

Научни форуми  
Scientific Forum

## THE BATTLE OF GORNI DUBNIK AND THE FINNISH BATTALION

**Mikko Saarinen**

*Посолство на Финландия в България*

**Abstract.** There have been many wars between Russia and Turkey and one of them became the Bulgarian war of independence. The battle of Gorni Dubnik was fought in October 24<sup>th</sup> 1877. The victory was important for the fall of Plevna that surrendered six weeks afterwards to the Russians. There was also a Finnish sharpshooter battalion that took part into the battle.

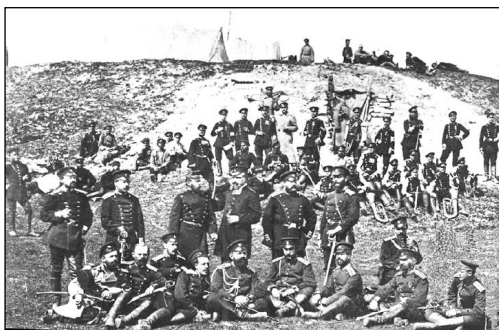
One battalion can't change the course of history. That being said, this battalion was at the time the only infantry force of the Russian Great Duchy of Finland, and thus all it could offer.

Later generations both in Finland and in Bulgaria have commemorated in many ways the part of the Finnish Guard in the battle of Gorni Dubnik. Exactly four years after the battle, October 24<sup>th</sup> of 1881, a memorial stone was revealed at the yard of the Guards battalion's barracks in Finland. During the years this has grown to be symbol for the friendship and bond between Finland and Bulgaria.

*Keywords:* Russo-Turkish war, Gorni Dubnik, Finnish battalion

The battle of Gorni Dubnik was fought in October 24<sup>th</sup> 1877. The victory was important for the fall of Plevna that surrendered six weeks afterwards to the Russians. There was also a Finnish battalion that took part into the battle.

There have been many wars between Russia and Turkey and one of them became the Bulgarian war of independence. It was the last time that a Finnish detachment fought under the flag of Russian czar. It is noteworthy that the force was made entirely up from recruits, of whom a large part were volunteers.



*Officers of the Finnish Battalion*

In the context of the million-strong armies that took part in the war the thousand or so men of the Finnish Guard did not play a vital role. One battalion can't change the course of history. That being said, this battalion was at the time Finland's only infantry force, and thus all it could offer.

In total context of the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-78, the battle of Gorni Dubnik does not rank significantly high. For the Russians it was only one of several minor, but unavoidable, battles in their mission to liberate Bulgaria. Modern military history agrees with the Russians by seeing the battle as one of the many that completed the fall of Plevna. However, Gorni Dubnik was important, even crucial for the Turkish communications between Plevna and Sofia. Its storming meant in fact the fall of Plevna. The Turks of course knew this and had fortified it heavily and garrisoned between seven and eight thousand men in there. Their weakness was that they only had four cannons. The attacking Russians had between twenty and twenty five thousand infantrymen, around ten thousand cavalymen and forty eight cannons.

The eve of the battle was foggy as the inexperienced battalion of Finns gathered near the villages of Dolni Dubnik and Gorni Dubnik. though not a battle-hardened group, its core was made up an elite belonging to the imperial life guard, who had signed up for six or ten years and could support the more hurriedly trained young men. The oldest guardsmen were already over 30 years old; others were still in their



*The Battle of Gorni Dubnik*

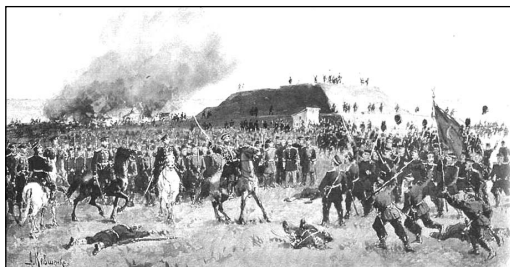
teens. The battalion was based in Helsinki but the troops had been recruited all across the country. The men were armed with with Berdan II rifles with bayonets.

At 7 in the morning of 24<sup>th</sup> October the fortifications were attacked by three columns from three sides. The sharpshooter brigade, of which the Finnish Guard was a part, started to advance, under the command of Major General A. V. Ellis and supported by three *sotnyas* of Cossacks and 16 cannons. They moved from the North-East where the ground was flat and offered little or no cover.

Around 10 am a Russian attempt for general attack was beaten back. However, the small redoubt was taken.

At 3 pm General Iosif Gurko ordered a general attack. By a mistake one column discharged to the attack by itself so Gurko needed to release also the two others. What resulted was a series of isolated operations instead of a united one. No single body managed to reach the redoubt, but aside of one regiment they held their ground. At 4 pm the Russian troops were very close to the main redoubt. Gurko organized them for fresh attack.

The attack began at 5:30 and it was supported by cannons that came from behind the men. The cannonade at a short distance was very effective, setting the redoubt partly ablaze. In this chaos the Russians were able to storm the breastwork. The Russian victory was secured by troops attacking from the Turkish rear. At 6 pm Turkish leader Ahmed Hifzi Pasha hoisted the white flag.



„Gorni Dubnik is Taken“ – Painting by Aleksej Danilovich Kishenko (1851–95)

When the fighting was over, twenty-two Finnish guardsmen were buried on the battlefield. Two more men died over the next few days. There were more casualties among the seriously injured men. When illnesses are taken into account, it is difficult to say whether men died from wounds or from other reasons. The fallen men were representative of the whole Finnish Guard. They were young and almost invariably from modest backgrounds, including farmhands, other agricultural workers and blacksmiths assistants. Only one was educated man. Its noteworthy that third of the twenty-four casualties had signed up only in August. The oldest casualty buried in Gorni Dubnik was 35 years old and three of them were only 20. The 35-y-old had already served a ten-year stint and was halfway a new six-year contract.

After the battle there was also criticism of the commanders. The artillery support was considered to have been inadequate and tactical shortcomings were found in terms of timing, the deployment of different units and cooperation between them. In the end however, the Russians had achieved their main aim: Plevna was completely

surrounded and after six weeks it had to surrender.

Once the Finnish Guard had received its baptism of fire, it took its place by the side of other well-known guard units. There were more challenges ahead. The large number of sick and wounded put the battalion under serious pressure over the next few weeks. Some of the more seriously wounded were repatriated by train, and they all made it safely to home. The campaign had still six months to run for the other Finns.

When the 1877–78 war in general and the battle of Gorni Dubnik in particular are mentioned in Finland, the accounts tend to concentrate to the Finnish Guard. It's worth remembering that there were many Finnish officers serving in the different capacities in almost every Russian unit. There were probably around 200 of them on the front.

The best known Finn serving in the Russian forces to see action at Gorni Dubnik was Colonel Hjalmar Fredrik Nikolaus Procope. He was member of the life guard's Finnish regiment (Finlandskij Leib-Gvardij Polk, a Russian unit with no connection to the Finnish Guard battalion). He was seriously wounded and died a few weeks later. He is depicted on one of the statues in Lavrov Park.

Later generations both in Finland and in Bulgaria have commemorated in many ways the part of the Finnish Guard in the battle of Gorni Dubnik. Exactly four years after the battle, October 24<sup>th</sup> of 1881, a memorial stone was revealed at the yard of the Guards battalion's barracks in Finland. During the years this has grown to be symbol for the friendship and bond between Finland and Bulgaria. Later that same Autumn the Finns who fell at Gorni Dubnik also



*Monument for Hjalmar Procope, Officer of Russian Unit Finlandskij Polk, Who Fell at Gorni Dubnik*



*The Finnish Monument at Park Lavrov*

got memorial stone to the place where the battle had been fought. It was designed by young Finnish architect Sebastian Gripenberg, who had graduated from the same Hamina military academy as had many of the Finnish officers who took part in the campaign.

## **УЧАСТИЕТО НА ФИНЛАНДСКИЯ БАТАЛЬОН В БИТКАТА КРАЙ ГОРНИ ДЪБНИК**

**Резюме.** Русия и Турция са водили много войни помежду си, но една от тях се превръща в освободителна за България. В битката край Горни Дъбник на 24 октомври 1877 г., която има важна роля за падане на обсадата на Плевен шест седмици по-късно, взема участие финландски стрелкови батальон.

Поколения признателни българи и финландци пазят спомена за подвига на участниците в боевете край Горни Дъбник. На 24 октомври 1881 г., четири години след знаменателните събития, в двора на казармите на финландските гвардейци се открива мемориална плоча, която във времето се превръща в символ на приятелство между народите на двете страни.

**Mikko Saarinen**

✉ Embassy of Finland

26, Bacho Kiro Str.

1000, Sofia, Bulgaria

E-mail: sanomat.sof@formin.fi