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Organization, Administration and financing of the Venetian Defensive System in Dalmatia during the War for Crete (1645-1669)

Domagoj Madunić

Abstract

Venetian Defensive system in Dalmatia during the war for Crete can be seen to be made of the three main components: (1) the armed forces (2) system of fortifications covering all key points of the province and (3) set of well supplied repair facilities and magazines of war materials. The heart and body this system were the Republic's armed forces – the army and navy. As is well known, the majority of the seventeenth century armies were "national" only in their names. The armed forces of the major European powers, French, Spanish and others as well, were in fact conglomerates made of native and foreign recruits in varying proportions. Foreign mercenaries were an unavoidable component of all European armies of the 16th and 17th centuries, and the national name associated with such forces only designated a ruler or a state in which service they fought.

By the time of the War for Crete, the Republic had a long tradition of reliance on foreign mercenaries. Still, even for the seventeenth century standards, the Venetian forces represented a sort of curiosity. The armed forces of the Republic were one of the most mongrel mixtures of the period. Its ranks were filled with the recruits of all Christian denominations (Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist, Orthodox) who originated from almost all parts of the continent. French, Germans, Swiss, Walloon, English, Scots and Dutch to name just the usual suspects, same as the Italians from all parts of the Peninsula, all filled the ranks of the forces of the Serenissima. Additionally, what gave a specific flavor to Republic's military forces were its colonial troops, with their exotic outlook and armaments, recruited in the Levant and in the various parts of the stato di Mar: Albanians, Croats, Greeks, Montenegrins, Morlacchi, and even the Turks. The challenges involved with the governance of such multinational force presented above also found their way into the organizational structure of the armed forces of the Republic.

The second major theme of this paper concerns the problem of financing the Republic's war effort in the overseas province of Dalmatia. The Republic's governor-generals in Dalmatia, like any other early modern military commanders, were fully aware that the ability to maintain an army with adequate provisions of ammunition, food and, above all, money was as important as having an army in the area of operations in the first place. And indeed, one of the most common themes found in the letters by the governor-generals is that of a total lack of money and food, accompanied by the pleas that the intolerable burden of their service be eased by a swift transfer of these provisions. Without insight into the financial and material aspect of the Venetian war effort in Dalmatia, it is practically impossible to explain and understand how the Republic of Venice manage to sustain its war effort in this prolonged conflict that spanned for over two and half decades.