

Konstantinos N.Thodis,  
writer – historian professor of Greek language and  
history at State University of Stavropol,  
Russia (2004–2013).  
[www.ktdrus.gr](http://www.ktdrus.gr)

## The Greek diaspora in the area of Azov (18th – 19th centuries) - The Case of Taganrog

Taganrog is found on the tip of the northern part of the former ancient Greek kingdom of Pontus. Based on the descriptions of three great Greek historians and geographers, Herodotus, Xenophon and Strabo regarding the location and chronology, they coincide with the existence of the colony of Miletus in the area which carried the name of Cremna[1]. The exact location of the port of Cremna on the cape of the bay of Taganrog was the area where the sun-drenched beaches and coast of the Pushkinsky area are found today[2]. Miletus, a Greek colony in Asia Minor and an important member of the Ionian Federation, at its peak goes back to 500 BC and its association with Cremna to the 7th – 6th century BC[3]. In 1927 archaeologists brought to light a marble pedestal with a Greek inscription and a large pot of Greek origin which dates back to the 9th and 10th century AD. From these

findings it is clear that the Greek culture did not split or weaken but continued for many centuries after the Roman Conquest and the dissolution of the kingdom of Pontus. The presence of Greeks in the area of Azov in ancient times and their establishment in Taganrog in the 18th and 19th centuries is marked by one event. That the Greeks, who were invited into the area of Azov by Catherine the Great II, were the descendants of the Ionians and subsequently of the Pontic Greeks who had lived in Asia Minor and who, after the persecution by the Turks in the Aegean Sea and Crete, took refuge in the lands of New Russia. It is for that reason we are assured that the Greeks, during 400 years of slavery under the Turkish yoke, maintained both their language and Christian beliefs as Crypto-Christians.

The history of the 2nd Greek Colonization on the Cape of Taganrog and the peninsula of Mius starts from the Russian-Turkish War of 1769 – 1774. The Greeks had been beaten on land and sea. Catherine the Great II found the re-establishment of the colonists from Greece in lands of South Russia logical and necessary[4]. The historian P.P. Filevski wrote, “Soldiers and the wealthy that could settle in the area and establish trade were given priority to settle in Taganrog[5].” The number of Greek merchants in Taganrog outnumbered the number of Russians 2:1. The families of Ralli, Mousouri, Skaramanga, Rodokanaki, Benardaki and others held in their hands all the international trade[6]. It is not at all

an exaggeration that the fathers of the Great Russian poets Anton Chekhov, Pavel, decided to send their eldest sons to study at Greek schools. Mavrokordatos, Voulgaris, Komninos and Palaiologos among others also lived in Taganrog. Anton Chekhov himself used to say, "We need to give them a place that they deserve, both from an aesthetic point of view and with a particularly high cultural development... Taganrog outshines every other European city...." The colonists gave the city essence, perfection and form. Paustovsky, citizen of the city and intellectual, wrote at the beginning of 20th century, "The culture of the Aegean Islands has been brought to Taganrog and a perfect mixture of Greece, Italy and the Steppes of Zaporozhe has been formed[7]."

The Garrison Commander founded 2 streets for the Greek immigrants in Taganrog: Gretzeskayia and Malo-Gretzeskayia which had a whole quadrangle for construction[8]. In 1781 the first Greek Orthodox Church of Saints Constantine and Helen was founded[9]. The Greek officers established themselves near the River Mius and next to the Pavlovsky Castle. According to the Order of Gregory Potemkin, 2 Greek army companies were established there, which later developed into a Greek battalion and of which Antonis Dimitriadis was the commander and Dimitrios Alferakis the captain. Up until today this part of the city still keeps the names of the 2 Greek companies that were

stationed there[10].

The Greek nobility and land-owners settled in the area which was located between the port of Mius and in particular on the coast which reached up to the rivers Sambek and Kamenki. The families that settled there were Alferaki, Chouliara, Aslani, Karagianni, Gerodomatou, Palama, Statha and others. In 1781 the Greek Chamber of Commerce was created, of which I.M. Roussetis was elected president. Up until that time this was the first Common Organization to use elections to choose its members. On 20th July 1784 the commercial department was restructured into the Greek Magistrate[11]. At the beginning of the 19th century one third of the city's population was Greek. In a different chronological period, the city council was taken over by the Greeks S. Valianos, K. Fotis, A. Alferakis and P. Iordanov. The Greeks played an active part in the economic growth, showing at the same time an extremely well-developed and inventive activity[12]. In the history of Taganrog, one name, that of the hero Ivan Andreevich Varvaki, has been kept in living memory. He financed the construction of the Greek monastery and founded the first municipal hospital and orphanage [13].

G.Depaldos donated a large amount of money for the construction of the 'Steps of Rock' and the creation of the 'Home for the Veteran Soldier'[14]. In general, there were Greek churches, schools, theatrical groups and

one-act plays in Greek. Talented musicians, artists, poets, scientists etc. came from the Greek population [15]. The poet Sherbina, grandchild of a Greek woman, called himself 'The Greek of Taganrog'[16]. The Greek family Avgerinos played an important role in the musical life of the city. The grandfather wrote Byzantine music and sang in the chorus in the church of St. Constantine and Helen. Nikolai was a famous violinist and head principal of the Musical Technical School at Rostov[17]. A. N. Alferakis' brother, Sergei, was a renowned scientist in the field of Ornithology and Zoology and a member of the Russian Imperial Geographic Union[18]. N. M. Sinodi-Popov was an internationally renowned artist who exhibited his work in Paris at the beginning of the 20th century[19]. The Greeks maintained an Italian Opera and a symphonic orchestra which was conducted by the famous composer B. I. Souk. The family of Italian nobles, Molla, also contributed largely to the musical life of the city. Gaetano Molla was invited by the Society for the Protection of Arts and Literature. He was a conductor for the orchestra at La Scala in Milan. After the performance which he gave in Taganrog, he stayed and lived there for the rest of his life[20]. The Greek theatre 'New Mainandros', under the direction of N. Paraskevopoulos, presented ancient Greek tragedies in authentic language for the first time[21]. Pavel Fiodorovich Iordanov, physician, became a member of the City Council. In 1909 he became a member of the

Committee of Commerce and Industry in St. Petersburg and in 1912 a member of the State Council [22]. Archip Kouintzi worked on photographic montage at the renowned studio of S. S. Isakovits from 1860 to 1865. The Greek photographic studio of I. Antonopoulo was also well-known in Taganrog.

At the beginning of the 19th century, the descendants of the Byzantine Imperial Dynasty of Komninos lived in Taganrog[23]. They became relatives with the children of Ivan Andreevich Varvaki, the mythological hero of Greece and benefactor of Taganrog. Ivan Andreevich Varvakis was born in 1732 on the island of Psara. In 1770 he offered his services to the Russian Navy. He fought in the first Russian-Turkish War of 1769 – 1774. In honour of his participation he and his children were much later awarded a title of nobility. His daughter Maria was the first wife of Nikola Komninos. Varvakis' other children were Ivan, Igor, Andrei, Mark and Kosmas. The family of Varvaki is noted in the 2nd part of the Birth Registry of the Ekaterinoslav Government House[24]. Ivan Andreevich was a member of the Society of Friends and played an active part in the fight for national liberation by the Greeks. At the age of 35, he was a famous pirate and sea wolf for whom the Sultan offered a reward of thousands of piastras (gold coins). In 1770, Varvakis was put under the command of Admiral G. Sviridov of the Russian Armada and he took part in the operations in the Aegean. He was distinguished

especially in the Battle of Chesma on 26th June 1770. Ioannis Varvakis donated land, a house, a site and a large amount of money towards the operational maintenance of the Taganrog Hospital – today the 2nd Hospital [25]. The writer B. A. Sleptsov, who lived in the city, describes his impressions: “Taganrog. A Greek kingdom. It is not the same as Kiev. Only.... Here Greeks. All Greeks. Suppliers, priests, teachers, civil servants, artists – Greeks. The commercial signs Greek. And from what I know from one Greek phrase: commercial bank. It is a bank. I like it[26].”

The monk Gerasimos Belout arrived here in order to satisfy the spiritual purposes of the Greek community. He was allowed to conduct mass in the Church of Troitskaya. P. F. Jordanov, later mayor of the city, was baptized here and the family of Gerasimos Depaldos was married here and also had his children baptized in this church[27]. Later the Greeks built their own church which dates from 1781 and was dedicated to Saints Constantine and Helen. The church was made of wood and was located where no. 54 Gretseskaya Street is today[28].

Amongst the parishioners were many renowned members of the community who made large donations. They were merchants, businessmen, children and grandchildren of naval officers who had taken part in the important naval battles in the Aegean against the Turks, such as Ioannis Varvakis. Ivan Andreevich Varvakis

contributed over 1 million rubles towards the construction of churches, bridges and canals in the other Russian cities. The Italian composers Joseph, Cezar and Gaetano Molla made donations to the city's Hospital of the Red Cross. There were also Epaminondas Alafouzov and Achilles Alferakis, who baptized his son here. Achilles Alferaki composed more than 100 romances and 2 operas in St. Petersburg: 'The Girl Sunbathing' and 'The King of the Forest'. Mark Spiridonovich Magoula, one of the first merchants in Tanganrog was also a parishioner. The mayor P. F. Iordanov was married to Maria Alexandrovna Laker here. Among them were also: the owner of the export office; D. A. Negroponte; the owner of the local mill and pasta factory, A.D. Nomikos; members of the Handri dynasty, who owned the craft trade; F.D. Kotopouli, assistant to the director of the Community Bank and novelist; and finally members of the Skaramanga dynasty, who owned the leather trade and tiling business and who were grand landowners in the neighbouring province of Bachmout[29]. In the Soviet era, 46 silver-plated icons, 18 brass candlesticks, 17 diamonds, 1 emerald and 37 gold votive offerings were taken from the church. In the beginning the Bolsheviks did not destroy the church as they considered it a dedication by foreigners. However, later and in particular on 16th June 1938 the moment of its destruction came about[30].

The inhabitants of Taganrog called their city 'The Capital of the South of the Russian Empire'. This was because it was a strong and important port on the shores of the Azov Sea with an active commercial trade among many foreign countries. In 1864, 807 ships were anchored off the port of Taganrog. Of those 245 were Greek, 164 were English, 55 French, 28 Italian, 25 Turkish, 22 from Mecklenburg, 12 Norwegian, 2 Belgian and 88 from other countries. There were the embassies of Greece, Great Britain, France, Italy, Austria, Turkey, Holland, Sweden, Norway, Spain and Portugal. It was a time when Taganrog port's trade outdid even that of Odessa. Earlier, in 1806, according to official records, there were over 7000 Greeks. Of those 1438 were merchants, 191 were middle class and civil servants and 234 were nobility. The 'Sons of Greece' played an active role in the economic development, the cultural life and the formation of the architecture style of the city. From the 2nd floor of the Moiseev house, young Anton Chekhov would watch the comings and goings of the ships in the port daily [31]. The wealthy Greeks built luxurious villas and stately homes. In particular, the architectural perfection and magnificence of the palace of the Alferaki family stood out: 'A gold-trimmed world, a splendid hall with a stage for musicians, lights on the walls and a hall full of paintings by the Italian masters [32].'

The theatre of Taganrog was quite unusual for the

Russian countryside. In one season 2 prima donnas sang at the theatre: Zagern and Bellati. Salvini played the leading role in Othello. Famous touring theatre companies which left their mark on the city during that period contained names like Nikolo Ofitsiozo Sarti, Bertini, Loupi and Gaetano Molla [33]. On 23rd April 1904 in Taganrog, the company under the direction of F. Pafantis staged the variety show by the Great Russian dramatist A. P. Chekhov called 'The Bear' in Greek [34]. The more famous families of whom the children had contact with Anton were Raphaelo, Skaramanga, Hatzichristou, Smirli, Malaxiano and Drosi. Anton could see the Greek signs on the streets. He sang with his brother Nikolai in the church of St. Constantine and Helen. He took part in the children's performances and also played a duet in Drossi's house. He went to concerts at the Alferaki house and so on.

Pavel Grigorovich wanted his children to be like the Greeks. He wanted them to visit Athens and to have a career in Greece as merchant traders. It was for that reason they had to learn the Greek language. He sent them first to the Greek School and not to the Russian Gymnasium as was the usual practice. The school had 6 classes and had 6 rows of desks, one for each class. At the end of each row there was a girl who had a sign next to her with the letter which stood for each class. Antosha, the nickname for Anton, was in the back row. He turned and looked at two of his classmates with

desperation on his face. Antosha, Nikolai and Firknoul looked at each other. The others laughed. Immediately, without expecting it, he received a strike from the teacher's cane on his back. The Greek teacher Voutsinas was standing next to him. The cane was the basic method of discipline and the teacher knew how to use it well. The lesson started. The teacher went from desk to desk saying one word loudly and the children repeated the word. Whoever did not understand the word would receive a strike from the cane on his shoulders or hands. Antosa returned home frowning. "I will not go to Athens!" he said[35]. It was apparent that he could not get used to the educational system enforced by the teacher and he had difficulties.

Greeks were godparents to the Great Russian poet. The proof of this is an excerpt from the registry of the Cathedral of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, Ushpensky in Taganrog in 1860. "27th January in the the Cathedral of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary: Here was baptized Anton Chekhov. Godparents were the merchant Spiridon Titov from Taganrog and the wife of the merchant Dimitrios Kirilov-Sofianopoulos, Elizabeta Efimovna Sofianopoulou[36]". In 1782, immediately after its establishment, Nikitas Argyros, who was probably from Santorini, was the first priest of the Greek Church. The church was at no. 54 Gretseskaya Street. On leaving Taganrog, the Empress Elizabeta Alexeevna dedicated money and vessels to

the church. In 1830, the wooden construction was replaced by masonry. During the Crimean War, an English cavalry regiment was based outside the church. Young Anton would sing in the choir here with his brother. It was also here that he heard the history of the great imperial family Komninos for the first time.

An important attraction in the city was the Greek monastery dedicated to Tsar Alexander I. There are witness accounts from the older inhabitants that state “The monastery was beautiful. The walls had a protective covering. Underneath they were massive but tapered up to delicate towers. At night it looked as if the moon was circling it”. It was built thanks to the donation from Ivan Andreevich Varvaki and mass was said to be based on the mass used in the monasteries of Jerusalem. That is why the street was first named Monastirsky Street, later Jerusalimsky Street and today Alexandrovskaya Street[37]. The walls were decorated with Byzantine icons. Young Anton went there every year on 19th November to commemorate the death of Tsar Alexander. All the students from the school in Alexandrovskaya Street went with him. Anton also took catechism lessons in the church of Archangel Michael, where his uncle Mitrofan Yiegorovich was a trustee. His aunt, Mitrofan’s wife, was the daughter of the Greek merchant Kambouri[38]. The first person to suggest that a statue of Peter the Great be erected in Taganrog was the mayor Achilles Nikolaevich Alferaki. This became a

reality when the 200th anniversary of the founding of the city in 1698 was celebrated. In 1893 the designs began. The next mayor, also of Greek origin, Pavel Fiodorovich Iordanov (1857 – 1920) was the one who carried out the plan. The statue was finally erected in 1898.

The first photographic studio was opened in Petrovskaya Street by Simeon Isakovich in the house belonging to the Greek Nikolaou Psalti. The famous artist of Greek origin Archip Kouintzi worked in the position of photographic montage. One of the first clinics in the city was in Gretseskaya Street 104. During the second half of the 19th century it was the stately home of the great Greek merchant Alexopoulo. In 1880 a temporary hospital was housed there for the 5th Auxiliary Artillery Brigade. At the beginning of 20th century, a 2-storey tiled-roofed building with large balconies on the front façade was built on the site of an old storehouse and its surroundings, which was rebuilt after World War II. In 1902 the building was bought by Epaminondas Nikolaevich Alafouzov and was dedicated to the Community of the Red Cross of Taganrog. From 1915 onwards, there has always been a permanent clinic catering for all specialities of therapeutic and surgical medicine.

Today Taganrog belongs to the state of Rostov of the Russian Republic. It is 80 sq. km. and has a population of 250,000.

NOTES:

1. *Мячина М.* Таганрогское поселение Кремны на Меотийском озере. – Энциклопедия Таганрога. Таганрог: Антон, 1998, 13–16.
2. *Суханов А.* Пушкинская набережная - пропуск во всемирную историю. – Таганрогская правда, 12 авг. 1998, с. 2.
3. *Панченко Т.* 27 веков назад – Таганрогская правда, 11 октября 1978, с. 4.
4. История Екатерины Второй. Сочинение А. Брикнера. СПб, типография А.С. Суворина, Эртелевъ пер., д. 11/2, 1885 г.
5. *Филевский П.* Переселение греков в Таганрог и условия жизни первых обитателей. – История города Таганрога. Таганрог: Сфинкс, 1996, 91–122.
6. *Гусева А.* Греческое благотворительное общество – Энциклопедия Таганрога. Таганрог: Антон, 1998, с. 237.
7. *Гаврюшкин О.П.* «Гуляет старый Таганрог» (исторический очерк), Таганрог: Международный институт китайской медицины, 1997 г.
8. *Филевский П.* История города Таганрога. Таганрог:

Сфинкс, 1996, 1–12.

9. *Гаврюшкин О.* Греческая церковь. Греческий монастырь. – Гаврюши О. Отблески золотых куполов. Таганрог, 1999. 36–46, 130–144.

10. *Потемкин Г. А.* Из приказа от 23 августа 1779 г.. – Филевский П. История города Таганрога. Таганрог, 1996, с. 98.

11. *Гаврюшкин О.*, 130–144

12. *Светлов В. Я.* Греки Таганрогал – Светлов В. Я. Город Таганрог. Ростов-на-Дону: Кн. изд-во, 1990., 26–37.

13. *Киричек М.* Его называли “Варвакис”л – Грани месяца, 2000, N 26–27.

14. *Веташкова А.* Род Депальдо судьбой не избалованл – Таганрогский курьер, 1997, Вып. 53, с. 4.

15. *Григорьева Н.* Таганрогские греки или греческие таганрожцы? – Таганрогская правда, 6 нояб.1999, с. 6.

16. *Киричек М.* “Эллин из Таганрога”л – Грани месяца, 1999, N 4, с. 31.

17. *Назаренко И., Киричек М.* Авьерино род. – Энциклопедия Таганрога. Таганрог: Антон, 1998. с. 153

18. *Ревенко Л.* Алфераки Ахиллес Дмитриевич. Алфераки Ахиллес Николаевич. Алфераки Дмитрий Ильич. Алфераки Сергей Николаевич. – Энциклопедия Таганрога. Таганрог: Антон, 1998, 165–166.

19. *Назаренко И.* Синоди-Попов Дмитрий Минаевич . – Энциклопедия Таганрога. Таганрог: Антон, 1998, с. 442.
20. *Кукушин В., Бойко З.* Музыкальная культура города Таганрога. Ростов-на-Дон, ГинГо, 1999, 52–54.
21. *Цымбал А.* “Вполне интересные и полезные для города граждане”. – Греки в истории Таганрога: Альманах. Вып. 1. Таганрог, 2000, 28–29.
22. *Званцев С.* Городской голова: Рассказ. – Званцев С. Миллионное наследство: Рассказы о Таганроге. Ростов-н/Д.: Кн. изд-во, 1965, 256–270.
23. *Киричек М.* Комнено-Варваци, род. - Комнено-Варваци Владимир Николаевич. - Комнено-Варваци Козьма Николаевич. - Комнено-Варваци Марк Николаевич. – Энциклопедия Таганрога. Таганрог: Антон, 1998, 303–304.
24. *Андрееенко С.А.* Познавательное путешествие по легендам и былям старого города Таганрог. 2004.
25. *Михайлова Н.* Грек с острова Псара. – Греки в истории Таганрога : Альманах. Вып. 1. Таганрог, 2000. 21–25.
26. Чеховские места в Таганрогел – Путеводитель. Таганрог, 2004.
27. *Киричек М.* Связь времен. – Греки в истории Таганрога: Альманах. Вып. 1. Таганрог, 2000, 30–32.
28. *Киричек М.* Судьба греческой церкви. – Таганрогская правда, 16 апр. 1994, с. 3.

29. *Филевский П.* Церковь Святых Царей Константина и Елены. – Греческий Святой Троице Монастырь. – Филевский П. История города Таганрога. Таганрог: Сфинкс, 1996, 256–258, 273–277.
30. *Цымбал А.* Греки Таганрога. – Энциклопедия Таганрога. Таганрог: Антон, 1998, 81–85.
31. *Митрофанов Н.* Книга о Чехове. – Дальний Восток, 1960, № 2.
32. о.п. Михайлова Н. Грек с острова Псара, 21–25.
33. *Кукушин В., Бойко З.* Музыкальная культура города Таганрога..., 63–64.
34. *Михайлова Н.* Греки в истории Таганрога. – Греки в истории Таганрога: Альманах. Вып. 1 Таганрог, 2000, 2–13.
35. *Чехов А. П.* Повести и рассказы, Москва 1978.
36. *Громов М. П.* Чехов. Москва, 1993.
37. *Киричек М.* Варвациевский монастырь. – Грани месяца, 1999, N 8, с. 30.
38. *Киричек М.* Имя, достойное памяти. – Грани месяца, 2000, N 3, с. 31.