

The Napoleon Series

The Germans under the French Eagles: Volume I

The Regiment of the Saxon Duchies – Chapter 12

By Commandant Sauzey

Translated by [Greg Gorsuch](#)

THE
REGIMENT OF THE FRANKFURT

CHAPTER XII

RUSSIAN CAMPAIGN IN 1812

The Emperor sent a considerable proportion of foreign troops into the enormous human stream which he drove in 1812 against Russia; the Imperial army included in its ranks Spanish, Swiss, Neapolitan, Italian, and Croatian regiments; legions of Polish, Portuguese, Irish; Danish, Austrian and Prussian auxiliaries; finally, all the German contingents of the princes of the Confederation of the Rhine.

By Imperial order of 2 January 1812, the Grand Duchy of Frankfurt had to place on the ground 2,214 men in two battalions; these battalions were to be delivered on 15 February at Fulda, where subsequent orders would await them.

General von Zweyer explained to Dalberg that the effort required was excessive; he had, in fact, only 1,237 available men, including the officers; of this figure, 400 were unable to campaign... The protests of the Prince Primate resulted in Berthier agreeing to include in the manpower demanded the depot companies, under the name of "companies of march"; the number departing was thus reduced to 1,710 men:

"The levy required to reach this figure was made despite the greatest resistance of the population" -- say the German authors; they would not find the pretensions of the Allies too great, which would oblige the Grand Duchy to furnish the following year more than six battalions. Lieutenant-Colonel Horadam took command of the regiment, whose battalions were numbers 2 and 3, with the number 1 remaining on the battalion of Spain. The battalions were headed by Captains Dracke and Cornelius. . .

...Captain Dracke, commanding the 3rd Battalion, enjoyed a low regard; he had made an indiscreet loan of a few hundred florins to the military fund which he managed; and, in addition to that, his affection for the brandy, affection shared by his wife, was no secret to anyone (Horadam's letter.)

The equipment left much to be desired; the fusils were of the old Austrian model, those of the 3rd Battalion did not have flints.....; the ammunition carriages were empty; 500 kettles were missing, as were coats; finally, men had only one or two pairs of boots, when four were absolutely necessary.

The regiment left from Frankfurt on the 16th of February, and crossed Cassel, Westphalia, and Hanover; it committed many depredations during this route and motivated numerous complaints from the Westphalian prefect, Baron von Ompteda; the number of deserters was so considerable that Dalberg had to send a reinforcement of 300 men to cover the gaps caused in the two battalions.

Arrived at Hamburg, the regiment passed under the command to Carra-Saint-Cyr, who distributed new fusils, completed the ammunition, gave each man four pairs of boots and a precious tent, and finally attached fourteen wagons with two horses (each).

On 23 March, Carra-Saint-Cyr passed in review his division, which was called the Princely Division and which included:

| | |
|--|------------------------------|
| The Regiment of Wurzburg } | Anthing Brigade |
| -- of Frankfurt } | |
| The 4 th Regiment of the Rhine (Regiment of the Saxon Duchies). | |
| The 5 th -- | (Anhalt-Lippe). |
| The 6 th -- | (Schwarzburg-Waldeck-Reuss). |

General Anthing, -- said Bernays, born at Gotha, and becoming a French general, thought to impose on his former compatriots by his abrupt manner and his rudeness...

The division was destined first to protect the coasts of the North Sea against a landing of the English; the Frankfurt Regiment went to Bremen and Bartel, on the Jade Bight (Jadebusen), and furnished several detachments in the neighborhood. During this stay on the coast, the company of carabineers of the 2nd Battalion rescued, on 18 June, the crew of a wrecked French ship; the carabineers, who were the grenadiers of the regiment, were distinguished from the soldiers of the other companies in that they alone had the privilege of wearing the mustache.

On the 1st of September a great news arrived at the regiment: the order to leave for Danzig; it was the assurance of participating actively in the major operations that were being prepared; so the enthusiasm was great, especially among the young officers. One of them writes about it in his "diary":

...We all had high hopes in our heads, and the most prodigious plans; Russia being conquered, we were marching on Turkey, and passing through Greece, this homeland of heroes of antiquity...We were going to plant the Napoleonic Eagle, at the limits of the world!....

Saint-Cyr, before leaving, passed all his people in review and wrote to the Prince-Primate:

I hasten to tell you by letter, Monseigneur, that I have found in the most satisfactory state the instruction, the discipline, and the up keep of your Royal Highness's regiment, whose good conduct has not been diminished for a single moment; it is really an elite troop, and I have no doubt that, on the occasion, it will behave with distinction.

These good feelings did not prevent Saint-Cyr, a few days later, from overturning the judgment of a courts martial, which only sentenced a deserter from Frankfurt to prison, and put him in front of a new court that had him shot.

Arriving on 6 October at Danzig, by Hamburg, Lübeck, and Stralsund, the division returned three days later to Königsberg, where it arrived on the 22nd.

There, it was dislocated, and most of her regiments enter the formation of the 34th Division, General Loison, which includes:

8 battalions of French.

2 -- of Frankfurt.
3 -- of 4th Regiment of the Rhine.

2 -- of 5th --
2 -- of 6th --

Leaving the 5th Regiment of the Rhine at Konigsberg, Loison was ordered to march on Smolensk. He crossed Tilsit, Johannisbourg (where the cold begins to be felt) and arrived, on 18 November, in Kowno; there, he learned of the burning of Moscow and the retreat of the Great Army.

The 6th Regiment of the Rhine remained in Kowno and the division continued on its way. It arrived at Vilna on 22 November and stayed there; 2 December, the birthday of Austerlitz, was celebrated by illuminations and a great review passed by the governor of the city, General von Hogendorp; the parade took place in the middle of a real storm of snow. The number of unavailable became considerable, and General Loison, ill himself, was obliged to leave his command to General Gratien.

The Regiment of Frankfurt at that time had 1,300 men under arms, and the 4th regiment of the Rhine, 1,600.

On the 4th of December, at Miednicky, one began to meet the remains of the Great Army in retreat and the cold dropped to -20 degrees.

The next day, 5 December, in Osmiana, 80 Cossacks of Seslavin fell on the division and failed to take General Gratien, who was saved by a company of the 4th Regiment of the Rhine. Napoleon crossed Osmiana in the night with Caulaincourt, the Mamluk Roustan and the Dalmatian Captain Vukasowitch; Duroc and Mouton followed in another train; a weak squadron of Polish lancers served as an escort. The attack of the Cossacks determined the Emperor to take with him the squadrons of the Neapolitan Guard which had marched with the Princely Division and to take them to Kowno: it was the destruction of these squadrons.



Ney

Ney

Dr. Geissler says in his "Memoirs" published in Gotha in 1840:

We were a few steps from the Emperor, while Generals Gratien and Vivier stood, with the colonels of the regiments, in a semicircle before him. The personality of this extraordinary man, the most extraordinary of our time; his features, so original in expression, the memory of the astonishing actions of which he had filled the world, we plunged into an inexpressible astonishment... His voice, which we heard, was not that which filled all Europe, declared war, won battles, decided the fate of empires, and gave glory or delight... (BERNAYS, page 376.)

The troops had to be prevented from giving the Emperor a spontaneous ovation, for he wished to pass incognito.

On December 6th, the debris of the Grande-Armée crossed the cantonments of the Princely Division. 600 men, taken in all the regiments of the division, were established in advance; the cold was so strong that the sentries had to be relieved every quarter of an hour; these outposts were withdrawn at midnight, and the division set out for Vilna, leaving behind the 4th Regiment of the Rhine and its only battery. The temperature was such that the horses were soon frozen on the snow, and the battery remains abandoned... The division, arrived at noon in Miednicky, lost more people than if it had fought a great battle. Finally, on the evening of 7 December, it arrived at Vilna, after a horrible march: it had only 500 soldiers under arms: 48 hours earlier, in Osmiana, it still counted 10,000 men...

On the 8th and 9th of December, during its stop at Vilna, the division reconstituted itself a little; many stragglers joined; the Saxon Duchies Regiment (4th Regiment of the Rhine) got back to 1,000 men, and that of Frankfurt to 800: but barely a third of this number was capable of using its weapons, and the last two marches had cost, in sum, 600 men to the two German regiments.

After the departure of the army, Marshal Ney remained in Vilna with the Princely Division, whose General Loison has just taken command: it would make up the rear guard of the Grand Army. The thermometer went down to 27 degrees: the next morning Frankfurt lost 200 men, and the 4th Regiment of the Rhine 300! It was not until 10 December, at 10 o'clock in the morning, that Ney abandoned Vilna. The division started in the midst of Cossack clouds, and took the road to Kowno. At Ponary, all the carriages were burnt which could not have climbed up to the coast; finally, in spite of the repeated attacks of the Russian cavalry, one arrived at Miłakowo, and the next day at Kowno.

There, the Princely Division found a valuable reinforcement: it was the battalion of Anhalt, of the 5th Regiment of the Rhine, which had been previously detached from the division. As for the 6th Regiment, which Loison hoped to also find at Kowno, it had been sent to Königsberg, escorting a treasure of 12 millions, which were exactly returned to Murat.

With his usual energy, Ney gathered everyone that could hold a fusil in the division and occupied with this small detachment, enlarged of the battalion of Anhalt, a redoubt in the ground hastily built in front of the gate to Vilna: there, was still a cannon which at first rendered good service, but was soon dismantled by enemy artillery. Russian bullets rained on the redoubt, the German officers wanted to withdraw: "A good grenadier must be killed at his post!" exclaimed Ney, at which moment a bullet broke the two legs of Captain Barkhausen, who, taking a pistol, said to the marshal, "See how a German grenadier dies at his post!" and he blew out his brains. Ney retired, saying to Captain Wiedburg, "Come, comrade, you are all good boys!"

Kowno was burned on December 12th. While the battalion of Lippe (5th Regiment of the Rhine) was trying to save a store of 40,000 fusils established in a church, 400 unfortunate, half frozen, came to warm themselves at the flames of fire, could not be removed, and perished burned in the collapse of the building...

The debris of the Princely Division gathered at Königsberg. The 6th Regiment of the Rhine, which had not fought, was already there, with 300 men. Murat reviewed the division on the 28th of December, counting 2,000 men; on the 1st of November it had had 14,000! Of all the regiments, that of Frankfurt had been the most tried, but it defiled with the shout of *Vive l'Empereur!* while the 5th and 6th Regiments of the Rhine passed, silently...

The report of Colonel Horadam on this famous retreat deserves to be known:

LIEUTENANT COLONEL HORADAM, COMMANDER OF THE CONTINGENT OF TROOPS FROM THE GRAND DUCHY OF FRANKFURT, TO THE MINISTER OF WAR, BARON VON EBERSTEIN.

Since I had the honor to send your Excellency my last report, describing the march of the contingent of Frankfurt on Vilna, I have lived the hardest days of my life. In the stages, until Vilna, fatigue and cold have killed a mass of men and 11 horses of the train; bad quarters, insufficient food and half-fodder rations had further weakened what remained; also the number of patients rose every day, without any question of entering them into hospitals; healthy men died every night, and we had to leave them the next morning on the road.

On the 2nd of December, I received the order to accompany the division which was to go beyond Miłakowo, on the road to Minsk, to meet the retiring Grand-Army. General *Grassien* (sic) led us, and took us to Osmiana, 7 miles from Vilna, where we had a hurrah of Cossacks, and the next morning, the vanguard of the army began to defile ... The troops were in a frightening state, almost without arms... More cavalry, not a cannon... A swarm of Cossacks accompanied these unfortunate men. The greater part of the army, as well as His Majesty the Emperor himself, passed into the night of 5 December. The most extreme cold was felt on the night of the 6th to the 7th, during our march on Vilna, where we arrived at 9 o'clock in the evening, after unheard-of sufferings, and where we were paying for our quarters. I had lost in this march, which I will never forget, the best of my soldiers; I cannot give the number of the dead; it was the night march that killed them; the men had their eyes frozen closed. Half of the regiment had frozen hands, feet, or noses; most of these wretches remained in Vilna when we resumed our retreat on Kowno on 10 December.

On the 6th, I had sent to Königsberg the pay officer 1st Lieutenant Melzer, with the regimental blacksmith wagon, to bring back some money; all the other wagons, by superior order, had to remain at Vilna, and to leave at night with those of the other regiments and the carriages of a mass of generals; this column of carriages, obliged to stop the next day at the entrance of a defile, was pillaged by the retiring army, so that the "Aerarium" and the part of the equipment of the last quarter, which had not yet been distributed, were lost, along with all the officers' baggage. I had taken from the box only 30 Louis of gold to meet the most urgent necessities; they alone escaped the looting. Other regiments shared the money of their corps and we were witnesses that the generals' carriages and even the Imperial treasury carriage were not forgotten... I lost my horse in this way, packed, with my best clothes and all my papers.

On the morning of the 10th, after a night spent at the bivouac, we left Vilna, and the division, reduced to a third of its strength, took the rear guard. In the city itself, we had already been assailed on all sides by the Cossacks; but, half a league from Vilna, we were attacked by a thousand of these horsemen, who had with them four cannon on sleds; the murderous fire of this artillery on our soldiers arranged in squares did not prevent us from marching; to stop would have been death for our troop without cannon, and reduced only to its fusils; after each discharge of the enemy's artillery, we would rank in order to prevent the Cossacks from entering our squares by the breaches made there by their balls. The Cossacks followed us this way until the evening, killing us and wounding a crowd of officers and soldiers. The Frankfurt Regiment was the most tried; for my part, I received a contusion on my left knee which obliged me to leave the regiment. Lieutenant-Colonel Cornéli, Captain Büsser, and Lieutenant Ringelmanu, badly wounded and abandoned, are probably all three dead, but this cannot be assured.

Captain Unkelhaeuser, rolling under his slain horse, broke his leg; Captains Breidenbach, Bødiker and Henning are slightly injured; Lieutenants Baumert and Wunsch were taken prisoner at Vilna, and Captains Seelig and Drach, as well as Lieutenant Schsefer, during the march.

Almost all the regimental officers were sick and exhausted by fatigue. Alone of all the officers of his rank, Captain Toppel remained under arms; I myself cannot manage to recover, in spite of the strength of my constitution; I am unspeakably weakened and ruined, though miraculously I have no frozen limbs. I lost my best non-commissioned officers, including those who could later become officers; among those who remain and who have been able to drag themselves from Vilna to here, there is none to whom the surgeons were not obliged to cut a finger every day either at the feet or at the hands.

The regiment had only 285 men; of this number, scarcely 100 are in a condition to bear arms. General Devilliers commanded the brigade, and General Marchand the division; this one did not count in all more than 2,000 valid men.

Macdonald's corps arrived yesterday in Riga; I do not know his strength. We are ordered to be ready to go back at the first signal. I sent to Danzig all that could still be dragged along by my cold-skinned ones; in spite of this, I will have to abandon here a lot of unfortunate people.

No one can say with certainty what has become of the Prussian corps; we do not know where the enemy is, nor what movements he makes; a thousand rumors are running about it in the public.

We have lost most of our horses from the train here; First Lieutenant Melzer took six to Danzig with the regimental watch; I have three with me. All our other carriages were dropped off the road by the fugitives, to clear their passage. I am especially concerned about the loss of our beautiful and good fusils, three quarters of which have disappeared with the wounded and the prisoners.

I still had here a small deposit of a hundred pairs of work pants. In the impossibility where I find myself of carrying them away, without means of transport, and not to abandon them without any profit, I just sold them for 350 thalers to a Jew of the locality, after having taken what I thought was necessary to dress some men who needed it. I have just received ammunition for my able-bodied men and eight days of biscuit; I wait an hour for the order of the retreat, for which we will probably make the rear guard. I cannot prolong my relationship of events.

Königsberg, 3 January 1813.

HORADAM.

The planned retreat started the same day when Horadam ended his report, 3 January: the defection of the Prussian Corps of Yorck had just been announced, and the approach of the Russians, commanded by Wittgenstein, was also known.

The division left Königsberg on the 4th of January, and arrived on the 12th at Danzig. Horadam brought there 21 officers and 127 men: of these, only 40 were valid; (4 officers and about 30 soldiers had managed to return directly to their country). These feeble remnants of the Frankfurt Regiment contributed to the defense of the town, a famous defense which lasted more than a year, and of which we shall trace the most important incidents.

Placed on the Napoleon Series: April 2018