Destitution and Triumph: The Closing Stages of the Campaign

The summer of 1831 witnessed the impending collapse of the Polish uprising. The Polish attempts to spread the insurrection across the borders of the Kon-gresówka had failed decisively. An expedition to Galicia had ended in military debacle, and the Russian army had driven the insurgents across the Austrian frontier, where the commanders had surrendered to the Habsburg authorities. The brief outbreak of insurgent activity in Left-Bank Ukraine had been already crushed in July, and the uprising in Lithuania, led by the legendary Plater siblings, had also reached its conclusion in August. By the end of the summer, the Russian army began to concentrate for a new attack on Warsaw in an attempt to put a final end to the uprising. The logistic preparations marked a lull in hostilities, and from late May to early September, the Finnish troops saw no combat, until they were suddenly thrown into the final attack against Warsaw.

This chapter discusses the situation of the Finnish Guard during this closing stage of the Polish campaign, with the main emphasis on the period from June to October 1831, and also including the Battalion’s final return to Helsinki in the following spring. Special attention will be paid to the effects of the cholera epidemic in the summer, the conquest of Warsaw in September, and finally the service of the Finnish Battalion as part of the Russian occupation forces in the Polish capital during the early autumn months. The focus will be on the shift from one experience to another, as the Battalion moved from incapacitation to action, from combat to garrison life, and from destitution to victory and back again. The contrast between the miserable lethargy of disease-ridden camp life and battlefield triumph was particularly pronounced in this period, and it had an effect on the perspective and expectations of the soldiers and officers.

Exploring the period during which the Finnish Battalion served as an occupation force in Warsaw and commenced its final journey back home, also demonstrates the extension of the war experience. Although the hostilities were already over, the Battalion was still on foreign soil and still experiencing casualties due to wartime exigencies – in other words, still experiencing the effects of the war. The main primary sources utilized in this chapter are, once again, the surviving records of the Battalion as well as Lieutenant Colonel Lagerborg’s letters, which provide the most direct information on the experiences of the Finnish Guard during this final period of the Polish campaign.
Epidemics and Logistics; The Operations of the Finnish Guard from June to August, 1831

As described above, the cholera epidemic had already gained intensity during the campaigning season in Mazovia. The encounters against the Poles had marked a breathing-space during which the Finnish Battalion had other things to worry about, but with the end of the fighting the disease once again became the main enemy of the Finnish soldiers. On the last week of May, Lieutenant Colonel Lagerborg had ordered no less than 23 men to be hospitalized. At this time, faced with the continuing Polish offensive, the Battalion was on a forced march from Tykocin to Bialystok, with other Russian units. The local military hospital at Bialystok accommodated the incapacitated soldiers of the Finnish Sharp-Shooter Battalion. During the march, the first deaths after the recent battlefield encounters were observed in the Battalion.¹

The Finnish Guards Battalion arrived at Ostrołęka a day after the battle, when the Imperial Life-Guard joined with Field-Marshal Diebitsch's main army.² At this time, the epidemic had once again taken hold of the Battalion. During the following days, 15 men were transported to the local hospitals at Łomża and Ostrołęka, where several Finns had been evacuated in early May. The badly-mauled Battalion was detached from Poleshko's vanguard. After passing through Maków, the Battalion continued its journey to the village of Szwelice, where it stayed for most of June. In the last week of the month, the Battalion relocated to the nearby Czarnostów, remaining there for the next fortnight. During this period, those Finns who had been evacuated to Ostrołęka and Łomża were joined by 23 more men, five of whom died either during their transport or soon after reaching the hospital.³

The effects of cholera were now worse than ever before. Other diseases, such as typhus, quickly followed in the wake of this new epidemic, and losses were severe by the first summer month. Judging by occasional inconsistencies, the records for the Battalion describing the men who had to be hospitalized, are probably incomplete. According to Lieutenant Colonel Lagerborg’s notes, the total number of hospitalized soldiers for the period from 21 May to 21 June would seem to be at least 87, of whom 52 were dispatched to the nearby Russian military hospitals at Bialystok, Ostrołęka and Łomża. Meanwhile, 35 men remained at the Battalion’s own infirmary, which was continuously full. Seven men had already perished by this period, which meant that the Battalion had

¹ Bataillons-Orders 141–143, Maj 21–23, Finska Gardets Ordrejournaler 1831. M51/6, KA.
² Bataillons-Orders 147, Maj 27, Finska Gardets Ordrejournaler 1831. M51/6, KA.
³ Bataillons-Orders 152–173, Juni 1–22, Finska Gardets Ordrejournaler 1831. M51/6, KA.