

# Abolishment of the Military Guard at the Riga Alexander Heights Institution in 1856: War as a Monitor of Humanization?

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**Abstract:** *The system of state institutions created in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century in Russian Empire – asylums for the insane – had three major problems: lack of a solid legal framework in the form of medical legislation, lack of professional staff as well as the traditional negative public perception of insanity. All taken together resulted in the close coexistence of two social practices: the practice of charitable care and the practice of isolation, which existed side by side in Livonia. Isolation of the insane coexisted with isolation of another groups of outsiders – prisoners and venereal patients. Initially, the existence of charitable penal institutions – correctional and work houses and their inhabitants – caused the necessity of the presence of military guard at the charitable institutions like the 'Alexander Heights' in Riga. The presence of the military guard and its duties were regulated by relevant parts of the legal code in case of the above-mentioned correctional institutions, and could be extrapolated on the insane to prevent acts of aggression, accidents and escapes. The insane were also a subject of control of the military veterans due to the shortage of professional staff. One of the first signals of a change in the situation were the "small" reforms of the system of charitable care as a consequence of the state's unsuccessful Crimean campaign: prohibiting the stationing of hourly guards in the Riga insane asylum in 1856, and, finally, closing of all the penalty institutions at the 'Alexander Heights' institution in the 1860s.*

**Keywords:** *Alexander Heights charitable institution, early Baltic mental asylums, history of psychiatry in Latvia, Livonia Board of Social Care, military guard, military veterans as part of the system of care of the insane*

The issue of charitable care for the mentally ill at Alexander Heights (AH) institution in Riga during the 19<sup>th</sup> century is covered by several authors, among whom mention should be made primarily of G. Holdt (1867), J. Luiga (1904), J. Brants (1925), H. Buduls (1938), Z. Sochneva (1956; 1974; 1974) and V. Kuzņecovs (2011). In particular, charitable care associated with behavioral control of the clients at AH is examined primarily with regard to mentally ill patients. This report is intended not only to continue to study this topic, but also to expand it, taking into account historical aspects of charitable care of the mentally ill patients as part of the system of philanthropic institutions, which included penitentiary facilities, and provided for use of the military guard for the reason of order and safety.

### **Mental asylum as a part of the system of charitable institutions of the Livonia Board of Social Care**

As it is known, the beginning of regular charitable care of the mentally ill in the Baltic provinces of the empire was provided for in the federal Statute on Provincial Administration of 7 November 1775 (Yudin, 1951, p. 36). Before the advent of the first Baltic insane asylum, charitable care of these patients might have been provided sporadically, relying on municipal, church and personal charity. Most patients were cared for by families, sometimes in the most primitive and inhumane manner; or they lived as homeless drifters. According to the law of 1775, care for the insane was entrusted to the new provincial administrative structure as well as to a charitable institution, the Livonia Board for Social Care. The scope of activity of the board was very broad. Among the charitable institutions within its ability to provide services were almshouses, schools, homes for the terminally ill, hospitals, insane asylums (which by law were not considered hospitals); correctional facilities, a work house (to earn one's living, but also for those convicted of begging and indolence) and a correctional house (for people of both sexes "who lead a dissolute and intemperate life"). The same law of 1775 foresaw, along with a humane attitude to mentally ill persons from the side of administration and care persons, the measures of safety against their possible aggression, and first and foremost, the reliable isolation. The use of military veterans, "conscientious and careful", was proposed by the law along with paid careers (*Polnoe Sobranie Zakonov...*, 1830). As shown by the activity of the Livonian Board for Social Care (Russ. *Lifliandskii Prikaz obshchestvennogo prizreniya*, Germ. *Livlandische Collegium für allgemeine Fürsorge*), several such institutions might have existed in one territory and even

within a single building, such as the first insane asylum in Riga (1787–1823) (Kuznecovs, 2007).

In Europe the first correctional/work houses appeared in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Pullan, 2001). The presence of mentally ill patients in such institutions probably was a rule rather than an exception. Originally the tendency to combine homes for the insane, immoral persons, criminals as well as the venereal patients into a single entity was dictated by the moralizing atmosphere of the society, which encouraged isolation of these kinds of marginalized persons in the first hand for the reasons of safety and re-education of the “poor insane”, and only later on by the reason of their treatment (Nolan, 1993, pp. 29–31). The merging of wards for the mentally ill with correctional or infectious (including venereal) facilities was practiced in different countries, such as England, Holland (Haarlem) and Germany. Thus, in Berlin, patients were transferred to the hospital from the penitentiary building only after a fire occurred there in 1798 (Bartlett, 2001, p. 435).

In Russia, probably, similarly to the German model, the insane asylum, or *dolgauz*, (Russ. *долгауз* from German *Tollhaus*, ‘mental asylum’) since the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century was often combined with the correctional house (Rus. *уухмазуз* from German *Zuchthaus*, ‘correctional house’) in Moscow, St Petersburg, Novorossiisk (later Yekaterinoslav), Kharkov, Ufa, Vyatka and other provincial cities. In Moscow, the majority of the mentally ill patients were placed in the correctional house; calm patients were kept in the almshouse, and only violent patients were cared for in insane asylum. At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century violent patients from the insane asylum of the Obukhov Hospital in St Petersburg were transferred to the correctional house – the official part of the Obukhov institution (Yudin, 1951, pp. 34–37, 64). According to eyewitnesses (1801?) the military guard was stationed at the entrance of the St Petersburg (Obukhov?) hospital building. The presence of an internal guard was observed only in areas of seclusion and restraint for prisoners of correctional facility,

*Although they are at fault for nothing other than as servants being angered by something that their masters – nobles, wealthy merchants and others – had done, and by order they were sent here, where they also were kept. They wear neck irons and are watched over by guards... They work here, and for that they receive black bread and water two times a day. They are held here for a week or two, a month or two, or up to two or three years, then they are released. Sometimes it happens that their master does not remember some of them, and so they end their days in custody. If the master wishes they can be released immediately. (Buyanov, 1989, pp. 45–47)*

The text notes the seemingly extrajudicial character of prisoners kept under guard, and the terms of their sentences being determined arbitrarily. However, according to the law of 1775 the basis for referring persons to the correctional houses could be not only a court sentence but a determination by the Provincial Administration; a petition by private individuals, fathers, mothers; or a petition by three relatives (*Polnoe Sobranie Zakonov Rossiiskoi Imperii*, 1830, p. 275). The text also notes the presence of an external military guard (for all the hospital branches?) and an internal military guard for the correctional house.

It still is unclear when and why was the presence of military guards for guarding prisons extended to include patients. According to an early report this took place after 1801 when the Board of Medical (the central agency of medical administration) and the Secret Police were closed due to the formation of government ministries. After that the mentally ill patients who were under the authority of these agencies were transferred to the Board of Social Care using the prior system of protection (Konstantinovsky, 1887, p. 550). According to another report the need for the use of guards was primarily due to a shortage of staff for the mentally ill (Yudin, 1951, p. 56). Anyway, with its penalty institution, it subdued to the rules of guarding of prisoner places by military guard formulated by contemporary laws (*Svod zakonov...*, 1857) that could be expanded to the neighboring branches like the mental asylum and venereal hospital mainly for the reasons of safety for the prophylaxis of suicides, accidents and escapes.

## Alexander Heights in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century

The institution ‘Alexander Heights’ (Russ. *Aleksandrovskaya vysota*, Germ. *Alexandershöhe*) was opened in 1824. A new complex was constructed at Alexander Heights on the grounds of the former royal park on the banks of the Daugava River outside the city limits. After moving, the old house of the Board for Social Care in the Citadel was closed and turned into a city jail (pointedly underscoring continuation of the essence of understanding of the insane asylum as a ‘psychiatric prison’!). The new institution inherited the structure and the very spirit of the old *dolgaуз* with majority of pure social clients in its five wards. The first requirement of the law of 1775 remained, which required that the insane asylum (as well as, in the corresponding article, the Correctional House) must be “spacious and fortified so that it would be impossible to escape from it”. This section on the insane asylum was followed directly by guidance on “making efforts to treat them” – which was unrealistic considering the limited degree of medical development at that time with

its lack of psychiatric help (*Polnoe Sobranie Zakonov Rossiiskoi Imperii*, 1830, p. 274). Statutory acts for confining people in the Correction House often had a moral character: disobedience to parents, profligacy, debauchery, drunkenness, laziness, unwillingness to work and much more. These and other crimes and misdemeanors were supposed to be treated by continual labor. The “lazy and disobedient” were punished by putting to bread and water for three days, confining to a cell for a week, or flogging (*Polnoe Sobranie Zakonov Rossiiskoi Imperii*, 1830, p. 275). The latter was performed according to the Alexander Heights’ statutes, by use of the house whip (*Hauspeitsche*), not more than three strikes for one misdemeanor. Punishment of the mentally ill was prohibited by state law and by the Alexander Heights’ statutes (Luiga, 1904, p. 26). However, as Luiga also justifiably observed, it often was difficult for personnel and the guards (who could be civil persons from penitential wards) to distinguish a client of the correctional division from a patient, who might accidentally be subjected to the punishment mentioned: “Just who in general would be able to distinguish a mentally ill patient from a tramp? There was no psychiatrist at all, and a permanent physician [...] was appointed around 1845. Justice and punishment were in the hands of the caretakers and the guards.” (Luiga, 1904, p. 26) Starting at least in the 1840s, the Interior Ministry asked the Livonia Board for Social Care about terms of confinement, the dynamics of admission and discharge, compensation for the labor of residents of the correction house, and compliance of conditions of confinement with requirements with the Code of Institutions and Statutes on Confinement under Guard from Volume 14 of the Legal Code (*Svod zakonov...*, 1857).

Thus, on 6 October 1852, the Ministry asked the (Civil) Governor as the head of Livonia Board about the numbers and lengths of stay of residents in the correctional institutions of Alexander Heights who were sent to such houses for bad behavior since 1847 (Inquiry of the Ministry of Internal Affairs from 6 October..., 1852). On 14 November 1852 the Livonia Board reported about only three persons (one of them entered twice), who were in the correctional division “at the request of the society” or at the request of the parents for bad behavior with different duration of stay up to one year (Answer of the Livonia Board of Social Care from 14 November..., 1852).

According to federal law, the goal of the Work House of the Board for Social Care was to provide roof over one’s head and work for the impoverished, or those without a permanent residence for being fed. However, based on a detailed draft of the Riga Alexander Heights’ statutes (1824), it follows that the basis for confinement in the work house, first and foremost, was the negative moral quality of these individuals – laziness, understood as lack of desire to work and begging that went along with it, for which the police detained them. Originally

the minimum duration of stay at the Alexander Heights Work House was defined as six months. But the same statute reads, “The completely incorrigible remain in the institution indefinitely” (Riga Alexander Heights statutes’ draft, 1824, p. 24). Accordingly, a universal means of correction for all residents, and especially for the correctional divisions at Alexander Heights, was permanent residency – labor of various degrees of intensity and heaviness, different for men and women. But also at that time in Lübeck, Germany, the term of confinement for prisoners of local work house could be without term (*Plan uchrezdenia rabochego doma*, 1821). In time, the difference between now penitential institution was equated, they were called ‘work-correctional institutions’. On the whole the number of correctional prisoners in the institution steadily declined over time with improvement in laws, and the number of mentally ill patients, especially chronic patients, rose at AH.

Meanwhile, strictly mentally ill patients originally occupied only 52 (30 men, 22 women) out of 221 beds in the five wards of AH institution in Riga in 1824. The rest of the beds were occupied by social clients from the almshouse (veterans constituted about one-third of its inhabitants), two correctional facilities and a venereal hospital. The inhabitants included a quite number of asocial residents of the penitentiary and venereal departments of the hospital – tramps, alcoholics, thieves and prostitutes. Due to a shortage of space, patients, as it already has been said, might have been relocated to the social division and vice versa. In real life the use of soldiers from garrison battalions, retired veterans from almshouses, and other clients of the social wards for patients care at that time was widespread practice associated in the first place with a shortage and expensiveness of personnel hired on their own free will (Yudin, 1951, p. 56). However, psychosocial attitudes also could play a role. The ex-servicemen from the army in asylums of that time “were much liked by superintendents because of their disciplined background and their ability both to lead and to be led” (Nolan, 1996, p. 49). It was not rare that in the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Alexander Heights’ superintendents themselves were retired military officers (Brants, 1925). According to the reports of the Alexander Heights, in 1824 there was one paid male attendant (for prisoners) who lived on the territory of the institution but was not its client. In 1826 the staff included six attendants from different wards, in the majority partly paid clients of social units. The same is true for the majority of the caregivers and various supporting staff in 1847 with its partly paid 45 persons (Kuznecovs, 2008, pp. 92, 95–96). “The asylums were expected to be self-financing and this meant that labor costs had to be kept to a minimum” (Nolan, 1996, p. 47).

With regard to the mentally ill, patients were subjected by law to the right of unlimited internment in the institutions of the Board for Social Care at the request

of the administration of the province (mostly police and medical doctors), the criminal court (from crimes committed in a state of mental disorder), and in connection with a loss of capacity and appointment of guardianship by decision of the Senate. Such patients were released by the court “after recovery” (Janovsky, n.d., pp. 953–960). The issue of their special guarding and care was not regulated at the level of federal law.

## **The military guard at the Riga Alexander Heights institution**

The number of military guards and their duties was mentioned only minimally, even in such meticulously compiled documents as statutes of institutions. Early sources report on the number of military guards at the building Livonia Board of Social Care (with asylum) at the Riga Citadel in 1818: forty-four soldiers and two non-commissioned officers were thought to guard all the Board building’s inhabitants, the mentally ill and prisoners (Kuznecovs, 2007, p. 64). When Alexander Heights opened in 1824 there were seven military guard posts. The guarded objects included the main buildings of the institutions’ wards: three buildings constructed in 1823 and the big building of the work house (1835) for prisoners. Two of the posts were placed near the main gates, which still exist today, one facing the woods and the other on the opposite side of the Daugava River. Possibly, the latter one was near the bridge over the river, which belonged to the institution. The bridge at least in part could be maintained by two persons from the Alexander Heights almshouse (Alexander Heights 1<sup>st</sup> tertial report, 1826).

The exact number of military guards at Alexander Heights remains unknown to this day. As early as in 1826 the administration proposed to the Board for Social Care an increase in the number of military guards by an additional 12 soldiers and one officer (Kuznecovs, 2011, p. 157). The guard had to be present at the post day and night to prevent the possibility of escape by the residents of the work and correctional houses. The guard also was supposed to make rounds inside the buildings and patrol the grounds to prevent escapes and other incidents which might threaten the security of the institution or its residents. For prevention of emergencies, besides the military guard there also was a local team of disabled retired military veterans from the local almshouse. Their duties included night watch, as well as prevention and extinguishing of fires (Kuznecovs, 2011, p. 158). Lighting for offices at night during the first decades of Alexander Heights’ existence consisted of oil lamps, and the risk of fire was great. The problem of individual and social security for residents of the institution was increased by

the large expanse of the grounds – a former imperial park, covering about 17 hectares. Compared to several tens of meters of the courtyard of the Board for Social Care's building in the Riga Citadel, which also had utility rooms and in which it was nearly impossible for patients to go for strolls, the difference literally was huge, both in the positive sense (the calming effect of nature), as well as the negative sense (increased risk of escape, accidents and suicides). Upon any detected violations the commander of the guard was supposed to inform the steward, who also was the superintendent of the institution. At night the steward kept the keys to the main gates and the premises of the correctional departments of the institution (Kuzņecovs, 2011, p. 158).

Nevertheless, escapes took place. As early as in 1824 the administration of the Alexander Heights proposed the issuance of a pass to residents for preventing escapes, and the cloth badges for prisoners with the letters 'Z.H.' (*Zuchthaus*) (Administrative Committee report, 1824). However, in the third tertial report of 1826 (September–December) three persons escaped from the Correctional House including one insane person (Third tertial report, 1826). An investigation was conducted by the commandant of Riga, Major-General Wrangel, and his report to the civilian governor of April 23, 1848 contains information about the escape of three "civilian prisoners" from the Work House that they managed to accomplish on the premises of the hospital where they were being treated. A private of the Olonets Infantry Regiment who was on hourly guard duty at the hospital, was found guilty in the investigation (with participation of the Commander of the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division), as well as a non-commissioned guard officer who did not inform about the escape in time. It also was determined that the spaces between bars of windows, through which the escape took place, were too wide. They were supposed to punish the guilty guard and replace the window bars (Riga Military Commandant Report from 23 April..., 1848). Also three night posts around the Work House were established before the installation of the new, narrower bars (Riga Military Commandant Report from 23 April..., 1848; Riga Military Commandant letter from 23 October..., 1848; Report by the commandant from 25 October..., 1851). In another report by the commandant to the Civilian Governor Essen, he speaks about the need to prevent the possibility of escapes by prisoners held in the Work House while returning from work at dusk. The commandant proposed organizing the return of prisoners before the onset of darkness (Riga Military Commandant letter from 23 October..., 1848). The civilian governor, in turn, reported to the Livonia Board about the investigation of the circumstances of the escape of four prisoners, who crawled through the fence of the wood storage shed. An increase in the height of fences around the Alexander Heights was proposed in order to prevent future escapes

(Memorandum of the governor from 5 December..., 1853). In 1854, the guarding functions at the Alexander Heights were executed by the staff of the Revel Regiment of Chasseurs (Report from the Ordonans-Gauz, 1854).

It is not ruled out that, as in the Citadel asylum, armed guards could be summoned by personnel for the oversight of aliens and calming of agitated patients (Kuznecovs, 2007, p. 64), although provisions of the draft statutes of Alexander Heights suggest that such action by the military guard was not specifically foreseen. However, as already mentioned above, other sources (Konstantinovsky, 1887, p. 550) indicate that the military guard was stationed not only outside of buildings, but also inside the premises as an internal guard. It was the same not only in penitentiary institutions but also in the insane asylum. It was the same in various cities throughout the empire. After a personal visit by Czar Nicholas I to the insane asylum in Riazan in 1832 he issued an order for immediate removal of the military guard from the insane asylums, since “weapons, due to incautiousness of the military guard, easily could harm the unfortunate and those bereft of reason, and the very sight of one [a weapon] must make an unpleasant impression on their imagination.” (*Polnoe Sobranie Zakonov Rossiiskoi Imperii*, 1833). The Imperial Decree of 1 October 1832 went to press in 1833 as the seventh volume of the Legal Code. However, although the Minister of Internal Affairs right away announced the Imperial Decree to the civilian governors throughout the country, the military guards were removed only from the internal premises of patients (Konstantinovsky, 1887, p. 580). Having the force of law the Imperial Decree of 1832 on elimination of the military guard *de facto* was not accepted also at the institutions of the Livonia Board for Social Care. The reason probably was the above-described structure of the institutions of the local Board for Social Care, which was changed at the end of the 1860s with the closure of the penitentiary departments. Nevertheless, as archival materials indicate, removal of the military guard at Alexander Heights took place according to a special Imperial Decree as early as on 16 September 1856 – earlier than it took place in other provinces.

Problems associated with the need to station a military guard for oversight of clients at Alexander Heights was complicated at the beginning of the Crimean War (1853–1856). In April 1854, due to the possibility of an enemy attack, and according to the command of the Commander-in-Chief, the military guard had to be transferred to the main guard house in the Riga fortress to join other troops. The military guard was supposed to be replaced by a so-called ‘disabled veterans’ team’, composed of the persons living in the Alexander Heights almshouse (Letter of the Livland Governer from 7 April..., 1854). But later in April the Commander-in-Chief suggested that the most dangerous prisoners

were transferred to the city jail in the fortress, and to replace the military guard due to possibility of the allied forces attack with 15–20 veterans from the Home Guard forces (*vnutrennie voiska*) in order to guard more effectively the institution's property and people (Letter of the Commander-in-Chief from 27 April..., 1854). The initiative received the support of the Riga military governor Prince A. A. Suvorov who communicated to the vice-Commander of General of the 1<sup>st</sup> district of the Home Guard corps in order to follow the above proposal. The military governor suggested the replacing of the military guard with 20 serving veterans associated with the Home Guard (Correspondence of governors from 4 May..., 1854).

The expected attack by Allied forces did not take place, and the supposed transfer of the guard to the Citadel seemingly lost its actuality for some time. However, by the end of the war, that local initiative received support from the high-ranking person from St Petersburg, Adjutant General Frolov. The General came to Riga by imperial order for inspection of local military post and guarding service. The acting commandant of Riga, Colonel Z (S?) Kotzebue (3. *Коцебу*), in his report of June 12, 1856 to the Livonian Civilian Governor, referring to Frolov, proposed replacing the military guard of all six posts "of the insane asylum" (obviously referring to the entire complex of institutions at Alexander Heights) with 12 veteran guards. The military hourly guards were supposed to remain for guarding only prisoner places. That last post was supposed stationed in a building of the Work/Correctional House. The guards were supposed to be stationed near the entries of its front and back doors; the new post was supposed to be stationed at gates facing the wood. But the post at the "exit gate" (facing the river?) was supposed to be closed. Kotzebue also mentioned the nine convoy soldiers that were supposed to be sent to the Alexander Heights "as before" for the control of prisoners working for the institution. The reason for this replacement by Kotzebue is reminiscent of the Imperial Decree of 1832 (possibly cited by General Frolov during his inspection), "because an hourly guard with a weapon has nothing to do with the insane" (Report of Colonel Kotzebue from 12 July..., 1856).

However, the real changes took place only after an Imperial Decree from 16 September 1856 from Czar Alexander II on the reduction of military guard registries: "instead of ... hourly guards, formerly stationed in the Riga insane asylum and now phased out, appointing 12 men from the disabled veterans of the second category as permanent guards" (Letter of Riga governor from 5 November..., 1856). They were there, apparently, because of the three then existing categories of disabled veterans teams – mobile, able to serve, and unable to serve (totally disabled). In other provinces the external military guard was removed only later – 29 April 1859 in accordance with the Imperial Decree

prohibiting the stationing of hourly guards in the insane asylums not only in the institutions of the Board for Social Care, but also in departments for the insane in military hospitals (Konstantinovsky, 1887, pp. 580–581). According to archival data, the guarding functions at the Alexander Heights in the second quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were performed both by the soldiers of active army and by forces of the Home Guard.

Ironically, the implementation of the human law of abolishing the military guard in mental asylums of Czar Nicholas I could start only after the death of its author on 18 February (2 March) 1855. The question of softening control of patient behavior was accompanied by a gradual transition to specialized services and the closure of penal institutions at Alexander Heights in the 1860s. Generally speaking, the question if war could serve as the driving force of humanization sounds rhetorical. However, in the given context the answer might sound positive at least for this author. As it is known, confrontation with the coalition of Western Nations, which ended unhappily for the empire, resulted in a systemic crisis of old practices poured out in the liberal Great Reforms of the 1860s. To some extent the described “small” reforms of the liberalization of the confinement of mentally ill patients in the 1850’s Livonia can be considered forerunners.

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