of the Napoleonic wars, Denmark was Napoleon's most faithful ally. Scandinavia was once again divided between the greater continental powers as Sweden allied with Great Britain.

In October 1807, Seniavin began his journey to Kronstadt. Some smaller vessels and those that were not sound enough for the long voyage were left behind, shifting to French-controlled ports where they would subsequently be transferred to the French in 1809. a storm encountered shortly after leaving port damaged three of his ships of the line, forcing them to put into French-controlled ports for repairs. The remainder of the fleet - composed of nine ships-of-the-line, two frigates and a brig through the western Mediterranean and passed the Strait of Gibraltar without incident. The British received news of his departure, however, and moved to intercept the Russians. On November 10, after encountering another storm, Seniavin's fleet, save only the brig, Shpitzbergen which had become separated, put into Lisbon which at the time was controlled by the French. Seniavin sent the speedy Swedish-built frigate, Venus, back into the Mediterranean with orders that the vessels left behind should remain in French ports. Venus was subsequently sold to the Kingdom of Naples.
Seniavin’s crews rushed to complete repairs, but within days of their arrival a British squadron appeared off the Tagus, effectively trapping Seniavin in port. Shpitzbergen took refuge in Vigo to avoid capture.

For nearly ten months, Lisbon was the scene of an odd three-way standoff. Seniavin, who personally detested the French, refused to cooperate with them in any way. Admiral Sir Charles Cotton persisted in his blockade of the Russians, but either through communication with Seniavin or a canny reading of the situation decided not to push hostilities with the Russians. Finally, in August 22, 1808, the French commander, General Jean Andoche Junot, trapped in Lisbon under blockade by land and sea, concluded the Convention of Cintra with the British. The convention, which called for the surrender of Lisbon and the repatriation of French officers and men to France, did not include the Russian fleet, however. Seniavin and Cotton instead worked out an amicable agreement whereby his ships would be sent to England under Russian colors to be “held as a deposit” until the termination of hostilities between the two countries, at which point the vessels would be returned to Russia. All of the officers and men of Seniavin’s fleet were to be sent back to Russia aboard English ships without being considered in any way prisoners of war or debarred from further service. The agreement set up the curious circumstances of the Russian sailors at Haslar.

In September 1808, Seniavin’s squadron surrendered to the British at Lisbon. The vessels had spent up to four years away from their home port, and had spent nearly a year idle in Lisbon. One of the Russian ships, the Rafail, had deteriorated during its time in port and had to be abandoned in Lisbon as unserviceable. The remainder sailed from Lisbon under Russian colors, bound for Portsmouth. This included eight ships of the line: Svyatyaya Elena, Retvizan, Selafail, Yaroslav, Tverdyi, Moshyni, Skoryi and the Silnyi, with the frigate Kildyuin. [Note: Russian sources indicate that the Shpitzbergen was sold at Vigo in 1812, but her officers and crew appear to have been taken to Portsmouth with Seniavin.]

THE PORTSMOUTH STORY

On 27 September 1808 the Admiralty was informed that enemy vessels had anchored in the Portsmouth harbour, with their flags streaming, as if in times of peace. The Lord Mayor of London declared the convention disreputable for Britain’s prestige and many in the Admiralty shared his opinion. The Russian fleet was therefore detained in Portsmouth under various pretexts until winter weather made their return to the Baltic impossible.

Whilst the Russian fleet was impounded in Portsmouth the crews were further detained onboard their ships. Having endured many months aboard ship, both at sea and having been impounded at Lisbon before their voyage to Portsmouth, a large number of the Russians were becoming sick. Many suffered from scurvy and arrangements were made for them to be admitted directly to Haslar, with other less sick being transferred to the hospital hulk Pegase anchored in Portsmouth Harbour.

Some Russians were also held on the prison ship San Antonio and records show those who had died on board were sent to Portsmouth for burial.

The Royal Navy ship Pegase, a 74-gun ship of the line originally of the French Navy, had been launched in 1781 and at that time was the lead ship of her class. [Length 55.2 metres (182 feet) and Beam 14.3 metres (48 feet).] Pegase was captured by the Foudroyant on the 21st April 1782 and following capture was commissioned by the Admiralty as the third rate HMS Pegase.

In her later years Pegase was to serve as both a prison ship from 1799 and was finally used as a hospital ship before the order to be broken up in being given on 31st December 1814.

HMS San Antonio 74 guns was captured from the French in1807 and known as the St Antoine she was immediately put to service as a prison ship. In 1814 she became a powder hulk and was finally sold in 1828

Pegase was commanded by Lt John F Miller RN from 27th October 1808 to June 1809. He had a difficult command, enduring many problems especially those associated
with the crew who were continually absent and deserted the ship in droves, possibly not being able to stand dealing with the sick and more so Russians.

The Surgeon in charge was William Halfpenny who was required to swear an oath to Record all admissions, deaths and those placed run\(^1\). The surgeon also had the responsibility of hiring staff (nurses) and ordering stores and supplies used in the running of the hospital ship these were demanded from Haslar on a regular basis from linen for bandages to hospital shirts. One such order for shirts alone numbered 100 shirts and many orders included requests for medication and also for coal and wines as well.

Patients were nursed between decks in hammocks, which the ship’s orders stated ‘were to be scrubbed on deck and aired’. Nursing staff\(^2\) were employed at a rate of 19 shillings (90p) a month and a matron was eventually employed as the nursing staff increased in numbers to deal with the growing number of patients. The matron by the name of Elizabeth Arnold was paid £1-10shillings (£1-50p) a month. Mary Clerk (Nurse) was the first of the nurses to die onboard of disease, possibly Typhus and her body was sent to Haslar for burial.

Victuals were demanded regularly and paid for monthly and in February 1809 £3-12s-2d (£3-61p) was spent on milk for the sick. In the same month on one day alone 10 bags of bread, 331lb of Flour, 347lb of raisins, 67lb butter, 163lb Cheese, 220lb sugar were demanded to include 10 bushels of Pease and 8lb of oats with 126 gallons of beer and 2 casks of water.

Regarding bread it is interesting to note that contractors for the supply of bread in the Portsmouth area had complained (in writing to the admiralty) that they had been expected to bake good bread for foreigners, something the bakers did not agree with. This information being found recently in a letter held on file at the Public Records Office at Kew.

Surgeon Halfpenny was responsible for hiring and firing of staff and as was found with Haslar staff of the time if you did not report for duty No Pay! Many Russian patients who overcame their illness were recruited to serve onboard in the daily care of the patients. There is recorded a Barber (I Cenoff), cook and also those rated as Helper(s) (Eli Danieloff and Timothy Elifican), obviously Russians who, being able to speak English, were acting as interpreters etc. The staff were paid on a monthly basis with the staff bill for July 1809 being £17-12s-9d (£17-64p). At this point the dead were being returned to their ships for disposal and the ships in turn were transferring the bodies to Haslar for burial.

It was the Surgeon’s duty to complete all logs and registers concerning patients treated onboard. From reading the records (held by the PRO) Surgeon Halfpenny must have spent many late hours completing these books. At times pages bear suspicious stains that could be blood, or body fluids now dried into the pages. The entries at times were just a scrawl, possibly written at night and in the candlelight of the sick quarters with Halfpenny tiring from a long day of caring for his patients.

The number of sick and dying onboard the Russian ships overwhelmed the Pegase and as records show that from November 1808 many patents were then admitted directly from other ships to Haslar. The first such patient to be admitted to Haslar was Captain (Cavalry) Ivan Petrovitche of the Sollafaell suffering from Rheumatic pains he was eventually discharged back to his ship.

Such were the numbers of patients for admission that a separate register was commenced in order to record fully the members of the Russian Fleet admitted to Haslar hospital.

The prolonged detention of the Russian sailors at Portsmouth, an apparent violation of the convention Admiral Cotton had signed with Seniavin, resulted from the military situation in the Baltic, which had become an active war.

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1. To be placed Run was to be absent from the ship or establishment ‘on the Run’
2. Nurses as such were mainly widows, or women of easy virtue who cared for patients with little, or no instruction on how to do so.
In February 1808 Russia had invaded Sweden and Denmark, a French ally, declared war on Sweden in March. Marshal Bernadotte of the French army soon arrived in Denmark to command an army of French and allied troops, including a Spanish contingent, poised to invade Sweden from the south.

With Sweden beset on all sides by the forces of the Russian-Danish-French alliance, Britain responded by sending additional land and naval forces to the Baltic. Admiral James de Saumarez, 2nd Baron Saumarez of Guernsey of the Royal Navy, was sent to the Baltic Sea with his fleet (his flagship was HMS Victory). The Baltic command was established and effectively protected the coasts of southern Sweden from Franco-Danish invasion, while a British expeditionary corps of 10,000 troops under General Sir John Moore, arrived outside Gothenburg, Sweden on May 17, 1808. The troops were never landed in Sweden because King Gustav IV Adolf protested strongly, with the result that Moore along with the expeditionary corps was sent to Portugal instead. The British naval presence, however, prevented any action by Bernadotte’s forces against Sweden and was successful in sweeping the Baltic of Russian vessels and keeping them bottled up in port. While Saumarez kept watch on Baltic ports from Copenhagen to Kronstadt, British ships evacuated the Spanish forces in Denmark, returning them to Spain in August 1808 after the French occupation of Spain and forced abdication of the Spanish king led to the rebellion of the Spanish people against French rule.

In January of 1809 and further to the Russians being admitted Haslar was handed by the Admiralty to the Army in order to cope with the returning casualties from the peninsular war. Large numbers of troops, including casualties and the sick, arrived at Spithead in their thousands onboard troop transports from Corunna. It is recorded that on 7th January 1809 such was the number of ships arriving in the Solent that they stretched from St Helens to Cowes. This was only the prelude to the full evacuation of Sir John Moore’s army, which had narrowly escaped destruction by the French.

The Royal Navy evacuated some 27,000 men from Corunna under French artillery fire, although Moore himself was mortally wounded at the Battle of Corunna. On the 27th January an estimated 10,000 of these were disembarked [at Spithead] with 2,600 sick mainly suffering from Typhus and wounds of battle. There were also 360 dead not all admitted via Haslar for burial.

By late summer their numbers were to be increased by sick and injured who arrived for admission to Haslar from the ill-fated British action across the channel at Walcheren island, which had taken place in July when it was planned that British troops would attack the French Fleet thought then to be at Flushing. The action resulted in the death of 4,000 troops and many of the sick suffering from Malaria and Fever were also transferred to Haslar.

During this period the hospital continued to admit naval patients whilst at the same time also admitting their own hospital staff for treatment who for the first time (during this research) are recorded in the hospital’s admission register and shown in the register as admissions on a monthly table at the end of each calendar month including their disposal, either back to duty, dismissed unable to work, or dead for burial.

Many of the Haslar staff who died had been employed as washerwomen, nurses and labourers who themselves caught Typhus, obviously from handling fouled bed linen. It is understood that the army quartermasters of the day were selling articles of clothing from the returning soldiers to civilians and that all manner of diseases were spreading along the south coast of England because of infected clothing.

As a matter of note naval pensioners were at this time also being admitted for care into Haslar. This period in Haslar’s history was to see the greatest number of admissions to the hospital, totaling some 1800 – 2000 patients being mustered on the hospital wards at any one time during this period.

Russians who had died both onboard their own ships and on Pegase were sent directly to
Haslar for burial, the numbers including a nurse who died onboard and recorded as an admission in the Haslar register. Death amongst the patients (Russians) was caused by many medical conditions but notably Scurvy, which was rife amongst the crews showing the lack of suitable food for those impounded even in a British port, although many could, or would have possibly been suffering from the disease exacerbated by a poor diet since arriving from the Mediterranean and from having spent further time being impounded in Lisbon.

In the period 1808/09 both Russian and British seamen, marines and British Army died at Haslar along with Haslar staff and all being interred in the (Paddock) grounds of the hospital.

Reference should be made that at the same time as dealing with the Russians admission to Haslar Portsmouth had over 3900 French and Spanish prisoners of war both in Prisons onshore (Portchester castle being the largest) and afloat in prison hulks within the harbour and creeks in and around Portsmouth.

It is also known that French prisoners of war were being admitted to Haslar at this time. In the Russian register of admissions to Haslar a Frenchman’s name appears as being of the French marine and yet he must have strayed into the wrong queue as he is recorded admission wise as a Russian.

In 1941 whilst workmen were carrying out repairs on the Haslar sewers four skeletons were found in the sewer. These are thought to have been the bones of patients attempting escape, as this was a favourite escape route for all patients to freedom. They were possibly trapped and either overcome by foul air, or incoming tide from the harbour that on rising and falling cleared the waste from the main sewer. 1805 hospital records show that one Richard Tipper was employed to scrape the sewer walls and clear the sewer of waste for 4 shillings (20p) a month.

In the Haslar admissions register for August 1809 the first listings of ‘Effects of the Dead’ appear. The effects are recorded on paper notes signed by the head nurse of the ward, or block in which the patient died. These have been pinned into the register at the head of the page bearing the deceased’s name and some make pitiful reading - officers having many items of personal effects and sailors and soldiers very little save for the shirt, trousers and coat they were admitted with.

The last member of the Russian fleet to be admitted was Seaman Ivan Sakowloff of the Spitzbergen and having been treated at Haslar he was discharged.

On the 5th August 1809, the nearly-starved Russian officers and crews embarked on British transports for repatriation to Russia in accordance with the terms Seniavin had negotiated at Lisbon, arriving at Riga on 9 September 1809.

The Russian ships themselves were to spend several more years in captivity until the alliance between France and Russia was shattered with Napoleon’s invasion in 1812. The long years in port, though, had taken their toll on the hulls of the Russian vessels. Of the 8 ships interned at Portsmouth, only two - Moshnyi and Silnyi - remained sufficiently seaworthy to make the voyage back to Russia in 1813. The rest were sold at Portsmouth for breakup.

Thus closed the final chapter of the Russian fleet at Portsmouth 1808 -09.

End Note - This was not the first time that Russians had been admitted to Haslar as in January 1770 the Russian fleet was stationed at Portsmouth with many sick, dead and dying onboard and the government eventually gave permission for the crews to be quartered at Hilsea Barracks.

In the February 2 Russian transports arrived at Portsmouth from St Petersburg with 700 soldiers onboard and they were moved to

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3 During May, June and July 134 patients out of 437 admitted were suffering from Scurvy.
4 ADM 102/292 PRO Kew
5 ADM 102/353/351 PRO Kew
camps on Southsea common with some 400 sick Russians being admitted to Haslar. During this time English Marines taught the Russians the maneuvering of small arms and the handling of hand grenades aloft and in the fighting tops of ships a discipline that the Russians were not acquainted with.

It is believed that some 50 Russians died at Haslar at this time from Typhus and were buried at Haslar. Should this be the case then some 176 Russians lie in the paddock shoulder to shoulder with English sailors, marines, army and cavalry, at rest having served their respective countries.

Annex

Admission and Discharge

**Russian Navy Details Taken from Adm102/349 PRO Kew**

The register opens with a signed printed form directed to the Admiralty Board of Sick and Hurt requesting the admission of Russian Cavalry Captain *Ivan Petrovitch* followed by:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Numbers</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>November 1808</strong></td>
<td>admitted 109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admitted</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discharged</td>
<td>Dead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 1808</td>
<td>admitted 65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admitted</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discharged</td>
<td>Dead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 1809</td>
<td>admitted 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admitted</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discharged</td>
<td>Dead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 1809</td>
<td>admitted 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admitted</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discharged</td>
<td>Dead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 1809</td>
<td>admitted 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admitted</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discharged</td>
<td>Dead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 1809</td>
<td>admitted 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admitted</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discharged</td>
<td>Dead 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 1809</td>
<td>admitted 165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admitted</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discharged</td>
<td>Dead 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 1809</td>
<td>admitted 60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admitted</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discharged</td>
<td>Dead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 1809</td>
<td>admitted 212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admitted</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discharged</td>
<td>Dead 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 1809</td>
<td>admitted 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admitted</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discharged</td>
<td>Dead 10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:**

Although in UK Waters many cases of Scurvy are recorded especially during the summer period. Patient numbers dwindled through September and the Fleet was eventually permitted to sail for Russia in September and October 1809.

*Eliza Gerasimoff appears in the register and by name is obviously female. The mystery surrounds whether she was crew or more than likely the wife of a senior officer. Either way she was buried at Haslar.*
Robert Goetz
Robert has studied the Russian Navy and Army of the Napoleonic wars and has a long standing interest in the French Revolution and Napoleonic era.
He is an author of several award winning articles concerning the Russian Army and its campaigns.
I am most grateful for his cooperation and support in writing this paper and his guidance regarding the historical introduction and the listing of the Russian Fleet and at the same time for his encouragement to tell the story of Russian Patients at Portsmouth and Haslar, a little known and unique story concerning the Napoleonic wars.
Books: ‘1805 Austerlitz’

Eric C Birbeck MVO
Eric served in the Royal Navy Medical Service for 32 years specialising in Operating Theatres, especially Anaesthetics, he also served in NATO ending his Naval Career in charge of the medical centre onboard Her Majesty's Yacht Britannia. Eric then joined the Ministry of Defence as a Technical Officer at Haslar managing the Anaesthetic department retiring in 2008.
He came to know the history of the Royal Hospital Haslar during his 45 year continual association with the hospital.
An author and founding member of the Haslar Heritage Group. In 2007, for continuous service to Her Majesty the Queen, Eric was appointed a member of the Royal Victorian Order.
Books: ‘A Visit to Haslar 1916’
‘Royal Hospital Haslar A Pictorial History’

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Visit - www.haslarheritagegroup.co.uk