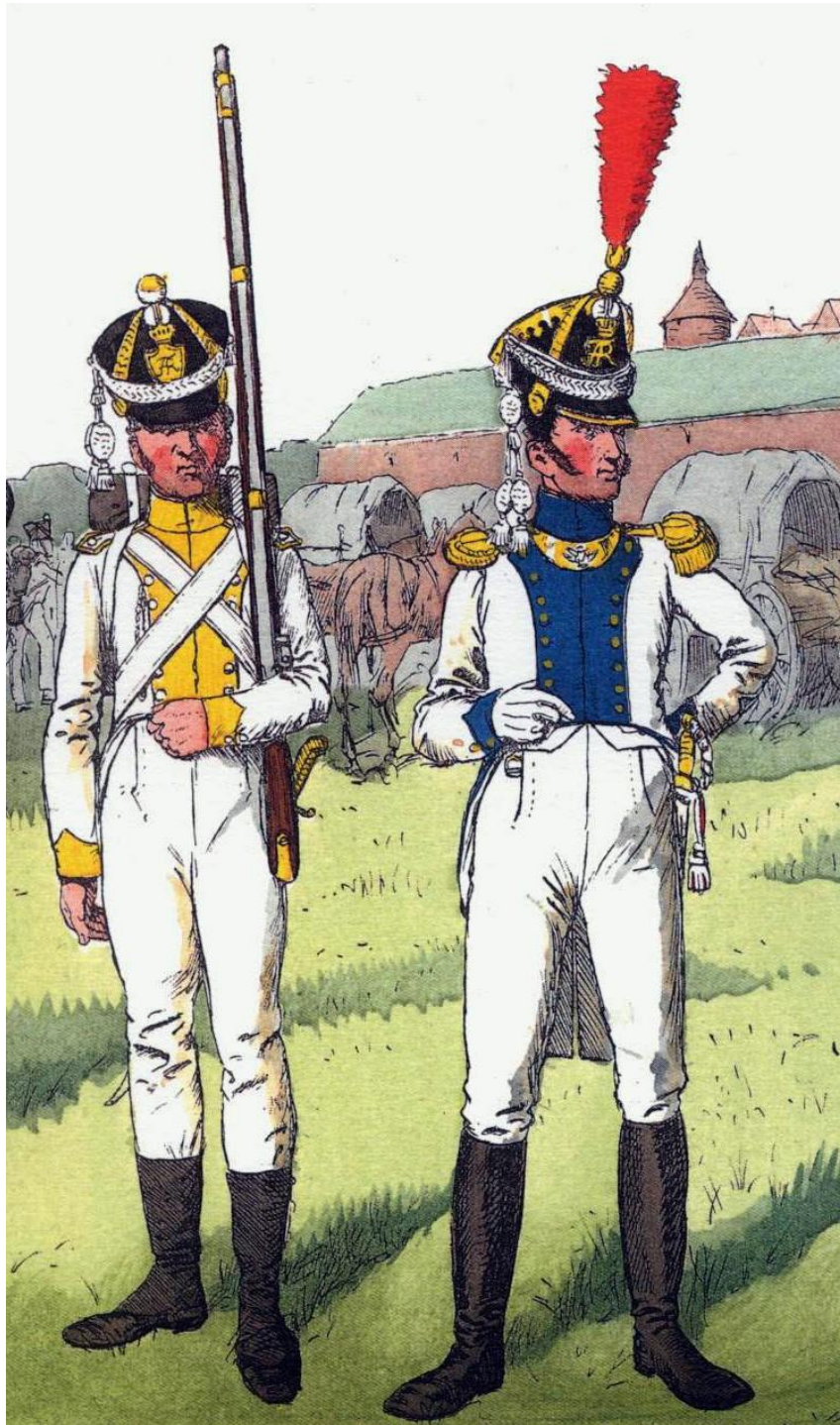


Extract from: *Die Feldzüge der Sachsen 1812 und 1813*

Reports on the Prinz Johann Light Horse Regiment, von Rechten Infantry Regiment and von Low Infantry Regiment assigned to 9^e Corps (Victor) of the French *Grande Armée* during the campaign in Russia in 1812.

By Clemens von Cerrini di Monte Varchi

First published in 1821 and translated into English from the original German by Peter G.A. Phillips.



Knotel - Musketeer of the von Rechten Regiment
and Grenadier Officer of the von Low Regiment.

[The maps accompanying this article were extracted from M.I. Bogdanovich's History of the Russian Patriotic War of 1812. Conversions of the measurements on the scale-bars are: one *versta* equals 1,067 metres or $\frac{2}{3}$ statute miles; one *sazhen* equals 2.1 metres or $2\frac{1}{3}$ yards.

The images of captured banners shown at the end of the article are from A.I. Häckel's Trophies of War 1812 - 1814 Stored in the Kazan Cathedral].

Prinz Johann Light Horse Regiment, commanded by *Oberst* von Rayski.

The Royal Saxon contingent had long since crossed the border to face serious combat with Russia when, in the last days of May 1812, two squadrons of the (Prinz Johann Light Horse) regiment that had remained behind in the country accompanied the Emperor Napoleon through Saxony. The turnout of this honour-guard and his need for cavalry probably convinced him to employ them; the regiment, therefore, proceeded to join the army on 25 June, 1812, six hundred men strong.

They marched via Crossen [Krosno Odrzańskie], Züllichau [Sulechów], Posen [Poznań], Gnesen [Gniezno], Thorn [Toruń], Marienwerder [Kwidzyn], Marienburg [Malbork], Elbing [Elbląg], Frauenburg [Frombork], Braunsburg [Braniewo], Heiligenbeil [Mamonowo] and Brandenburg [Ushakovo] to reach Königsberg [Kaliningrad] on 17 July.

The von Rechten Infantry Regiment, commanded by *Oberst* von Bose.

This regiment had formed part of the garrison of Danzig [Gdańsk] since 1808, which, more recently became composed of French, Bavarian, Saxon, Westphalian, Württemberg, Baden and Polish units, and whose strength amounted to about 22,000 men. In March the garrison was divided into two divisions, one of which was to remain as the garrison in the above-mentioned fortress, the other was mobilised, under the command of French *Général de division* Grandjean, and was to advance into the field to face Russia. One battalion of the von Rechten Regiment, under *Général de brigade* Ricard, was also assigned to the latter and was brought up to strength with men from the second battalion.

Ricard's brigade set off from Danzig on 10 April; each battalion marched independently; the von Rechten battalion marched via Langenau [Łęgowo, $6\frac{1}{2}$ miles south of Danzig], Herrengrebin [Grabiny-Zameczek, 12 miles north of Dirschau], Gemlitz [Giemlice, eight miles north-west of Neuteich], Palschau [Palczewo, eight miles downstream of Dirschau] (where they crossed the Weichsel [Vistula] on 11 April) towards the Tiegenhof area [Nowy Dwór Gdański, eight miles north-east of Neuteich]. They remained quartered there until the end of April, during which time Marshal Davout's corps, to which Grandjean's division was initially assigned, was to assemble on the so-called Werder [river island].

On 1 May, the von Rechten battalion moved to alternative accommodation in Tiegenort [Tujsk, 16 miles north-west of Elbing] and the surrounding area to make room for some divisions from those corps advancing towards Elbing.

On 31 May, Grandjean's division left their cantonments and marched to Frauenburg via Elbing, where they remained until 8 June.

The second battalion of the von Rechten Regiment, which had remained behind in garrison at Danzig, had later also received orders to follow Grandjean's mobilised division and rejoined the first battalion of their regiment at Frauenburg on 7 June.¹

Grandjean's division departed the Frauenburg area on 9 June, via Braunsberg, Heiligenbeil, Brandenburg to Königsberg, where they arrived on 11 May and were relocated to the surrounding area.

1 The von Rechten Regiment, like those of Prinz Johann and von Low, also went into the field as a supplement to the treaty-agreed contingents that had already been provided.

Napoleon had arrived in Königsberg and mustered the corps on 14 June. After this military review, the von Rechten Regiment received orders to part from Davout's corps and to remain in Königsberg in garrison instead of the Westphalian 1. *Infanterie Regiment*.² The second battalion was sent to Pillau [Baltiysk], arriving there on 19 June.

The von Low Infantry Regiment, commanded by *Oberst* von Jeschky.

They had already formed part of the garrison of the fortress of Groß-Glogau [Głogów] in Silesia since March 1811. Napoleon thought it a good idea to increase the large numbers of his soldiers by adding this regiment, which he praised for their excellent conduct during his visit to the fortress in June. Their initial destination was Königsberg, whence they set off on 2 July, 1812 (via Fraustadt [Wschowa], Posen, Gnesen, Thorn, Graudenz, Stuhm [Sztum], Marienburg, Elbing and so on), arriving on 23 July; they entered the place as part of the garrison and found the other two Saxon regiments, Prinz Johann and von Rechten, already there.

The former French governor of Königsberg, General comte van Hogendorp, who had left for Vilna on 21 July in the same capacity, was replaced by *général de division* Loison; the commander of the Saxon von Rechten Regiment, Colonel von Bose, was appointed temporary commandant of this place.

On 6 August, Marshal Victor arrived in Königsberg. His 9^e Corps, which was immediately joined by the Saxon Prinz Johann Light Horse Regiment, had passed through the city by 12 August, following the main army. Both Saxon infantry regiments remained behind in Königsberg and Pillau, while the light horse marched to Tilsit [Sovetsk] via Labiau [Polesk], arriving there on 12 August, crossed the river Memel [Neman] to take up quarters on its right bank and to link up with a Baden hussar regiment,³ a Hessen-Darmstadt light horse regiment and a Berg lancer regiment. These four regiments were to form the light cavalry division of 9^e Corps under the French *général de brigade* Fournier (who commanded the division and at the same time the first brigade, while General Delaitre commanded the second brigade) and the Saxons, together with the Baden hussars, formed the 31^e *brigade de cavalerie légère*.

This cavalry division left the Tilsit area on 30 August, marched (together with Daendel's infantry division from 9^e Corps) along the right bank of the Memel or Neman river to Kovno, while the rest of the corps moved along the left bank, arriving in Vilna on 7 September, in Minsk on 14 September, and passed through Smolensk on 28 September to take up quarters on the far side of this city.

Already during this long and arduous march, the selfishness and timidity of a foreign commander laid the foundations for the subsequent rapid decline of this excellent German cavalry through nugatory and damaging drudgery and ignorance of best practise and essential maintenance.

The von Low Regiment and the first battalion of the von Rechten set off from Königsberg on 12 August with some other troops from the garrison, because an enemy corps was about to raid against Biala from Bialystock. They advanced as far as Arys [Orzysz, 20 miles west of Lyck] and, as there was no enemy there, returned to the city after 12 days, only to follow the main army shortly afterwards.

The first battalion of the von Rechten Regiment stationed in Königsberg set out on 26 August for Tilsit, where they arrived on 28 August and were joined by the second battalion, formerly stationed in Pillau, on 4 September. They then marched up the Memel to Kovno, crossed the river on 9

2 This consisted of two battalions of French *Garde*, one battalion of Poles, two battalions of Westphalians (8. *Infanterie Regiment*) and one battalion of Saxons (the first battalion of the von Rechten Regiment).

3 The few who returned from the Prinz Johann Regiment still remember with heartfelt appreciation the truly comradely relationship they had with the brave men from Baden.

September and camped on the far side.

Regular resupply for the force ceased at Tilsit. Although the French governor of Kovno had confiscated all supplies from the Jews and others, he declared bluntly that nothing could be issued to the arriving troops from the magazines, but that the Saxon regiments were free to forage in the surrounding area, just as the army detachments that had passed through earlier had done, although this area already resembled a wilderness.

The results would show how disastrous this system of robbery could be for the country and at the same time for the troops.⁴

The von Low Regiment received orders to escort the Imperial treasury, which was carried in more than 20 wagons, from Königsberg. They set out from there on 31 August, arrived in Tilsit on 3 September, and crossed the Neman near Kovno on 6 September. This town already bore all the signs of war, and a permanent camp had been built close by because of the large number of troops passing through. The von Low Regiment continued their march via Rumszysky [Rumšiškės, 15 miles south-east of Kovno], Zhizhmory [Žiezmariai] and Jewie [Vievis] to Vilna, where they arrived on 11 September.

The von Rechten Regiment left Kovno after a rest day on 11 September and arrived in Vilna on 14 September by the same route. Several Polish regiments were formed with incredible speed here, where the appointed provisional government was working on a constitution for conquered Polish Lithuania that would meet French interests. One of these regiments joined the von Low regiment on 13 September and reached Smolensk with them (via Minsk, Borisov and Orsha) on 1 October. The von Rechten Regiment, in contrast, left Vilna on 16 September, arrived at Minsk on 21 September, at Borisov on 24 September, at Orsha on 29 September, and entered Smolensk on 5 October.

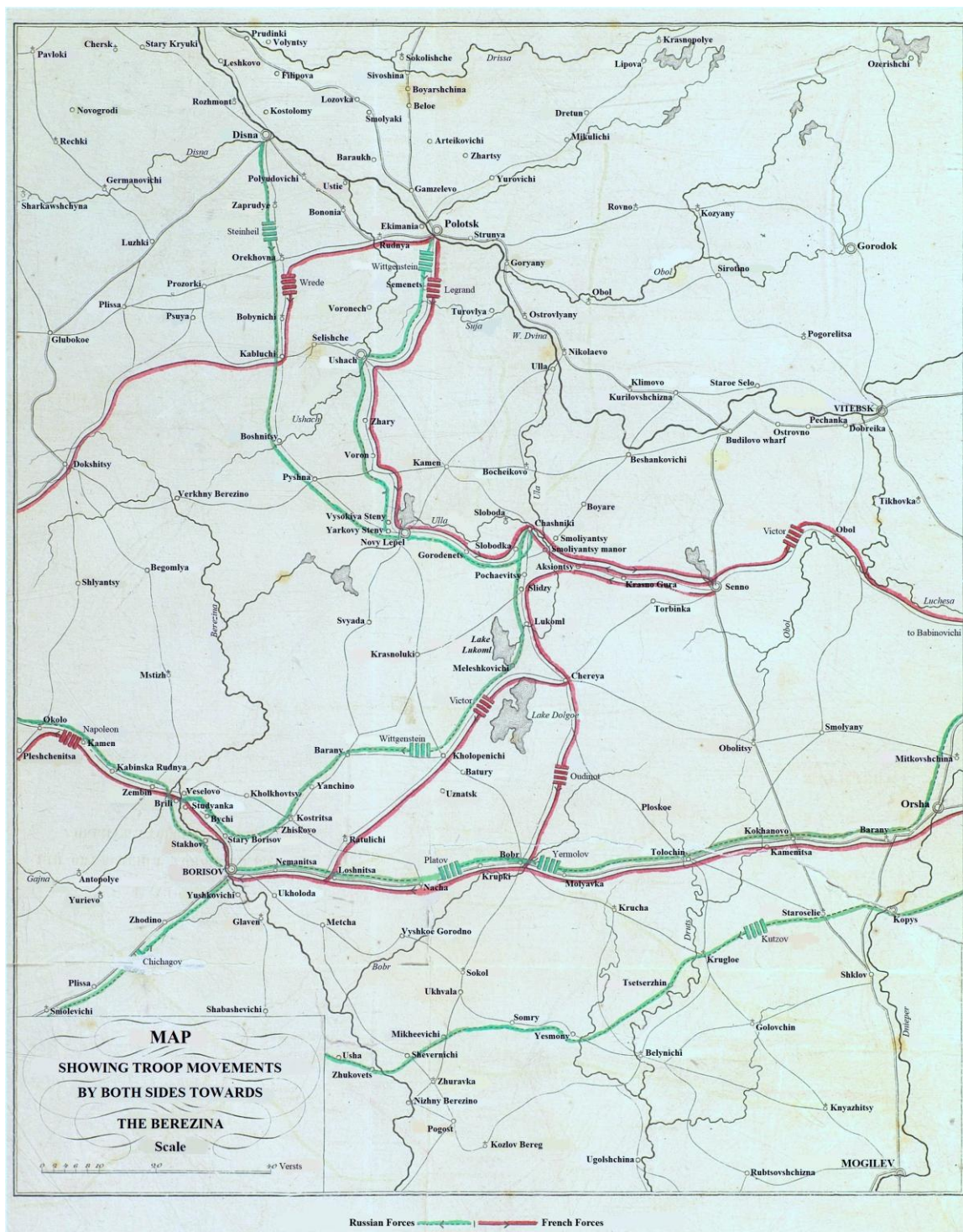
Here *9^e Corps*, made up of several combat units, some of which were present, some of which were expected, was to be activated under the command of Marshal Victor; the von Low and von Rechten Regiments therefore moved into cantonment quartering;⁵ they were united on 10 October into a brigade under the French General Devilliers, and this was assigned to Girard's division of *9^e Corps*, which, about 25,000 men strong, was quartered in and around Smolensk.⁶ The Prinz Johann Regiment was stationed on the secondary road to Moscow in Dolgomostye and Putyatino with the majority of the light cavalry division; the Hessen-Darmstadt light cavalry regiment was stationed on the main road to Moscow, while the Baden hussar regiment was stationed near Mstislav along with an infantry division in order to shield the right flank.

4 The following fact stands as proof of the unscrupulousness and shameful self-interest of the French provisioning authorities.

When the von Low Regiment marched through Kovno a few days later, they were also refused rations, a magazine official informed the colonel of the regiment that the magazines were still sufficiently stocked with everything he needed and that he could, for an immediate cash payment, receive everything he needed by way of fodder, grain, flour, rice and other dried vegetables, smoked and fresh meat, wine, liqueurs, rum, brandy and so on. *Oberst* von Jeschky expressed his righteous indignation and threatened to report the matter to the governor, but was assured that the complaint would be ignored and that he would do well to stock up on some provisions, as his predecessors had done, since regular ration resupply was now completely discontinued.

5 Each of the two regiments, von Rechten and von Low, after deducting the detached and sick, numbered at this time about 40 officers and between 1,100 and 1,200 non-commissioned officers and privates.

6 This corps, excluding Fournier's light cavalry division, consisted of three infantry divisions: Daendels' division of contingents from Baden and Berg; Partouneaux's division of French troops; Girard's division with a brigade each of Poles and Saxons.



Smolensk, now an enormous burned-out shell, brought ruin to the exhausted soldiers instead of rest. The air was polluted by whole heaps of unburied victims of the stubborn fighting on 16 and 17 August and this, together with the after-effects of the earlier hardships, irregular resupply and cold nights, produced typhus and filled the hospitals.⁷ The regiments were allowed to search for food at

⁷ The sick, however, found it more advisable to remain with their battalions, even without care, rather than go to a French hospital, which, given the unscrupulousness with which most of them were administered, were considered open graves. One eyewitness reported: 'The sick mostly rested on bare floors, without straw or blankets, wrapped only in their shabby coats. Days went by without a doctor asking about them, and then they were often only given platitudes instead of medicine or other tonics. For days the dead lay beside their former comrades in arms, who envied those wretches. I myself found corpses lying on the stairs and in the vestibule of a house assigned for sick

will in the nearby, mostly completely deserted, villages. Groups of 30 to 40 men were sent out for this purpose, and they were often only able to obtain the bare necessities by force. The inhabitants, who had fled into the neighbouring forests, observed a kind of military security, and their outposts usually called for support with loud shouts when they felt threatened by the approaching troops. If it seemed possible to overpower the invaders by assault, they would advance boldly in gangs; otherwise, they would withdraw slowly, in order to give the women and children time to round up the scattered cattle that were grazing and then hide with them and the rest of their belongings in the interior of the forest. Even if no violence was committed, negotiations were usually necessary in order to procure anything from them.

The Saxon brigade, which had been stationed in the city until then, on 10 September, moved to the suburb between the Dnieper and the Krasny road, near the Holy Field. While the greater part of 9^e Corps remained in its quiet positions around Smolensk until 20 October. On 11 October, Daendels' infantry division and the Saxon Prinz Johann cavalry regiment set out from Smolensk and marched north to Babinovichi (on the Orsha-Vitebsk road) via Krasny and Dubrowna, where they positioned themselves facing Senno and the Düna [Dvina or Daugava] - probably in order to link up with the French 2^e Corps now commanded by Saint-Cyr at Polotsk.

The Prinz Johann regiment was pushed further forward and advanced along the river Obol to Obol-Alexandrovo [21 miles north-west of Babinovichi], Oszmirsza and Leontinovo. Their patrols went as far as Vitebsk and the Düna. On 24 October, the regiment took up quarters between Senno and Vitebsk, where they rested on 25 October; on 26 October they moved toward Senno, but on 27 October they went to Vitebsk, which was occupied by troops from Baden and was the divisional headquarters of General Daendels and Graf Hochberg.

In order to put a stop to the onward advance by Wittgenstein's enemy corps, Marshal Victor and the rest of his force finally set out from Smolensk on 21 October to race to the aid of those who had already been forced to leave Polotsk and the Düna in the fighting from 18 to 20 October. They marched via Krasny and Orsha, turned towards Polotsk from there, passing the towns of Smolyany and Senno on 28 October, in the direction of Krasno Gura, to Zamoszcze [eight miles west of Senno] and advanced the next day to the village of Smoliyantsy, near Chashniki on the Ulla. Partouneaux's infantry division, which had been stationed to cover the right flank at Mstislav with the Baden hussars, had already rejoined 9^e Corps at Orsha on 25 October.

On 28 October, Daendel's infantry and the Saxon cavalry regiment marched from Vitebsk to the area of Ostrovno, and on 29 October to beyond Beshankovichi - the latter was near Piezikowo [Bocheikovo?].

Thus, the link up of 9^e Corps with 2^e Corps, which had turned eastwards from its position at Lepel towards Chashniki, was completed on 30 October behind the Ulla. Marshal Victor temporarily took on the overall command of both corps, as the wounded Marshal Saint-Cyr had left his.

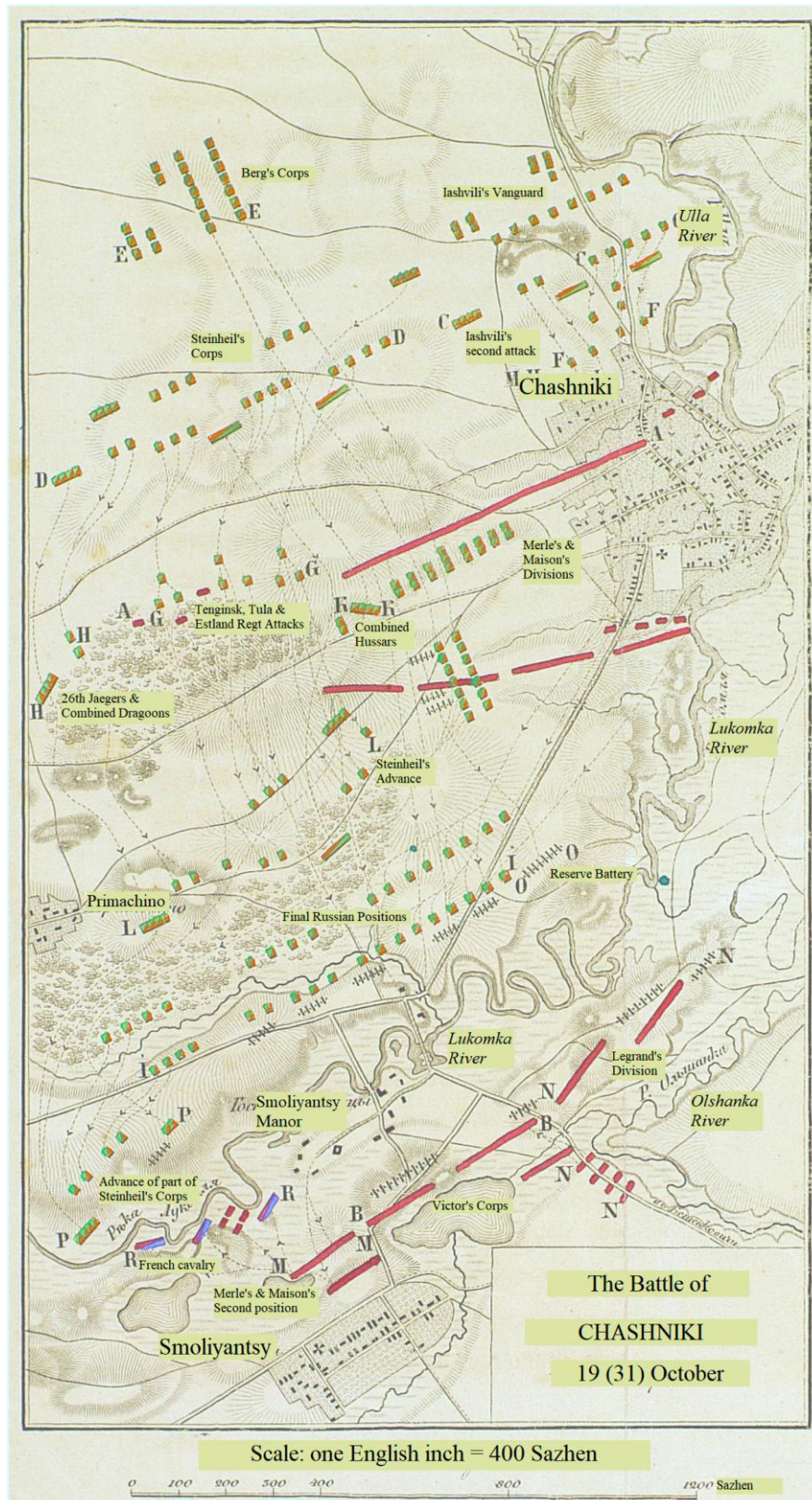
The enemy vanguard of Wittgenstein's corps appeared as early as the afternoon of 30 October, behind a wood at half cannon range from the front of the French position. That same day, 9^e Corps crossed the Lukomka stream and formed up behind the river Ulla with its right wing facing Chashniki, which was occupied by Polish units from Girard's division, while its left wing was in closed columns of battalions next to each other in the direction of Lepel.

All remained quiet on both sides that day, while 9^e Corps remained in the positions they had taken up in the afternoon. Relatively strong outposts were established but were not disturbed during the night. However, on the morning of 31 October, between six and seven o'clock, the Russians

soldiers from the regiment.'

advanced against the positions on our side and opened the battle with a cannonade, to which the French soon responded very vigorously. The enemy fire was initially primarily directed at the left wing of the French position, but soon also the centre and eventually even the right wing, on which the Saxon infantry brigade was positioned in closed columns.

The enemy advanced through Chashniki, which was held by the Poles and was in flames. The



majority of units endured under cannon fire until about nine o'clock, but at this time the centre of the French position began to make slow backward movements, with which the right wing proceeded in unison. The Cossacks, who were swarming around the right wing, were opposed by infantry skirmishers, and under their protection this wing, after the centre had already largely given way, retreated closer to the Lukomka.⁸ The wooden bridge over the river at our backs was threatened because numerous enemy artillery, protected by jägers, suddenly followed the retreat up and began to fire on it. The Russian jägers were opposed by skirmishers from the von Rechten regiment and individual Polish sub-units, under whose protection the right wing, at about one o'clock in the

afternoon, crossed the Lukomka river and repositioned themselves on the near side. But it seemed nobody wanted to hold this position either; the centre and the French left wing had again retreated further - in an eastwards direction - while the right, in which the Saxon brigade, still formed in two columns, was used to protect a French battery, followed this movement, but tried to hold the road to Senno. This wing moved past the village of Smoliyantsy at about five o'clock in the evening and took up positions behind it for the last time. Smoliyantsy and several other villages now forwards of the line, and to which the French had brought most of their wounded, were in flames, and it was seen that, in spite of the most anxious efforts to save themselves, many of these unfortunates fell victim to the conflagration. Suddenly a line of cavalry approached the right flank; the Saxon columns quickly formed square, awaiting the enemy, and only now recognised their own countrymen, the Prinz Johann Regiment, which, with the rest of the cavalry division, having been stationed closer to Vitebsk, had set out on a forced march in order to take part in the battle. It was the first cavalry regiment to arrive on the battlefield yet without being able to take part in this action.

The falling darkness put an end to the fighting and allowed the united French corps to retreat unmolested towards Senno, where Marshal Victor had set up his headquarters. It would probably seem strange to any uninitiated person that the aforementioned marshal, whose combined two corps (2^e Corps and 9^e Corps) must at least have been significantly stronger in numbers than the enemy's, had abandoned the field after a minor clash. Moreover, Napoleon's enforced retreat from Moscow could not have been unknown to him, since rumours about it had already spread among the troops and it was therefore all the more incumbent upon him to drive back and to distance themselves from Wittgenstein's corps at all costs, who threatened the line of retreat of the half-destroyed main army so strongly.

The Saxon von Rechten Regiment had eight dead and 11 wounded, among them *Leutnant* von Koppenfels, who had defended himself bravely and for a long time during the retreat with his skirmishers in front of the bridge against the advancing superior enemy force. The von Low Regiment lost *Hauptmann* von Hausen and had 40 dead or wounded.

General Girard expressed his satisfaction to the division in a special order of the day and particularly praised the Saxon and Polish artillery.⁹

The loss of men to disease began to become more significant. The prolonged marches, the ever-more-frequent shortages, the severe night frosts and bivouacs on bare ground had a destructive effect on even the strongest of constitutions, and so long as any of these exhausted men could simply drag themselves along, they followed their regiment out of revulsion for the hospitals. Due to the lack of transport resources, it became obligatory to abandon the wounded as well as the dead, and every morning there were the dead who had passed during the night and the dying who had to

8 For lack of a general overview, we can only specifically speak about the Saxons who formed this wing.

9 However, the Saxons had just two Prussian three-pounder cannon, which had been allocated to the von Rechten Regiment in Danzig, but which were operated by Saxon artillerymen under *Leutnant* Dietrich and were drawn by Saxon horses. Apart from these two cannon and a three-pound battery of six pieces which the Poles had with them, there were no other guns in Girard's division.

stay behind with them.

At the end of the fighting on 31 October, the cavalry of 9^e Corps took up positions on the road to Senno in front of the corps setting off towards Krasno Gura at three o'clock in the morning on 1 November, where they camped about six hours march from Senno, without being harassed in the least by the Russians. The cavalry made a forward movement in the morning in order to shield this retreat, followed the corps around midday and camped in front of them, near the village of Slobodka. The Baden hussar regiment formed the rear guard and skirmished with enemy patrols. Marshal Victor, concerned about his right flank, ordered the tasking of a patrol to Beshankovich that night, but found no enemy there.

On 2 November, Victor's corps continued its march towards Senno, where the French 2^e Corps was also stationed, but all the trains were directed towards Orsha and were to be sent from there towards Minsk.¹⁰

Fournier's cavalry division followed the corps and positioned itself at Krasno Gura; the Saxon Prinz Johann Regiment had led the rearguard until then and remained at this location together with the Baden hussars; the other two regiments, however, were sent to one side and made all necessary security arrangements.

On 3 November the enemy appeared in front of Krasno Gura stronger than ever with cavalry (the Grodno Hussars). The two German cavalry regiments stationed in this place and a mixed command under Major Dietz from Baden advanced to meet the enemy, but only insignificant skirmishes resulted. The enemy did not attempt any further attacks; the cavalry division remained at the above-mentioned location on 4 November, while the remainder of 9^e Corps, after a rest-day, continued their march from Senno towards Minsk. Girard's infantry division set out from the Senno area on the afternoon of 4 November, camped near the village of Kholivoly, and on 5 November moved to Torbinka, where it arrived in the afternoon and remained until 8 November. The road was so bad that the division took eight to nine hours to complete a three-hour march.

On 5 November, Fournier's light cavalry division, leaving the Baden hussar regiment behind, also moved from Krasno Gura to Lukoml and was separated into two parts by the narrow and shallow Lukomka stream, whose steep banks only allowed crossings here and there.

Before dawn on 6 November, the Duty Field Officer, the Saxon Major Zirkel, was given orders to conduct a reconnaissance of the road to Chashniki with about 50 horsemen from the outposts. After a march of three quarters of an hour, the vanguard approached a wood in which Cossacks were seen and behind them a column of cavalry, soon after descending from the high ground at a trot. The skirmishing began and the major immediately informed *général de division* Fournier of this contact, and soon afterwards informed him that more and more enemy cavalry (cuirassiers and dragoons) were becoming visible and that he was therefore falling back gradually. Under heavy pressure from the front and on both flanks, Major Zirkel soon found himself forced to accelerate his retreat and informed the general with a third message; but by this time he was close to reaching the town. The shooting and trumpets sounding the alarm quickly set the cavalry there in motion; but some of them, tempted by the chance of a fight, raced towards the enemy in ones and twos instead of hurrying to the assigned rendezvous point behind the town on the road to Chereya. Despite their bold courage, most of them fell into enemy hands, as they crossed the river on either side, being cut off and overpowered by them.

The greater part of the division had meanwhile assembled at the emergency rendezvous and were advancing towards the river. The enemy gave way to this superior cavalry, leaving behind about 20

10 The two Prussian three-pounder cannon that had been allocated to the Saxon von Rechten Regiment in Danzig had been shot to pieces in the fighting on 31 October and their Saxon artillerymen crews had to join the transport service under Lieutenant Dietrich, along with the empty ammunition wagons.

prisoners and several captured horses, but were not pursued.

The Saxon Prinz Johann Regiment lost 15 men and 19 horses in this battle, and *leutnants* von Planitz and von Bose were wounded.

The cavalry division remained under arms throughout the day and then, after having convinced themselves through reconnaissance in every direction that the enemy had completely gone away, camped outside the town. Each regiment was now given responsibility for securing the frontage nearest to it in camp. The Prinz Johann Regiment secured the left flank and linked up with the *lanciers de Berg* on the right.

At nine o'clock in the morning on 7 November, as the regiments from Fournier's cavalry division stationed at Lukoml wanted to return to their bivouacs from their stand-to positions, where they always formed up two hours before daybreak, the enemy approached with eight squadrons, two battalions and two guns along the same route as the day before.

The division immediately moved to the right bank of the Lukomka, towards the Chereya road, leaving skirmishers on the left bank, where the flankers, some of whom also had to deal with infantry skirmishers, held their ground and eventually gave way gradually to them on this side of the town. *Leutnant* von Otto of the Prinz Johann Regiment, leading one such skirmishing troop, particularly distinguished himself through the tenacity with which he stubbornly resisted the far superior enemy even when his troop had fired off all their cartridges. The two enemy cannon inflicted some casualties on the *lanciers de Berg*; they lost several men and an officer. One man from the Saxon Prinz Johann Regiment was killed and *Leutnant* von Altrock was wounded. During this action, infantry from 9^e Corps (probably from Daendel's division) arrived with two Baden cannon, having been sent up towards Lukoml following General Fournier's report the previous evening. The latter, in good fire positions and shielded by the terrain, inflicted considerable losses on the enemy. Their fire and the advance by the infantry suddenly forced the enemy to retreat; they were pursued only as far as the far side of the town. The next day [8 November], Fournier's cavalry took up quarters in Lukoml together with the infantry that had come up to support them and remained undisturbed until 11 November without suffering any particular shortages.

Girard's infantry division (including the two Saxon regiments) marched to Chereya on 8 November and rested there on 9 and 10 November.

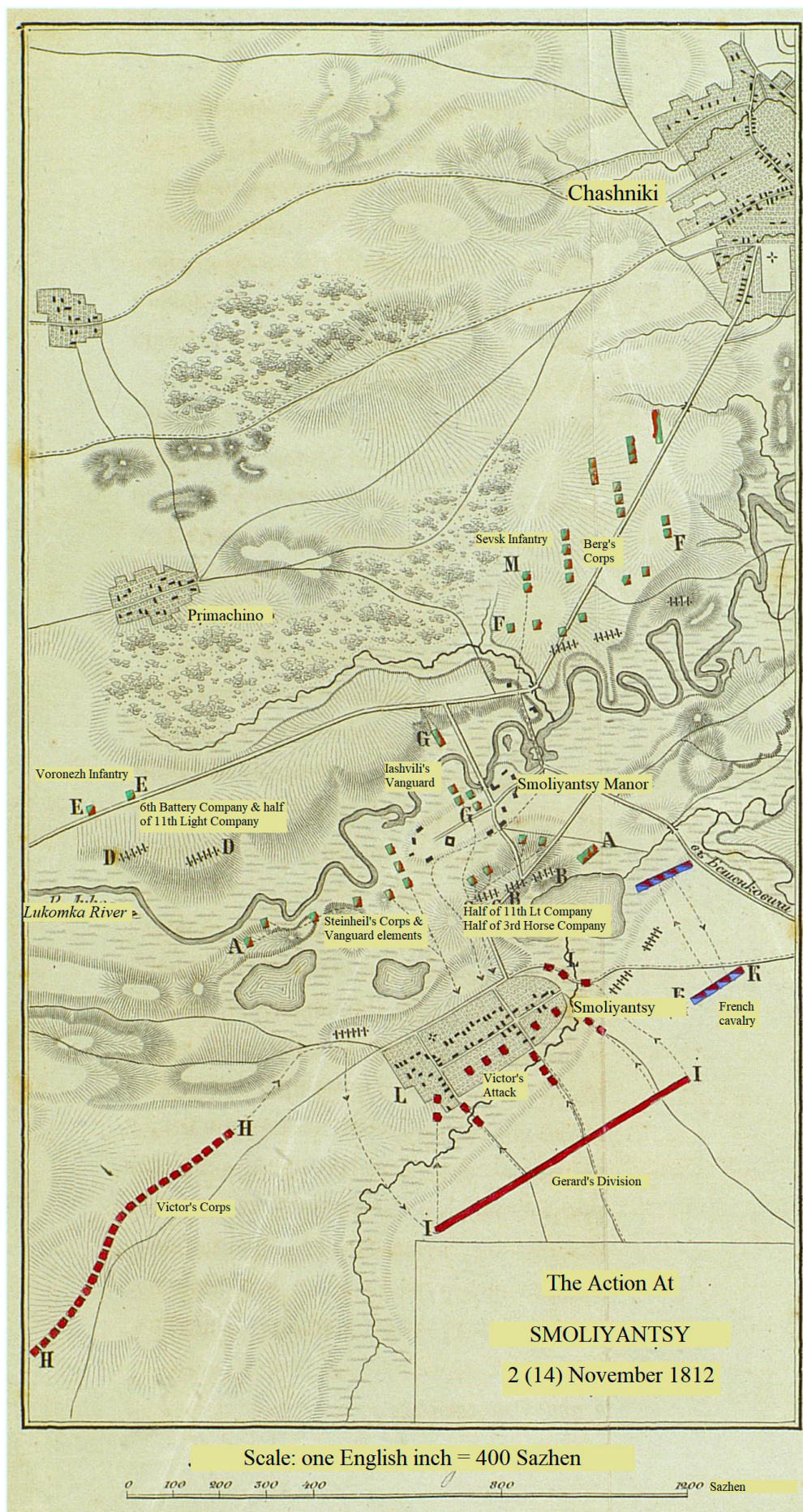
On 11 November, the infantry of 9^e Corps moved towards Lukoml, for a coordinated march the following day towards Chashniki and the enemy army once more. The two Saxon infantry regiments with Girard's division, however, had already camped near the village of Starnevitse, after having marched about an hour.

Marshal Victor arrived in Lukoml that day, along with several infantry and artillery units.

On 12 November, 9^e Corps set off from the Lukoml area towards Chashniki. The Saxon Prinz Johann Regiment and the Baden hussars, which, as mentioned earlier, constituted the 31^e *brigade de cavalerie légère*, formed the vanguard, while the other two cavalry regiments of Fournier's division (30^e *brigade de cavalerie légère*) commanded by General Delaitre) remained in Lukoml.

Girard's infantry division, leaving Lukoml to the left, marched toward the village of Smoliyantsy.

Both of the above-mentioned regiments in the vanguard were on their march near the village of Slobodka [2½ miles north-west of Lukoml] when the enemy were seen at a range of several thousand paces. General Fournier, having nothing better to do, advanced at a trot with these two regiments until he was within range of the enemy guns, and sent the reserve troops forward as skirmishers, forming the rest up in two waves. Given the lack of support, this reckless deployment



could not go unpunished. The newcomers were greeted by effective artillery fire, and soon Colonel Cancrri of the Baden hussars, along with several men and horses from both regiments, fell victim to the impertinence of their divisional commander. The soldiers showed commendable fortitude under effective enemy fire, and now, from our side, artillery and infantry hurried to the scene as quickly as possible; the former took up positions on high ground to the left to return the enemy fire, while the infantry skirmishers cleared the entrances to the scrub to their front. The enemy fell back and after dark, 9^e Corps camped near the village of Slobodka.

During the morning hours of 13 November, the corps advanced further towards Chashniki, during which the infantry pursued the advantage they had gained the previous day in the surrounding scrub and had the good fortune to push the enemy back beyond it. The cavalry followed, but exposed themselves to the enemy as little as possible. In the afternoon, Delaitre's brigade, which had remained behind in Lukoml, joined forces with the two cavalry regiments of the vanguard. The latter had managed to depart from Lukoml unchallenged in the face of the Cossacks.

The corps, which made only meagre advances that day, camped during the night near a village to the left of Smoliyantsy, which was still occupied by the Russians.

It was bitterly cold.

9^e Corps stood to arms before sunrise on 14 November. Girard's division, formed into columns by brigade, prepared to attack the very advantageous enemy position near the village of Smoliyantsy and advanced as soon as it became light. The Saxon infantry brigade¹¹ had Smoliyantsy on its right; to the right of this brigade was the Polish Brigade, also part of Girard's division, and further away at some distance were the other divisions, in deep columns.

At eight o'clock in the morning the fighting on the French right wing became very intense. The column of the Saxon brigade, headed by the von Rechten Regiment, was behind a battery facing the enemy right wing, and was exposed to heavy shellfire from the village of Smoliyantsy, which wounded *Oberst* Bose of the von Rechten Regiment and killed or injured several men. They marched, at full interval, to the right as the Russian left wing gave ground towards midday, and reached the far corner of the village in a wide arc. Here the brigade deployed into line; Saxon and Polish skirmishers attacked the village from different directions. The musketry became very intense and even reached the brigade in line. Two Polish companies of *voltigeurs*, standing to the right of the Saxons, advanced to storm the unfortified but strongly manned location, which was protected by natural obstacles, but had to fall back under withering fire without having quite reached it. The first company and then the entire von Rechten first battalion supported them in repeated attempts, but without success. The attackers then gained a foothold in the village and had taken possession of the first houses, but were driven out again by the returning, reinforced garrison after bitter fighting. The Saxons and Poles thus attacked the Russians five times, who were concealed in sunken roads and buildings, suffering heavy losses before they managed to take the place.

The enemy battery on the high ground beyond the village and the danger of being enveloped on the left flank, however, hindered any further advance at this point. Meanwhile the Russians had strengthened themselves, and under the protection of their artillery they advanced towards the burning village once more, forcing the very weakened Poles and Saxons to abandon part of it; the remainder was held until nightfall, when 9^e Corps withdrew.

The von Rechten battalion had expended not only the ammunition in their pouches, but also additional ammunition that had to be repeatedly passed up to the men. Towards evening the remainder of the battalion was relieved by Frenchmen and were led back to the brigade. Five of the officers had been wounded (*Oberst* von Bose, *Hauptleutnant* Angermann, *Hauptleutnant* von

11 The battalions had, in some cases, already been reduced to 200 privates.

Beulwitz, *Leutnant* von Hak and *Leutnant* von Könnemann, all of whom died from their wounds, except *Oberst* von Bose) and about 90 men killed or wounded.¹²

The Prinz Johann Regiment, with the rest of the light cavalry division, had camped during the very cold early hours of 14 November in the scrub on the right flank of the corps. On the morning of 14 November, they advanced and, under Russian artillery fire, rounded the corner of the scrub on the right, and found the infantry skirmishers from our side coming under heavy enemy pressure. Their arrival gave them the upper hand once more. The cavalry, protected by high ground to their front, formed two waves on the right wing of the corps, where the infantry fighting and artillery fire was very heavy. Opposite them stood several enemy cavalry regiments, which initially made moves as if to attack, but later retreated further and reformed into several columns. The enemy batteries successfully fired at the cavalry on our side; the Saxon regiment suffered considerable losses, the *lanciers de Berg* lost even more.

In the afternoon, Daendel's infantry division withdrew to the right of the cavalry; reinforced by the Hessian Dragoon Regiment, they crossed the minor Svecha stream flowing past the enemy right and left flanks, and took up positions on the far bank, threatening the aforementioned flank. A movement that caused this wing to retreat towards high ground behind them, towards the centre.

Night brought an end to the fierce fighting that had been raging at all points. Girard's infantry division left its positions at Smoliyantsy at seven o'clock in the evening, moved to the right and, after an hour's march, assembled with the rest of the corps at a village in that direction, on the far side of the minor stream, in order to camp there.

At daybreak on 15 November, 9^e Corps advanced towards the village of Smoliyantsy once more and formed up in columns, almost in the same place they had occupied the previous day, only a little further back. When the thick fog eventually lifted, the enemy army could be seen, also drawn up in battle formation, facing them at barely half cannon range. Both parties remained like this throughout the morning without attacking each other, until finally, towards midday, Marshal Victor gave the order to withdraw,¹³ which was carried out at about one o'clock, without being hindered or disturbed by the enemy close by. The corps gradually withdrew, and Girard's division, after marching continuously until late into the evening, camped near the village of Rotna (which lies two hours from Lukoml and about three hours from Chereya).

Fournier's cavalry division was placed on a rise to cover the retreat from Smoliyantsy, and the Hessen regiment was placed on the right flank; they skirmished with the enemy vanguard, then followed the corps and camped, late at night, in front of Trogonovitse. At the beginning of this retreat, Colonel Duchateau, who had returned from the imperial *quartier général*, undertook a reconnaissance against the enemy right wing with the second battalion of the Saxon von Low Regiment and a troop of *lanciers de Berg*. After a brief skirmish with a Cossack outpost, the objective appeared to have been achieved, because the colonel retreated through a dense forest towards the corps' line of retreat, from which this detachment had moved about an hour's march to the left before encountering the Cossacks. They tried to create every possible obstacle for the enemy - should they be following the corps - and to burn every bridge, but this was of little use as the waterways were already covered with ice. The rearguard was involved in several small skirmishes on this occasion; the Russians, however, contented themselves with feints.

12 The regimental surgeon, Matheis, and the battalion surgeon, Gasch, mindless of the danger, tried to assist the wounded until late at night, but due to a lack of transport, officers and privates had to be left to their fate. The von Low Regiment had also suffered from the enemy artillery fire.

13 Colonel Duchateau, Marshal Victor's Chief of Staff, had returned from a mission to Napoleon during the night of 14 to 15 November and is said to have delivered the Emperor's order to call off any further advance on Chashniki and to withdraw to the Smolensk to Vilna highway in order to protect the main army returning along it. According to his account, Napoleon had already passed Smolensk.

On 16 November, the cavalry division marched across the battlefield from 12 November and took the road left towards Krasno Gura, where Marshal Victor had set up his headquarters. The Hessen regiment was sent to escort a convoy of wagons, while the other three camped at Toliechebo from 16 to 17 November, an hour from Krasno Gura, in the direction of Vitebsk.¹⁴ The corps was in retreat, the enemy were already behind them; Girard's division, isolated from the main body, took the lead. They did not set off until the afternoon and moved in the direction of Senno. The ice made the ground treacherous, and the artillery hindered the march and made it troublesome. On the way, the vanguard encountered a troop of Cossacks, who, however, immediately withdrew. They marched throughout the night of 17 November, when Girard's division eventually made camp near the village of Prushch at five o'clock in the morning and remained there on 18 and 19 November.¹⁵ A significant number of men, given the weakness of the battalions at that time, had fallen behind due to exhaustion.

The Cavalry Division did not leave Toliechebo until the evening of 17 November, but then marched an hour further, towards Vitebsk, to the village of Pribitk. Camus' infantry brigade (from Partouneaux's division) reached Fournier's division that evening; part of it remained in Toliechebo, the rest proceeded to Pribitk.

On 18 November, the cavalry division, together with the infantry, advanced to Kagnova. The latter camped outside the village; the cavalry and the General Staff occupied the houses.

The proximity of the enemy increased the alert state; the horses were always saddled, one company from each regiment was kept ready on the stand-to positions, and strong field pickets were posted.

On 20 November, the cavalry division moved toward Chereya. The *lancier de Berg* Regiment was also sent from there to the right in order to rejoin the Hessen Regiment under General Delaitre, which had accompanied Girard's infantry division forwards from Krasno Gura.

Girard's infantry division, having camped near the village of Prushch on 18 and 19 November, also turned towards Chereya on 20 November, where the entire corps assembled on 21 November. For the first time in quite some time, some bread was distributed to the troops.

The cavalry and infantry now, jointly, held the following outposts:

The Saxon *Oberst* von Raysky went to Belaya Tserkov [two miles north-east of Chereya] on the main road to Chashniki with two squadrons from the Prinz Johann Regiment and a battalion of Berg infantry.

Général de division Fournier went to Stegavitse [Strazhevichi?, four miles north of Chereya] - the main outpost on the left - with the Baden Hussar Regiment and a battalion of Baden infantry.

Between these outposts, one and a half hours apart, the Saxon Major von Lindeman was to be stationed with his squadron and a company of Berg infantry in Konstantinovo [3½ miles north of Chereya]. However, since this location was incorrectly assigned and was located behind the outpost at Stegavitse, this troop moved to the latter location on the orders of the *général de division*.

On 22 November, Major von Lindeman's Saxon squadron patrolled from Stegavitse to the outpost at Belaya Tserkov, went beyond there and positioned themselves in front of a village lying between these two locations. They soon noticed enemy cavalry outposts, in a tree line on that side, and on a hill behind it, and later whole troops. The former remained passive, but the latter moved towards the Belaya Tserkov outpost, attacked their field picket, which was posted between two lakes, in superior

14 A fire broke out due to negligence in one of the stables of the Prinz Johann Regiment during the night, and seven horses were burned to death. The division, which had been called out due to the fire alarm, was obliged to remain at the rendezvous point until broad daylight on the orders of the enraged *général de division*.

15 The division was following the corps, which had already marched off early, and had to make this night march in order to complete it.

numbers and pushed them back towards Chereya. The Saxon squadron under Major von Lindeman, following orders, withdrew to Stegavitse and onwards with the outpost stationed there towards Chereya, which was occupied by the Prinz Johann Regiment and Berg infantry.

The rest of the corps, meanwhile at around noon, had marched off along the road to Borisov and, escorted only at a distance by Cossacks, arrived at Kholopenichi.

On 23 November, Girard's infantry division marched to Bresk, just four hours away. Partouneaux's division (probably in conjunction with Delaitre's cavalry brigade) had a negative clash with Cossacks on the way.¹⁶

The Saxon Prinz Johann Regiment and the Baden Hussar Regiment from Fournier's cavalry division continued their retreat to Dokushchin, where they camped together with Daendel's infantry. Delaitre's cavalry brigade had been deployed once more. At midday, a commotion suddenly arose here due to Cossacks and Bashkirs who had charged at the scattered wagons belonging to 2^e Corps (under Oudinot). The Hussar Regiment raced there, swiftly counterattacked, and took about 17 men and as many horses from them.

The miserable fate of the main army was now becoming better known to 9^e Corps. Girard's infantry division had to hand over three quarters of its artillery to the latter.

On 24 November, this corps continued its march. Girard's division camped at Klon. The cavalry division finally reunited on the retreat in the evening. The Prinz Johann Regiment, consisting of only two squadrons, joined the *lanciers de Berg* in front of a forest, to the left of the road, having enemy cavalry on their right wing on a hill opposite them, while the last columns of infantry, to which the Hessen cavalry regiment had been assigned, were pursued closely and were hurrying back to the road from the opposite direction. A squadron and a half of the Prinz Johann Regiment were sent from the left flank to support these infantry columns. They lost several horses under heavy fire from enemy artillery, while the guns on our side responded vigorously - but the retreat would have been difficult even under better circumstances, as the Russians had not only the advantage of the ground, but also of numbers. Nevertheless, they called off the pursuit of the exhausted, weary troops of 9^e Corps at the forest mentioned above, and allowed them to move on and rest undisturbed.

On 25 November, the corps marched towards Loshnitsa and camped in a village about a quarter of an hour from the main road from Smolensk to Borisov and Minsk.

The cavalry division had set out at daybreak in order to shield the retreat. The third squadron of the Saxon regiment, under Major von Lindeman, together with some infantry, formed the rearguard and the latter positioned themselves in a village to face the advancing enemy. A platoon of Saxon cavalry, under *Hauptmann* von Schulz, remained behind in forwards of the town, and Major von Lindeman marched with his squadron to the side, formed into two troops and one rank. The captain's platoon retreated slowly, skirmishing. The Cossacks advanced ever more determinedly towards the village but were counterattacked by the aforementioned squadron at a trot, thrown back and severely beaten. But the rage of the riders drew them too far from the infantry that had been deployed to support them, and they lost several men whose poor horses had slipped and fallen on the snow- and ice-covered ground. But now the column had some peace, and the Cossacks were content to follow them. But when the Saxon squadron was relieved after a halt by the division by a mixed troop under *Oberstleutnant* Wolfersdorff of the Berg cavalry, the enemy again advanced stronger than before, such that the division had to march up and show themselves, whereupon the

16 [The Russian Major General Vlastov reported to Count Wittgenstein that on 23 November the Combined Hussar Regiment, commanded by Colonel Gerngross, with the assistance of Loshchilin's Cossacks and Panteleev's Cossacks, drove off the 2^e *régiment cheval-légers de Berg*, broke a square of the 126^e *régiment d'infanterie de ligne*, killing some 200 men and capturing 27 officers and more than 300 lower ranks].

Russian vanguard fell back.

On 26 November, 9^e Corps withdrew from the Loshnitsa area and, on their march to Borisov, joined the Smolensk to Minsk highway, which was crowded with the sad remains of the main army that had until recently been so magnificent and awe-inspiring. How terrifying this sight must have been for the soldiers of 9^e Corps, which, although considerably reduced in number, were still in perfect order, and were now seeing thousands, completely lost from this, passing by in wild disarray and as visions of misery. The pale figures, almost consumed by hunger, wandered along the road in the most bizarre clothing, mostly unarmed, gathered in haphazard groups and following only the instinct for self-preservation, and saw in the still closed ranks of this corps a much longed for protective wall against the relentless attacks and abuse from the Cossacks. In fact, it was only after a halt of several hours that 9^e Corps proceeded with the column, which was still far from finished, and thus formed the rearguard against Wittgenstein's Corps, which had been following their movements.

Fournier's light cavalry division was immediately assigned to Marshal Davout's corps in order to form a rearguard for the remnants of the main army.

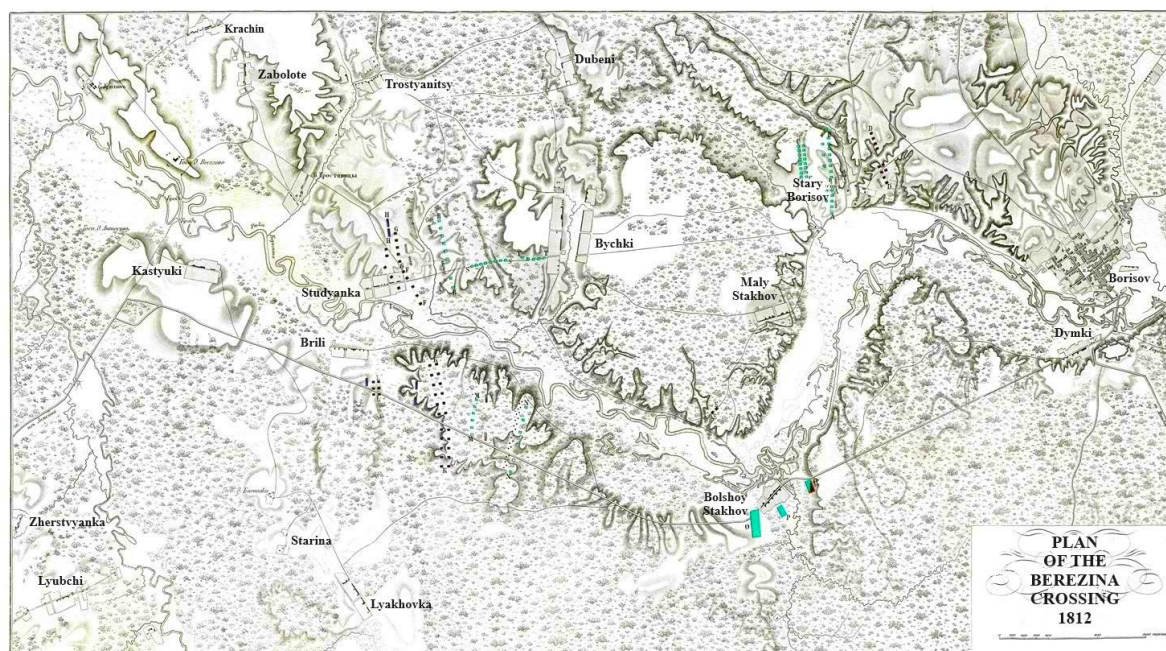
On the evening of that day, once 9^e Corps had moved into bivouacs near Borisov, a fierce cannonade began a short distance forward of their lines, and equally heavy musketry soon after, which continued until late into the night. The day before, Napoleon had assembled his corps on the high ground at Borisov and had done everything he could to deceive Chichagov's opposing army with regard to the crossing point. Because the crossing point at Borisov seemed too dangerous to him, being within sight of the Russians, where the enemy had burned the bridge over the Berezina which had originally been built by the French, he led the assembled troops that day a few hours upstream on the Berezina, and here, by means of two bridges built near the village of Veselovo, had 2^e Corps cross this river and drive back the enemy detachment stationed on the far bank.

Marshal Victor was therefore instructed to advance from Borisov that day with 9^e Corps in order to distract General Wittgenstein (who was still on the left bank of the Berezina) from the crossing point and to prevent him from linking up with General Chichagov via Borisov.

On 27 November, Marshal Victor's corps marched away from Borisov, leaving Partouneaux's infantry division behind. As the corps' rearguard, the latter were not to set out along the Berezina until evening, marching two or three hours upstream towards the village of Veselovo [*sic*, Studyanka] the crossing point of the French army. The corps had to deploy several times on this short march because of the proximity of the enemy. When they finally emerged from the forest onto open ground at Veselovo in the early afternoon, the still fairly strong *Garde Impériale* (which had crossed the bridges that day, as had 3^e Corps and 5^e Corps) were visible on the far side of the river on the high ground at Zembin, which Napoleon had selected for his *quartier général*. Yet on this side a mass of more than 2,000 wagons and many artillery pieces were visible in inextricable chaos, while streams of fugitives from all arms of service were pressing inexorably towards the crossing. The flimsily built bridges had already become damaged and had to be repaired several times, which made the progress difficult and slow. In order to provide the necessary protection for this convoy of wagons and the increasingly dense and rowdy crowd of people, 9^e Corps, together with the remains of several other detachments, took up positions which, moving outwards, formed a crescent shape along the high ground that concealed the bridges, with their right wing against the Berezina. This river, although not too far from its source, is already about 60 *Ellen* [30 to 48 metres] wide and is enclosed by very muddy banks.

The outposts on our side extended to the forest. On the far side, where the road leads up towards Vileyka, there was a forest, which from the left, was marked by a semicircle of camp fires, indicating the enemy encirclement of the position in the direction of Borisov. Thus the corps stayed

alert through one of the most terrible nights of their lives, in bitter cold,¹⁷ hunger and total want of everything.



Fournier's cavalry division, which had reached the Smolensk highway just the day before and had been assigned to form the rearguard for the entire army with the remnants of Davout's *1^{er} Corps*, set out very early that day for Borisov. A squadron of the Saxon Prinz Johann Regiment (in total barely two squadrons strong) followed Compans' French infantry division (from *1^{er} Corps*), which formed the rearguard to which it had been assigned, without being disturbed by the enemy on this march. Upon arriving in Borisov, General Fournier received orders to form the spearhead of Victor's Corps with the *31^e Brigade* (Prinz Johann Regiment and the Baden Hussars) on the march from Borisov to Veselovo, while leaving *30^e Brigade* (Delaitre's, consisting of the Hessen Regiment and the *lanciers de Berg*) behind. General Fournier immediately ordered the Saxon squadron, which was serving as the rearguard for Compans' division, to be brought over; however, due to the slow pace of the infantry, this squadron was still so far away that its arrival at the regiment took too long for the impatient general, and so he took the Hessen regiment from the other brigade instead of the Saxons, and assigned the Saxons to Delaitre's brigade. Delaitre and his two cavalry regiments (the Prinz Johann and *lanciers de Berg*) were assigned to Partouneaux's infantry division left behind in Borisov by Marshal Victor. When they arrived in Borisov, the cavalry set up their outposts by the demolished bridge and to its left on the Tolochin and Orsha road. The far bank of the Berezina, as well as the entrenchments facing Borisov on the Minsk Road, were occupied by troops from Chichagov's enemy corps. Their activities seemed to indicate a crossing over the ice, which still seemed to be solid in the area of the bridge, but this did not happen for the time being. With the onset of dusk, the units still at Borisov, whose mission seemed to be to hinder the link up of Wittgenstein's and Chichagov's corps through Borisov for as long as possible and, through their prolonged delay on the left bank of the Berezina, to save the mass of stragglers that eventually set out from there to follow the rest of the army upstream to Veselovo. *Général de division* Partouneaux was the first to march off with one brigade from his infantry division in order to maintain the link

17 Five men froze to death that night in the huts that still housed the von Rechten Regiment.

between Borisov and Veselovo. He was followed, at six o'clock in the evening, by the two regiments from Delaitre's brigade (the Prinz Johann and the *lanciers de Berg*). The latter formed the vanguard, the Saxons followed and were deployed along the high ground, a quarter of an hour's march from Borisov, in order to await the units of Partouneaux's division, which were still to the rear. Smaller groups were placed on the left flank to keep the Cossack skirmishers at arm's length. The following infantry arrived, but no news was received from General Partouneaux, who had gone ahead with a brigade of infantry. In doubt as to the state of affairs - including, it seemed, not being informed of the precise distance to the bridge built at Veselovo, and quite unfamiliar with the ground itself - officers were sent forward, and one of them returned convinced that the bridge was on fire. An aide-de-camp was once again sent to that area. The *lanciers de Berg* advanced through the narrow defile, about three quarters of an hour from Borisov, on the way to Veselovo. Infantry was moving into the forest to the east, already held by the Russians from Wittgenstein's corps, and artillery had been set up to cover the route. Meanwhile the aide-de-camp, who had recently been sent out, had returned with confirmation of the earlier news, and at the same time the head of the column observed that the road along which they were to proceed was held by enemy troops. The infantry, sent to the east, towards the forest, began a lively firefight, which suddenly ceased. It was dark; the Saxon Prinz Johann Regiment had meanwhile also passed through the narrow defile, and both cavalry regiments were marching on the far side of it, on a path between the road and the Berezina. The high ground further back towards Borisov was still held by the majority of the infantry. Soon after, those two regiments received orders to go back through the narrow defile and to march behind the high ground, facing Borisov, and to man it with vedettes. The Saxon regiment had the right wing, the *lanciers de Berg* the left; the infantry were positioned in squares further to the left, on the high ground extending a little to the east of Borisov. It was about eight o'clock in the evening when this position was taken up. The mass of unarmed stragglers, who had previously wavered between the narrow defile and the town, and the choice between capture and possible rescue, were too exhausted to make way for the columns, and made the movement of the troops particularly difficult in the narrow defile.

The enemy, in the meantime, in full possession of the surrounding high ground, had set up batteries here and there, from which they fired occasional shots in order to indicate their threatening, encircling position. Below Borisov and across the river, watch fires showed the presence and the already partially completed link up between the two Russian corps. Nevertheless, General Delaitre sent some officers to investigate whether there was a ford across the Berezina anywhere, at least for the cavalry; but the soft bed of the river, the swampy banks and having to break through the ice where it was beginning to seem solid, dashed this last hope.

The troops were in that most painful uncertainty of their fate, when a trumpet sounded the arrival of a Russian *parlementaire*, who assured them that General Partouneaux and the brigade that had followed him had already been taken prisoner, and that the rest of this division located there, was surrounded by far superior numbers. He therefore demanded that they surrender. There was some back and forth, and eventually an agreement was reached whereby the troops, with the exception of the officers, were to surrender their weapons and horses, but similarly were to keep their baggage.

Even if the conclusion of this agreement was a consequence of necessity, the question still remained: could this surrender have been prevented by an earlier examination of the ground, of the location and distance to the bridges at Veselovo, and by advancing more promptly? If they had known the ground, the officers sent out would hardly have mistaken a burning footbridge, located barely an hour from Borisov, together with the burning houses standing next to it, for the bridge at Veselovo. In addition, the advance at the narrow defile and the subsequent retreat to the high ground gave the enemy time to establish themselves between this detachment and the army at Veselovo.

The generals captured here were *général de division* Partouneaux, *généraux de brigade* Lecamus, Belliard, Blanmont and Delaitre. The Saxon Prinz Johann Regiment still consisted of about 200

horse. The number of the other prisoners is unknown to the author; they had only three cannon with them.

The following day (28 November) the weapons and horses were handed over; the Grodno Hussars took possession of the horses. The prisoners initially remained in Borisov and were later taken to Vitebsk.

The rest of 9^e Corps, consisting still of the two understrength infantry divisions under Daendels and Girard and the two equally weak cavalry regiments from Baden and Hessen under General Fournier, had, as is known, remained behind on the left bank of the Berezina on 27 November in order to protect the crossing of the remaining masses from the advancing enemy under Wittgenstein, whose vanguard force had already shown themselves. The night of 27 to 28 November was one of the most terrible; the hunger and cold were devastating. Finally, on the morning of 28 November, the columns of Wittgenstein's Corps could be seen emerging from the forest; their skirmishers drove the outposts of 9^e Corps before them. At the same time, on the right bank of the Berezina, Admiral Chichagov attacked the French corps that had already crossed the river from [Bolshoy] Stakhov.

The failure of Partouneaux's infantry division and Delaitre's cavalry brigade to arrive after having set out from Borisov the previous evening, must have put Marshal Victor in an even greater quandary, since his corps was even less capable of taking up secure positions on the left bank in order to protect the bridges. Daendels' division, as the right wing, rested against the muddy river; Girard's division was adjacent to them on the left and the Saxon infantry brigade (under Devilliers)¹⁸ was on the extreme left wing of the line, by battalion, with large gaps between them and the whole was only shielded by the two weak cavalry regiments.

The Russians began their attack along the whole line with rapid artillery fire, which soon reached and thinned out the columns on our side; they concentrated on the right wing in particular until midday and then attacked the left wing more forcefully, which had advanced somewhat in order to push the enemy beyond cannon range of the bridges. French horse artillery was now deployed in order to provide some protection for the exposed left wing and to hold back the light troops advancing towards the bridge from this side, while the second battalion of the Saxon von Low Regiment and a Polish infantry regiment were positioned further to the left to protect them, with their backs towards the Berezina.

This detachment, like the rest of the force, was heavily bombarded, while the infantry stood motionless in square next to their artillery, without - with the exception of the skirmishers - coming into combat themselves. Their losses were so great due to the persistent enemy shell and canister fire that the square of the Saxon second battalion of von Low soon had to form in two ranks rather than three. The fighting was fierce at all points by noon and the enemy artillery fire was murderous; but in spite of their great superiority and the gravity of the situation on our side, Victor's corps held out heroically at their posts until late into the night and to the final limits of their strength. It was simply a duel between the artillery and skirmishers, the infantry masses calmly protecting the batteries even in the midst of the fiercest cannon fire, without themselves taking an active part in the battle, yet their losses were significant.

It seems incomprehensible that the enemy, with their superiority in artillery and cavalry, did not exploit the large gaps between the battalions, which in order to extend the left wing in Girard's division measured as much as a thousand paces, and allowed themselves to be restrained by the skirmishers alone and did not attempt to break through the yawning gaps in the line.

18 The von Rechten Regiment, which had suffered greatly at Smoliyantsy, on that day numbered barely 300 men, and the von Low Regiment about 700 fighting men. The commander of the latter, *Oberst* von Jeschky, had died in Minsk on 17 November; he was replaced, on General Girard's orders, by Major von Wolan from the von Rechten Regiment.

Darkness finally (ten o'clock in the evening) put an end to the stubborn fighting; Victor's corps had held their ground, but now they fell back towards the bridge. After the weak remnants of the two Saxon infantry regiments had assembled, they were assigned a bivouac by a few isolated houses in front of the downstream bridge. They found there the Poles, also from Girard's division, who were willing to share their meagre fires with their Saxon comrades. The corps' artillery was to cross the Berezina first, but it took a long time before they were able to clear a path through the tangle of shot-smashed and looted wagons. In the unprecedented chaos that had hitherto occurred at this crossing point, greedy men, assuming that all was lost and everything was the guaranteed booty of the enemy, had plundered the officers' baggage as well as Imperial and treasury wagons.¹⁹ This evil still continued even as Victor's corps gradually began their withdrawal across the river, and only the good discipline which was maintained, especially among the German regiments, protected the majority from the lure of malign example and thus from dissolution. The artillery were followed by the cavalry and then finally by the infantry; the Saxon infantry were the last to move.

It was past midnight when they soundlessly set off, leaving the nominated sentries at their posts in order to deceive the enemy, and throwing all the wood they had on hand onto the watch fires. Only after several hours of the greatest effort and by resorting to force of arms through the homicidal crowd of refugees and masses of wagons that were streaming towards the river at random did the corps reach the bridge, which was barely thirty minutes from the bivouac. They reached the far bank and were stationed there by about four o'clock in the morning, with the exception of the sentries left behind. There were still thousands, mainly wounded, who were now crowding together on the other side trying to reach the right bank and the promise of safety, when the French General Éblé ordered the bridges to be dismantled after five o'clock in the morning. Due to the shortage of pioneers and sappers, the last of the Saxon rear guard from the von Low Regiment to pass through had to prise up the frozen planks lying flat above the water with their bayonets. By these means the work proceeded slowly and was far from complete when musketry from the abandoned outposts on the far side and the terrified shrieks of the unarmed crowd rang out across the river: "Cossacks!"

The situation of these lost souls was terrible. Many, shoved from the bridge, had already found their death in the current; now many, in despair, preferred this to imprisonment, of whose severity the most horrifying rumours had already circulated.

The losses from Victor's corps in the fighting at Veselovo were, overall, huge, and particularly affected the two Saxon infantry regiments. According to an eyewitness, only one division [pair of companies] 109 men strong could be formed from the remnants of both regiments.²⁰

While Victor's corps - as the rearguard for the army - took the road to Vileyka, a weak detachment of Saxons remained stationed to protect the bridge until daybreak, which had not been completely demolished, and witnessed the most terrible scenes which the survival instinct of those unfortunate isolated soldiers had in store for them. It was not until around nine or ten o'clock in the morning that the remains of the bridge were set on fire.²¹ Once this was accomplished and Cossacks and then enemy masses had appeared on the left bank with artillery, the Saxons also left the Berezina and proceeded as the rearguard. The highway leading to Vilna via Minsk could no longer be used, as the

19 This fate also befell the Saxons' medical wagon, which meant that their wounded and exhausted had to go without the benefit of medical aid.

20 The von Rechten Regiment lost: *Hauptmann* Obernitz and *Hauptmann* von Bose killed; *Oberst* von Einsiedel, Major von Hausen, Adjutant von Dürfeld, Adjutant von Heldreich and *Hauptmann* von Döring wounded, the latter three died of wounds.

The von Low Regiment lost: *Hauptmann* von Polenz killed; *Hauptmann* von Salza, *Leutnant* von Renner, *Leutnant* von Schierbrandt, *Leutnant* Pabst von Ohain (the elder) and *Leutnant* von Salza, wounded and never returned.

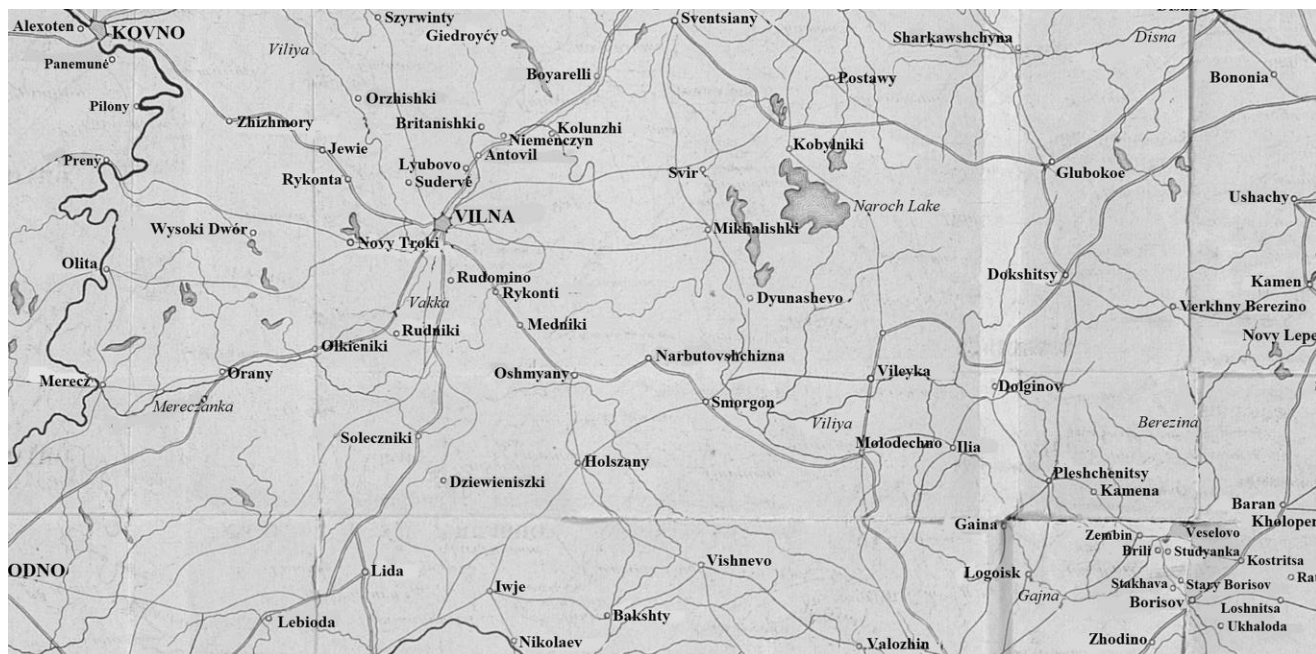
21 According to an eyewitness report, before the bridge was destroyed, French gendarmes cleared it by crossing it with linked arms, driving the refugees before them and trampling underfoot or shoving into the river whomever could not escape, shouting: "*Par ordre de l'empereur!*"

latter city had already been taken by the enemy; Napoleon had therefore chosen the northern route, which was to bring the army back onto the main road at Molodechno in five or six days.

Girard's division (Poles and Saxons), having received a few cannons after the crossing, formed the

rearguard for the whole as far as Molodechno, set out every day a few hours before daybreak, destroyed all the bridges behind them as best they could, and continued to march until about midday, when they usually halted at a village, posted sentries and lit fires to revive their stiffened extremities and to greet the advancing enemy. They then mostly fought until nightfall.²²

The unarmed masses wandered in the dark for hours from the road in order to search for some provisions at great risk to their lives, which, however, were usually taken from them by the armed men even under orders, whom duty kept in the bivouacs. Hunger now raged ever more fearsomely and often forced these unfortunate men to devour the basest and most disgusting things.²³ As the cold intensified, the misery reached its peak; the dead and the dying lay in a garish jumble on both sides of the road; a fire, laboriously lit, put the exhausted to sleep pleasantly and eternally. Those who were tired of life chose the corpses of their brothers as their death pillows, while others lay



indifferent around the deathly hush. The groaning wounded crawled for hours beside the columns with the use of their hands, only to be crushed in the end by horses hooves or the wheels of the guns.

On 2 December, Victor's corps passed through the small town of Pleshchenitsa and was again overtaken by the enemy vanguard near a village on the far side. The rearguard of the corps had just stopped at midday to give the few salvaged guns of some of the army units and their ammunition wagons time to gain a head start on the road leading into the nearby forest, when the Russians appeared. Their attack, due to the negligence of a weak outpost, almost had the nature of an ambush; but the fourth Polish regiment, by their quick reaction, averted the danger for the moment and repelled the Cossacks until the necessary preparations for resistance had been made. Victor's

22 As proof of the good morale which, despite all the misery, still motivated the small Saxon group, it should be mentioned that every morning the men eagerly filled their coat pockets with cartridges from the countless ammunition wagons they found along the way.

23 For example, blood from stabbed horses was drunk from cupped hands as a warming agent.

corps was positioned in a diagonal line across the road, with the roadside village being manned by Polish *voltigeurs* close in front of them. Here the struggle began, but the Baden unit, who were flanking the right wing, did not remain idle either; they held off several swarms of Cossacks that were emerging from the forest with the help of a few rounds of canister. The enemy, however, drove out the Poles, took the village, advanced briskly towards the centre, and the halted transport, which was supposed to be getting a head start in order to continue the march, had caused such confusion that the corps had to retreat from the right wing close to the road into the woods and abandon their position. Infantry and cavalry proceeded slowly; the gunners were forced to abandon their guns because they could not move them along the road, which was blocked by wagons and because of the closely spaced trees, some of which had fallen and were covered with snow. This confused and collapsed wagon laager, whose drivers had fled with their horses, fortunately delayed the vanguard for hours. In the meantime, by dusk the corps had reached the burning town of Vileyka, which lay in a plain surrounded by forest and adjacent to the woodland that the corps had just passed through. The rearguard assembled and positioned themselves here, as quietly as possible, in such a way that the road to Molodechno was covered on the right, but the left wing remained hidden from the light of the fires. Six howitzers, which along with a few other pieces were now back with Girard's division, were brought up on this wing and skirmishers were posted on the edge of the forest in front of them and within it. Thus, without being allowed to move, the rearguard (Saxons and Poles) waited in the bitter cold for the arrival of the advancing Russians, who had not expected their enemy to be so close or so ready to strike. As the skirmishers on our side withdrew to the flank, the guns positioned on the left wing were given free scope; the heads of the Russian columns approached boldly and carelessly but were greeted with canister shot and this time paid - as it seemed - rather dearly for their rash pursuit. They quickly returned to the forest and allowed the rearguard on our side to withdraw unhindered to Molodechno at midnight.

On 4 December, Victor's corps arrived at this small town on the main road from Minsk to Vilna. The remnants of the two Saxon von Rechten and von Low Infantry Regiments, which had been formed into two weak battalions after the actions on the Berezina, had been reduced by hunger, cold and daily combat to a force of 60 men at most.²⁴

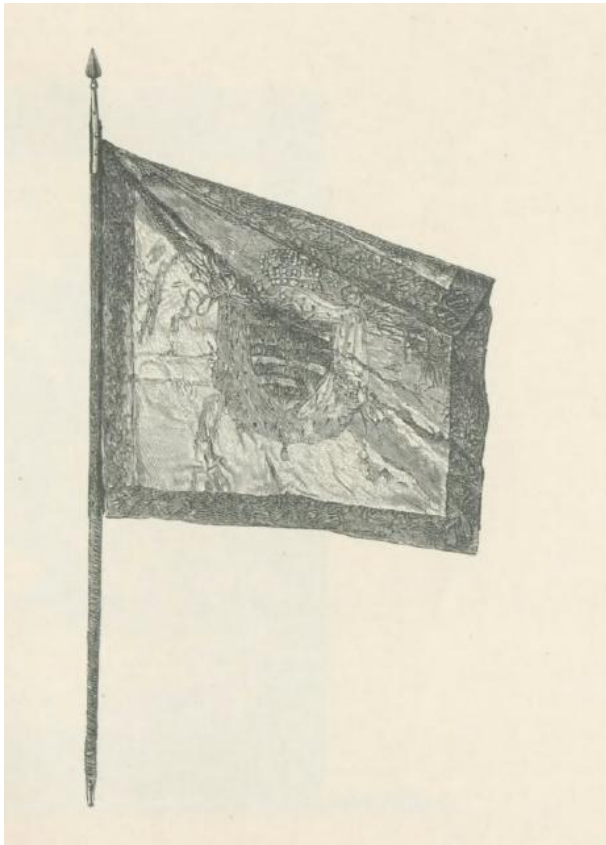
The corps formed up here to await the Russians once more and to thus give their own refugees time to escape. At about ten o'clock in the morning the enemy attacked, their cannon fire became quite lively and *général de brigade* Devilliers was wounded; but this attack was unsuccessful and the rest of the corps held their posts, however untenable they might be. The fighting continued until late at night. The remainder of the two Saxon regiments were ordered to defend a bridge over the river at Molodechno and then to burn it down. *Hauptmann* von Lichtenhain of the von Rechten Regiment was assigned to carry out the latter task, and he was assigned *Sousleutnants* von Brandenstein and von Biela of the von Low Regiment and an officer from the von Rechten Regiment; however, only the officers, all wounded, returned after their squad had been killed or rendered defenceless to the last man; The *Hauptmann* died of his wounds a few days later, as did the two *Leutnants* von Brandenstein and von Biela.

The Saxons had laid their lives on the line there with weapons in hand for the last time. Of the 60 men who had started the battle, only 16 men fit for service returned with the four Colours of both regiments. Otherwise, unemployed officers protected these symbols of honour during the battle; Girard's entire division barely amounted to 100 men.

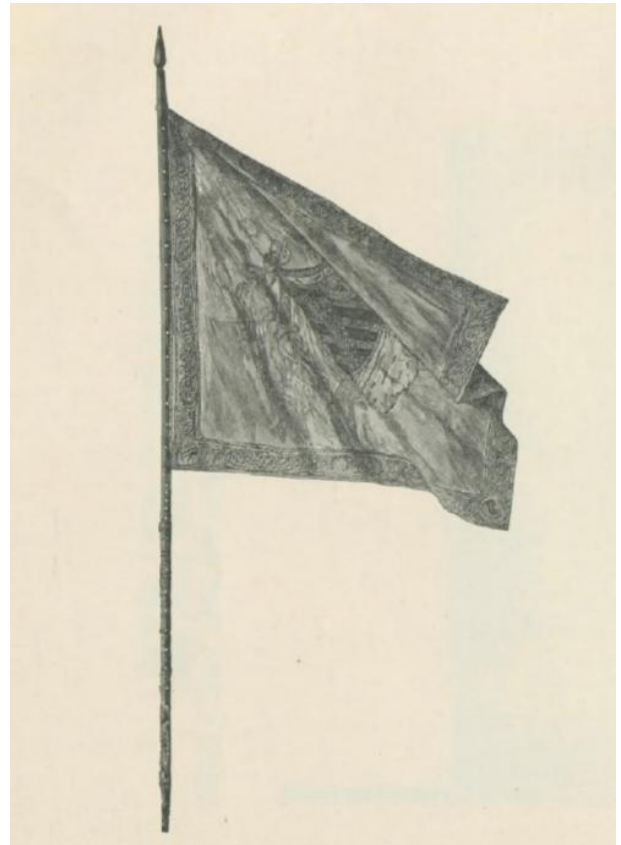
From 5 December, 5^e Corps took over the rearguard; the small Saxon troop with their four Colours, united under the command of *Oberst* von Einsiedel, continued on their way to Vilna, where, in the

24 Hunger, cold and hardship affected the officers as much as the rest of the men, and although some of them had to exchange their boots for wickerwork shoes, it is probably only due to the better clothing of the former that relatively more privates succumbed.

long procession of fugitives, little threatened by the enemy, but severely harassed by hunger and cold, they arrived on 10 December, via Smorgon and Oshmyany. Due to the lack of discipline, the unexpected arrival of the Russians resulted in the four Saxon Colours, together with many brave officers and several thousand unarmed men, paralysed by frost and hunger, falling into the hands of the enemy. Only a few of the individuals who saved themselves on that unfortunate night made it as far as the Neman, but even then, only some of them, reached Marienwerder, the rendezvous point for 9^e Corps, and only a few saw their homeland again.²⁵



Colour of the Saxon von Low Regiment.



Colour of the Saxon von Rechten Regiment.

²⁵ Apart from *Oberst* von Einsiedel, Major von Wolan and *Leutnant* von Koppenfels, who were captured in Vilna, just six officers from the von Rechten Regiment and only ten officers from the von Low Regiment returned to Saxony.



Standard of the Saxon Prinz Johann Light Horse Regiment.