

The Napoleon Series

The Germans under the French Eagles: Volume IV The Regiment of the Saxon Duchies – Chapter Five Part IV

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THE
REGIMENT OF THE SAXON DUCHIES

CHAPTER V

THE RUSSIAN CAMPAIGN (1812)

IV. -- At the rear of the Grande Armée.

We will now go through the painful road of the Loison Division, while in the glorious rearguard which it would form, until its complete annihilation. The role that devolved upon it, all of dedication and sacrifice, would consume it to the end and have deserved the testimony of admiration that history has bestowed upon it.

7 December. --The outposts of the division (300 men) whose sentries were relieved every quarter of an hour because of the incredible violence of the cold which had fallen to 28°, were withdrawn in the night of 6 December, and the 7th in the morning, the division headed in the direction of Vilnius, making up the rear guard of the army; the Duchies Regiment itself formed the rearguard of the division, and its first battalion, commanded by Captain Plankner, was the last of the echelons of the column. Osmiana was left behind, with several houses in flames and many dead bodies lying on the snow around the poorly lit bivouac fires.

After a march of a few hours, the first signs of disorder and indiscipline begin to appear in the regiment: several soldiers, despite the orders, the prayers and the threats of their officers, left the ranks to warm up with the fires by the French stragglers. At noon, they went to Miednicky to rest for a moment; but this hour-long stop was costly to the regiment: many men could not get up and had to be abandoned.

The company of carabineers of the Light Battalion, commanded by Captain Beulwitz, had the great honor of being chosen at Osmiana as escort by Marshal Ney, when the latter crossed the village on 6 December, on foot, followed by some colonels and senior officers; this company rejoined the regiment only at Vilnius.

At some distance from Miednicky, the French battery, which was marching with the rear guard, saw most of its exhausted and frozen horses fall to no longer rise; the captain who commanded it declared that he could no longer advance the pieces, the ice and the glassy roads making the march impossible; the traces of the few horses still standing were cut, the canons abandoned; and the first battalion of the Duchies, who was escorting the battery, no longer being slowed by it, speeding up and regaining its position.

A little further on, one found sleds loaded with barrels and convoyed by Anhalt soldiers. Major Wagner, commanding the 2nd Battalion of the Saxon regiment, asked the NCO of this escort where he went: -- "To meet the rear guard, to carry it these barrels filled with biscuits", replied the sergeant; it was the signal for looting: the soldiers rushed forward, the barrels were disemboweled, their contents shared, and the troop set out again with new courage.

The march was so painful that men fell dead in the ranks; others stumbled, got up, falling back never to get up again; others said goodbye to their comrades, lied down and waited for their end. The neighborhood of the great fires lit by the stragglers exerted on the unhappy Saxons an irresistible attraction; soldiers were running, it was impossible to restrain them; they are deaf to the voice of their chiefs, to the call of drums still existing; nothing could make them march again ... They wanted to get warm.

Finally, they arrived near Vilnius: a French general, unknown to all, appeared before the 4th Regiment and gave the order to go and occupy a group of houses on the right of the road. The regiment went there, but the shelters were illusory and it was impossible to settle there ... Some fractions stopped there however while the rest of the regiment resumed the road to Vilnius; the next morning, December 8th, the officers who remained at this post were abandoned by the rest of their soldiers and also went to the city. The Duchies regiment met that morning with only 170 men under arms ...

8 December. -- In the course of the day of the 8th, many groups of soldiers of the regiment joined their companies: tired men remained behind, soldiers strayed during the night or who had found some hospital fires ... In short, in the evening, the regiment counted 898 NCOs or soldiers and 41 officers; but of this number only 213 men and 26 officers are able to fight; others, exhausted or half-frozen, were at least for the moment incapable of any service.

In a few days, from its departure from Vilnius to Osmiana until his return to this first city, the Duchies regiment had paid tribute to nearly 600 lives in a cold of 28°.

General Loison, restored, rejoined his division.

It now had only 3,000 men under arms, instead of the 14,000 on 1 November at Königsberg. It should be noted that the 2nd Battalion of the 5th Regiment and the 6th Regiment of the Rhine were totally not included in the current strength of those present.

Vilnius was an important center of stores for the army. Colonel von Egloffstein was able to force the consignment of store house bread, sending Lieutenant Jacobs with an escort 100 men covered by 25 armed carabineers: despite the protests of the official who would not let anything be taken without the approval of a commissioner, the officer, by order, forcibly removed the loaves necessary for the regiment, leaving the store-keeper to threaten him with the anger of acting General Daru, Prince Berthier, and the other higher authorities of the army...

The only store which was actually looted during the passage of the army at Vilnius was a clothing depot; the officers of the Saxon regiment were thus able, for the most part, to acquire for themselves a capote of a soldier who, under their cloak, rendered them the most conspicuous services.

The instructions of the Emperor to the King of Naples, acting then with the command in chief, carried that Vilnius would be preserved as long as possible and would serve, as well as Kowno, of quarters of winter to the army. In the event that it could not be maintained, all the supplies of these places were to be evacuated on Danzig. Six million francs were to be sent from the army treasury, two-thirds from Königsberg, and one-third from Warsaw; lacking of means of transport, these movements could not take place. As for the defense of the city, it was barely mentioned.

9 December. -- The cannon of the Russians was heard that day, and the Bavarians of General de Wrede, eagerly urged on by the enemy, came to establish themselves in battle ranks at the gate of the city, facing Osmiana; there were about 2,500 men, with 60 light horse still mounted. Marshal Ney was charged with the defense of the city; the Loison Division at that moment passed under his immediate orders, and the Marshal sent, on the evening of the 9th, the 1st Battalion of the 3rd Regiment of the Rhine in support of the Bavarians.

General Loison divided his troops into three brigades:

1st BRIGADE.

Colonel ROUSSELOT, of the 29th Infantry Regiment.

29th Regiment.

1 battalion of the 3rd Regiment.

1 battalion of the 105th regiment.

2nd BRIGADE.

Colonel von EGLOFFSTEIN, of the Duchies Regiment.

113th regiment.

Regiment of the Saxon Duchies.

3rd BRIGADE.

Major HORADAN, of Frankfurt.

Regiment of Frankfurt.

1st battalion of the 5th Regiment of the Rhine.

Not wanting to keep a larger number of officers in the rearguard than the troop numbers, Marshal Ney sent back to the depots all the officers in excess; in execution of this measure, the Duchies Regiment evacuated a number of officers from Königsberg; it counted under the arms about 700 men, a large part of the soldiers having been considered the day before as sick or out of a state to resume the service, having returned in the ranks.

10 December. -- The night of the 9th to 10th was awful. The regiment passed it, camped on the main square, at a temperature of 27 ° C. On the morning of the 10th, the carriages left under the escort of 100 men; the division taking up arms and following them at about 9:30. The Cossacks began to show themselves all around the city, and two large masses of Russian cavalry were seen approaching, with guns on sledges; when the Russians entered Vilnius, they made 14,000 prisoners, 9,000 of them sick or wounded, and 5,000 stragglers who had lingered in the city.

Under the command of Ney, the two divisions of Wrede and Loison moved away from Vilnius. The Duchies Regiment was the rear guard, whose point was formed by the light battalion. The enemy attacked the rear guard; in this combat, the sergeant of grenadiers Rothe, of the 1st Company, was knocked over by a projectile which penetrated into his shako: he was thought dead; a few moments later, he got up and retook his place in the ranks, saying coolly: "The legs are still good, even though the head is buzzing ..."

The retreat continued, and the light battalion, very much in trouble, had already lost more than 100 men killed, wounded or prisoners. The relentless pursuit of the Russians, their numerical superiority, the threat of their cavalry, compelled the Loison Division regiments to march in a tight column. The 2nd Battalion of the 4th Regiment pressed a little to the left, intending to take advantage of a better position than a group of houses offers; the enemy took advantage of the remoteness of the rest of the division, and rushed to cut up the battalion; despite the efforts of the Saxon 1st Battalion, the Russian light cavalry sabered the 2nd Battalion which had no time to form a square; those who were not killed were taken prisoner; Major Wagner, an officer and a non-commissioned officer alone escaped captivity or death; they were collected by the 1st Battalion which, too weak to repair this disaster, had to hasten to rejoin the main column. On the orders of Colonel von Egloffstein, Major Wagner took command of the 1st Battalion.

On arriving at the defile of Ponary, the rear guard witnessed the looting of the baggage carriages and the army treasury whose teams had not been able to cross the steep slope of the road and which had been abandoned at the foot of the sloop. The regiment of Duchies had the good fortune to find there its carriage still intact; but all the officers' baggage was lost.



1812. — LE MARÉCHAL NEY
(D'après GAILDREAU)

1812. -- MARSHAL NEY (After GAILDREAU)

The column moved to the right of the road to climb the height, under the threat of an attack by Russian cuirassiers and Cossacks. The 4th Regiment of the Rhine, still at the extreme rear-guard, engaged in a small copse at the foot of the plateau; in spite of the difficulty of the ground, it was assaulted by the Cossacks and had to quickly clamber up

the slopes to get to safety; fortunately the Cossacks did not follow it and sought to reach the plateau on more practicable ground. When the Saxon regiment arrived at the top of the slopes, it found the Loison Division formed in squares and was immediately ordered to take the same formation. The Russian cavalry ran at full speed, and pronounced its imminent attack; but a double salvo stopped it, and made it turn back. The division was then able to resume its march and was rid of the enemy for the rest of the day.

They arrived in the evening at Mikity. The troops were weakened; the officers had to help the soldiers go and gather firewood for the fires. The little bread they tasted was thawed before the flames, and everyone thought sadly of the events of that day. The Duchies Regiment, since the morning, had lost 30 officers killed, wounded, or taken prisoners; the 2nd Battalion had disappeared in its entirety, and several companies of the 1st Battalion, with 35 to 40 men coming out of Vilnius, had more than 10 killed or wounded. The fighting of the day cost the regiment a quarter of the strength it presented with in the morning.

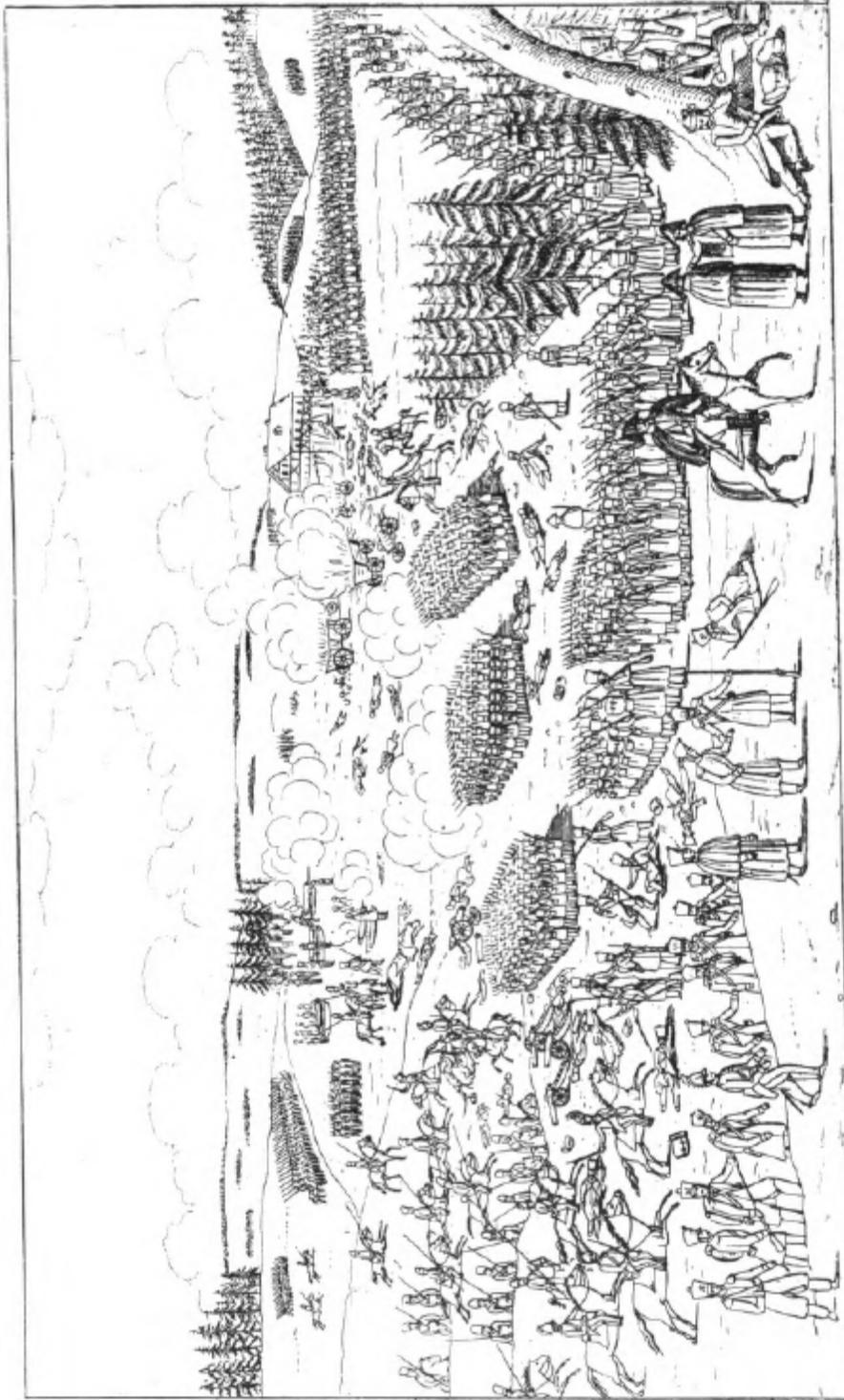
The night of the 10th to the 11th of December passed as painfully and as slowly as the preceding ones: each one realized that the cold and the fatigue would make the next day the resistance very difficult if the enemy renewed its attacks with the same obstinacy: the debris of the Loison Division, then, must they be fatally annihilated? . .

11 December. -- The troops of Marshal Ney, Loison and Wrede's divisions combined, amounted to about 2,000 men: French, Germans and Bavarians. The march resumed before sunrise; the Bavarians were in charge of the extreme rearguard. The Loison Division took the lead and went on without stopping as far as Evie, where during a halt a few soldiers discovered in the church a small deposit of flour and bran: the news spreads soon and these precious provisions were immediately distributed among all, mixed with powder and snow, kneaded into patties, roughly cooked on the bayonets and devoured in a hurry ... The sound of the cannon which approached announced the arrival of the Bavarians and the enemy who were close behind them. The division formed a square to wait for the Bavarians and serve them as a retreat; then when they reached it, they resumed their march, preserving its formation; 40 to 50 Bavarian riders still mounted formed the rearguard point.

During this retreat the cannon of the Russians continued to make many victims: the Duchies Regiment loses 8 to 10 men killed, and Colonel von Germar, commanding the light battalion, had his horse killed under him by a cannonball. The losses would have been even greater if the Bavarians, with the 1st Battalion of the 5th Regiment of the Rhine, had not stopped to keep the enemy on a height lined with wood: this maneuver allowed the column of General Loison to gain ground, and the night that came soon after an end to the pursuit.

The division settled in a village from which it drove out many stragglers who were already occupying it; everyone tried to enjoy a few hours of rest when an alarm made them take up arms in the middle of the night. It was necessary to go out of the houses, to form in square and to remain thus under arms until 2 o'clock in the morning; at that moment, they went back to Kowno, abandoning many exhausted or half-frozen soldiers.

12 December. -- The division arrives at Zismovy at 5 o'clock in the morning. The Saxon Duchies Regiment had only 50 men under arms, with 6 officers: the colonels von Egloffstein and Germar (Weimar), Major Wagner (Gotha) and the lieutenants von Mauderode (Meiningen), Schauroth (Cobourg) and Bruckner (Gotha): all remaining officers and soldiers who had lost the regiment during the course of the last night were either in front or behind the column. Abandoning the command of the remains of his regiment to Lieutenants Schauroth and Bruckner, with the order to conduct them to the Niemen and Königsberg, Colonel von Egloffstein went directly to that city with his three other officers. Königsberg had been set up as a meeting point for the whole of General Loison's division, which was, in fact, completely dissolved.



1812. — Retraite de l'armée française sur le Niemen.

(D'après l'ouvrage de Geissler.)

1812. -- Retreat of the French Army on the Niemen. (After the work of von Geissler.)

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