

The Napoleon Series

The Germans under the French Eagles: Volume I

The Regiment of the Saxon Duchies – Chapter 6

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THE
REGIMENT OF THE FRANKFURT

CHAPTER VI

WAR OF SPAIN (1809)

The year 1809 is one of the most brilliant for French arms in Spain, and our allies in Frankfurt would collect an honorable harvest of laurels. They would be at all the great days: Mesas de Ibor, Talavera, Almonacid and Ocaña; their blood would flow gloriously, mingled with ours, on all these fields of victory, and they would write one of the most beautiful pages of their military history.

Napoleon has just given the 4th Corps a new organization; he divided it into three divisions: the first, French, under Sebastiani; the second, German, with Leval; the third, Polish, under Valencia's jurisdiction; the 4th Corps had 12,000 to 13,000 men with 36 cannons.

The Leval Division was comprised of the regiments of Baden, Nassau, and Hesse, the battalion of Frankfurt, the two Dutch battalions, and one battalion of each of the new foreign regiments in the service of France called regiments of "Westphalia, Prussia, and Irish." It was soon charged with the Polish division to ensure the safety of the right bank of the Tagus between Aranjuez and Almaraz; the Spanish army of Cuesta, having united all its means of action in the south of the peninsula.

The battalion of Frankfurt left Madrid with an effective number of 13 officers and 373 men. The two Dutch battalions forming a brigade with it did not reach, united, this number of combatants. (Report of Lieutenant-Colonel Welsch, 25 January.)

From January 20 to 27, the battalion stayed in Talavera with part of the Hessians, while the Nassau settled in Almaraz and the Dutch in Arzobispo. Proclamations in Spanish, French, German, Polish and Latin were posted everywhere: they invited the allies of the French to abandon them...The soldiers tore them up or put them in their bags to send them back in their own way to the Spaniards...

On the 27th of January, a new movement was prescribed to the division which was squeezed on its right, threatened by the Spanish General Cuesta; Frankfurt marched on Arzobispo to hold the bridge of the Tagus, while Nassau, with the artillery of Baden, occupied Almaraz, and Hesse, La Puebla de Montalbán; but these provisions did not prevent Cuesta from taking the bridge from Almaraz and driving the Nassau regiment back to Navalmoral. General Leval immediately sent the battalion of Frankfurt to support the troops of Nassau on this last point, while he made a reconnaissance of the bridge of Almaraz. The latter was found heavily occupied by the Spaniards.

General Victor arrived on 6 February, and took direction of the divisions of Leval, Lasalle and Latour-Maubourg. All the provisions are decreed to attack, on the 15th, the bridge of Almaraz and take it back from the enemy; at the head of the attack columns were the Nassau and Frankfurt voltigeurs companies; the rest of the division followed in column by battalion. But the Spaniards blew up the bridge and the operation was canceled.

Being unable to attack the Spaniards head-on, since the crossing point no longer existed, Victor wanting to turn them; would send the Frankfurters to Arzobispo, to cross the Tagus and march on Mohedas, in the mountains of Guadalupe, where it would find the division of Lasalle; the Spaniards, threatened on their right and on their line of retreat, would be obliged to evacuate Almaraz, when Victor sent the order to stop the offensive movement: the Poles, occupying Toledo, had just been summoned to Zaragoza, and King Joseph, threatened in Madrid by the enemy army of the center, was forced to bring the German Division back to the Tagus line to replace the Poles...

As a result, Frankfurt returned to Arzobispo, Hesse to Talavera, and the remainder of the division occupied Toledo.

Lieutenant-Colonel Welsch asked the Prince Primate to reinforce his battalion, which had been greatly weakened by fatigue and by fevers. A detachment of 108 men, commanded by Major Vogt, left Frankfurt on 2 March.



Pont de l'Arzobispo.

(Gravure tirée de la *France militaire*.)

Bridge of Arzobispo. (Engraving taken from *Military France*.)

Victor reorganized the division, which presented the following order of battle:

1st Brigade: General von SCHÆFFER (from Nassau).

Battalion of combined Voltigeurs (8 companies, including Frankfurt).

2nd Nassau Regiment (which received 6 officers and 223 men of reinforcements).

2nd Brigade: General MERLE.

Baden Regiment.

3rd Brigade: General von SCHÆFFER (of Hesse).

1 Hessian battalion (the other is detached to Segovia).

Frankfurt Battalion.

4th Brigade: General CHASSÉ (from Holland).

The two battalions of Holland.

In the meantime, the capture of Zaragoza, after a famous siege, made two French corps available; the Poles returned to Toledo, and Victor was to have the Leval Division to resume operations against the Spaniards of General Cuesta.

On 14 March the division was reviewed at Talavera; the next day it was headed to the enemy.

Battle of Mesas de Ibor (17 March).

Cuesta, with a vanguard corps of 4,000 Spaniards including the three excellent battalions of the Walloon Guards, and rural militias, had entrenched themselves at Mesas de Ibor in a very strong position. The Leval Division attacked it: Frankfurt was on the right, Hesse in the center, Nassau on the left; Baden and Holland in reserve. The position was taken through their momentum and the Spaniards left 7 cannons, 2 of which were taken by the battalion of the Prince Primate. This success cost the Frankfurters 1 officer, 1 non-commissioned officer and 17 men killed or wounded; the division had 498 men hors de combat.

Bernays relates that General Leval, passing after the battle in front of the Frankfurt battalion, exclaimed, saluting him, *Long live the battalion of the Prince Primate! It decided the battle!*

Marshal Victor reported to the Emperor this feat of arms:

The Leval Division has shown an ardor and courage of which I cannot praise too much. The officers and soldiers who compose it are worthy of being the allies of France.

The day after the battle, while marching on the main body of the Spanish army, Marshal Victor approached Lieutenant-Colonel Welsch on horseback and complimented him on the conduct of his battalion. (Report of Welsch, 21 March.)

Fight of Valdecañas (18 March).

The enemy troops expelled from Mesas de Ibor were again roughed up the next day. Baden attacked from the front, Frankfurt and Hesse the flank; the arrival of the Villatte and Lasalle Divisions determined the flight of the Spaniards. The victorious troops joined at the bridge at Almaraz with the sappers of the Latour-Maubourg Division,

and the occupation of Trujillo as the consequence of these two happy days.

Victor said in his report to the Emperor:

On the 18th, Leval's division attacked the enemies whom it had fought the day before by Valdecañas, and attacked them with extraordinary impetuosity. Despite the difficulty of the ground and their resistance, it chased them out of all their positions.

The following two orders of the day show that the satisfaction of the French generals was complete.

ORDER OF THE DAY OF VICTOR.

...The marshal hastens to testify to the German Division his total satisfaction with the distinguished conduct of its brave troops during the days of the 17th and 18th, who, although very inferior in number to the enemy, pursued them at the point of their swords (in the loins) from mountain to mountain by impassable paths, having flushed it from all its positions and entrenchments, etc...

ORDER OF THE DAY OF LEVAL.

...The commanding general of the division believes he cannot better relate the bravery of the troops his special homage, than by assuring them that their conduct has been so audacious and distinguished, that he will count these two days among the most agreeable and honorable of his military life.

On 27 March, Victor arrived on the Guadiana. He left at Rena the battalion of Frankfurt, that of Hesse, six cannons and two squadrons, and continued his march on Medellin to fight against Cuesta.

The company of voltigeurs of the Prince Primate Battalion was still part of the Combined Voltigeurs Battalion; it therefore followed General Leval, arriving on the 27th at Medellin, and was along among the troops of Frankfurt who were able to take part in the glorious day of the morrow.

Battle of Medellin (28 March).

Cuesta had gathered all his strength in front of Medellin:

He had -- said Bernays -- 7,000 horsemen, like Seydlitz at Zorndorf, and, as later, Murat at Leipzig.

In infantry, outside the militia, he possessed in his ranks the brave Gardia Valona (Walloon Guards), the "Toledo" Regiment, and the Swiss regiments in the Spanish service.

To resist this numerous cavalry, Victor adopts a special formation: he divided the Germans into four squares, in the center of his first line of battle; these squares are separated by cavalry. On the left, the second battalion of Baden, then the division of Lasalle; then the first battalion of Baden, separated from the square of the voltigeurs and that of Nassau by five squadrons of the dragoons of Latour Maubourg.

In second line, the divisions of Ruffin and Villatte, were deployed.



LASALLE.

(Extrait de l'*Histoire de France* d'Henri Martin).

LASALLE. (Taken from the *History of France* of Henri Martin).

The battle began with a furious attack of the Spanish cavalry on the squares; these receive it by a terrible fire, opened at a short distance; the squadrons which fill the intervals impetuously charged the decimated enemy cavalymen, and compel them to retire.

The French divisions out flanked the wings of the Spanish army: the German Division advanced, the cavalry took the enemy from behind, and the disaster of Cuesta was complete: he left 15,000 dead on the ground. The Nassau Regiment particularly distinguished itself; the Frankfurt Voltigeurs Company had 12 wounded, and its leader, the Captain von Taunstein, had made a name for himself.

The officers and troops of Baden, Nassau, and Frankfort, -- said Victor in his report, -- showed the greatest bravery.

On 29 March Lieutenant-Colonel von Welsch rallied the division which was stationed at Medellin on the field of battle, and was charged with burying the dead. General Leval assembled his officers in a dinner, which he finished with this toast: *Long live Napoleon! Long live the Prince Primate! Long live the Confederation of the Rhine ... and all those who are for it!*

After the battle, the battalion of Frankfurt received good shoes and a new outfit: these shoes were taken from the feet of the Spaniards killed; with their brown coats, they made pants (culottes) for the troop, and the blue cloth that was requisitioned was used to make coats. The former white uniform of the battalion disappeared completely, and was replaced by a blue pants and a blue coat, the latter with red collar, lapel and seams; instead of the blue breeches it also wore white or blue trousers, falling over the gaiter. Soon after, the hats were replaced by shakos; grenadiers, voltigeurs and fusiliers, all took the insignia of the corresponding troops of France; however, they kept their national coat of arms on the plates of the shakos carved in half-moons: the old Wheel of Mainz.

After this brilliant feat of arms, Victor fell dormant in a dangerous inaction; he sent 200 Dutchmen and 25 men from each of the German regiments to the fort of Merida: Frankfurt supplied 31 soldiers for this detachment; the fort, attacked by the Spaniards, made a fine resistance; the Frankfurters, who distinguished themselves there, returned on the 27th of June to their battalion.

The English having landed in Portugal, and Cuesta having reconstituted his army; in front of this double threat, Victor had to return to guard the roads of Madrid. The German Division returned to Almaraz; on 23 May, crossing the Tagus River, the headquarters of the Frankfurt battalion and a company were almost drowned, so much had the bridge been badly repaired. It was at Almaraz that Major Vogt brought the reinforcements from the Grand Duchy: 128 men, including 32 convalescents encountered on the road.

On the 19th of June, King Joseph sent the German Division to Toledo, to support the corps of Sebastiani; he arrived there soon in person, with his guard and all the troops available at Madrid. Arrived at Toledo on 26 June after a painful march in which a large number of soldiers were struck by sunstroke (Frankfurt lost 13 men), the Leval Division was directed to the Sierra Morena, and then returned to Toledo (6 July). Joseph reviewed it, and Jourdan, his chief of staff, wrote to the Emperor:

The division of the Confederation of the Rhine is in very good condition.

The battalion, detached at Argés until 25 July, rested there on the hard marches which it had just executed, and in which Welsch considered himself happy to have left only nine men behind. (Report, 9 July)

Wellesley, assembled with Cuesta, advanced on the right bank of the Tagus to Talavera-de-la-Reina, with 25,000 Anglo-Germans and 50,000 Spaniards.

Joseph recalled to him Sebastiani, rallying Victor on 25 July and marched on the enemy with 45,000 men.

Battle of Talavera-de-la-Reina (26 July).

The English general had set up his redcoats on his left; on his right were the dark masses of the Spaniards; its center was reinforced by a great redoubt bristling with guns and kept in common by the troops of the two nations.

King Joseph had the English attacked on the 25th by the 1st Corps; but this attack had failed, and the night passed for the two armies within earshot.

As the 3,000 Poles left at Toledo could not long defend the road to Madrid against the very superior forces of the Spanish General Venegas, Joseph decided on July 26 to make a general attack on the positions of Lord Wellesley.

Victor, with the 1st corps, attacked the English left wing again. The 4th Corps was on its left, in front of the enemy center; the German Division itself formed the left of the 4th Corps, and had behind it Milhaud's cavalry and the reserves of King Joseph; it soon found itself in the grip of the English brigades of Campbell and Mackenzie, and with the Spanish cavalry: in all, with 15,000 enemies.

Let Major Fritsch recount the battle: this officer replacing Lieutenant Colonel Welsch wounded in action, says in his report:

The 4th Corps attacked at 10 o'clock. The objective of the German Division was the great enemy battery, on which it marched through difficult terrain, planted with vineyards and olive trees. The voltigeurs were the vanguard. Nassau was on the right, Holland and Baden in the center, Hesse and Frankfurt on the left. While Nassau won a brilliant advantage and captured an English regiment, Colonel Porbeck of Baden was killed in leading his regiment, and his death demoralizes his troops, who soon recoiled, dragging the regiment of Holland into their retreat. This gap in the line of battle of the German Division allowed the enemy to take Nassau in flank, and General von Schäffer could not preserve more than 67 of his prisoners... Primate and Hesse formed a square: they were charged three times by the enemy cavalry; Primate was on the front of the square: its grenadiers, decimated, were reinforced by a section of the first and one of the second company... 1 captain and 43 men were killed; Lieutenant-Colonel Welsch, 4 officers and 64 men were injured...

The German Division was supported at 2 o'clock by a French division and a Polish division, while the 1st Corps continued to fight on the left. Joseph finally deployed his reserves and all his cavalry. In the end, the French army remained on its positions...

The day was hard for the German Division: out of 4,000 men, it lost 1007, more than a quarter of its effective force. The French generals did it justice and did not spare it praise:

The French and German divisions of the 4th Corps, -- writes Sebastiani to the Emperor, -- have covered themselves with glory. The brave Colonel of the Baden Regiment, Baron Porbeck, was killed at the head of his corps. Major Welsch, Commander of the Frankfurt Battalion, was seriously injured (in the arm)...

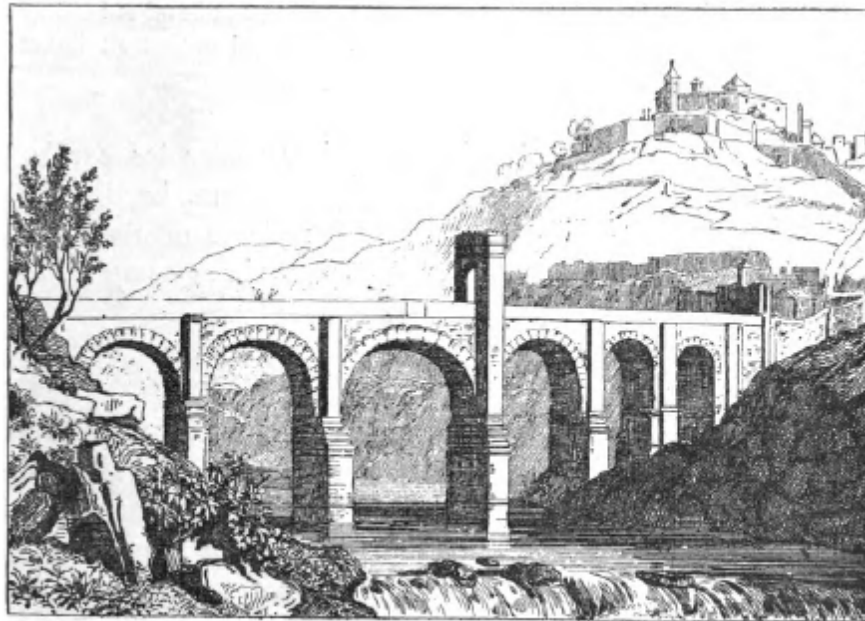
As a result of this battle, the French army withdrew. The German Division was the rear-guard, and the Frankfurt battalion "as a reward for the valor it has shown," was charged with escorting the wounded to Madrid.

In the meantime, the order from Paris was no longer to describe the Leval Division as a "German division," but as a "division of the Confederation of the Rhine."

Soult had finally reached Almaraz with 50,000 men. Free on this side, Joseph turned against Venegas with all his forces: only the company of voltigeurs of the Prince Primate can take part in these operations, because the bulk of the battalion, after heading to Madrid the wounded of Talavera, was put in cantonments between Madrid and Aranjuez.

Battle of Almonacid (11 August).

Venegas had settled at Almonacid, his left on a high mountain, and his center on a plateau north of the city. He had 30,000 men, 4,000 horses and 40 pieces of cannon "arranged in an amphitheater", says Bernays (*amphitheatralisch aufgeplantzt*).



Alcantara.

(Gravure tirée de la *France militaire*.)

Alcántara. (Engraving taken from *Military France*.)

Sebastiani commanded the French troops instead of Joseph. On 8 August, the army was assembled at Toledo; as the Spaniards held the left bank of the Tagus, Leval received the order to cross the river at the bridges of San Martino and Alcántara, to clear the valley. He executed this operation with five battalions (voltigeurs, 2 battalions of Hesse and 2 of Baden), and the French army followed him. On the 10th, Sebastiani stopped to wait for his last reinforcements, the Guard of Joseph, some French regiments, and Milhaud's cavalry arriving by Aranjuez.

Finally, the 11th, the French approached with all their strength, the Spanish left, key to the enemy position; the Polish division attacked head-on, and the German Division flanked, in a tight column by division. The center and the French left were in echelons behind.

The battalion of voltigeurs took the mamelon with a charge, under a terrible fire of artillery and musketry. Generals Leval and Schäffer (of Nassau), marching in at the head, crushed everything before them. - (Report of Sebastiani.)

The Spanish cavalry was broken against the squares. The enemy lost 3,000 killed and 4,000 prisoners. The German Division had 36 dead and 170 wounded: of this number are 13 voltigeurs of Frankfurt, whose company counted only 35 men the evening of the battle.

After this brilliant affair, the battalion was confined to Chinchón.

Detachments were posted on all sides, to protect and escort the couriers: Nassau, Baden and Frankfurt each provided a company, responsible for observing the fords of the Tagus. The companies of Baden and Nassau were surprised one night by the guerrillas and massacred: that of Frankfurt escaped the same fate by a miracle and thanks to the presence of a spirited cantinière.

Fifteen men deserted and wanted to go to the guerrillas: several of them fell under the bullets of the Spaniards before being able to make them understand their design.

The Prince Primate battalion only had 450 men under arms.

At the beginning of September, the Cuesta army, then commanded by Eguia, reformed once again and crossed the Guadiana. The French gave him chase: the battalion went to Arganda del Rey from the 1st to the 14th of September, then returned to its Chinchón quarters; on the 17th, it was sent to Toledo where he remained until October; from there it went to Yepes.

Marshal Victor, at the head of the 1st and 4th Corps and cavalry division of General Paris (successor of the brave Lasalle, killed at Wagram), forming about 30,000 men, crossed the Guadiana and went to Almagro and Manzanares: this movement was soon suspended because of the bad news: Marchand has just been beaten in Tamines and the Spaniards threaten Aranjuez and Madrid. Victor was forced to return to Toledo on forced marches: passing through Madridejos and Consuegra, it settled on the left bank of the Tagus, towards Aranjuez. The German Division, with a strength of 3,300 men, was commanded by General Schäffer, replacing General Leval, who was ill.

On 14 November de Aréizaga's army appeared in front of Ocaña: King Joseph assembled the 4th Corps with the 5th, commanded by Mortier; he sent from Madrid the Dessolles Brigade, two regiments strong, and his Guard. The whole French army was placed under the command of Soult and marched against the Spaniards.

Battle of Ocaña (19 November).

On the 18th, Sebastiani, with his cavalry division, won a great success from the Spanish cavalry.

The next day, at 11 o'clock in the morning, Leval recovered from his illness, and went on the attack with the German Division. It formed the extreme left of the French line and was supported by the French brigade of Girard and the squadrons of Sebastiani. The voltigeurs were deployed at the head of the front; behind them, the Germans advance in a close column of division (demi-battalion). The leading division fired in four ranks and then flowed rapidly to the left and right, unmasking the second division, which in turn fired, while the first division re-forms at the tail of the column.

A furious counter-attack by the Spaniards stopped the Germans: General Leval fell seriously wounded, and a sensible flutter began to manifest in his troops...Fortunately Girard advanced briskly, supporting the division and revived it. Meanwhile Soult was marching on the enemy center with the Fifth Corps, capturing Ocaña, while the cavalry sabered the Spanish right.

This brilliant victory gave us 20,000 prisoners, 36 flags and 46 guns; it cost the German division 143 killed including 3 officers, and 14 officers and 329 men wounded. Frankfurt had lost seven dead and 33 wounded. The division had only 2,500 bayonets.

While the 5th Corps pursued, the 4th Corps was on the 21st of November on Aranjuez; it was there that King Joseph made the mistake of incorporating 8,000 prisoners into his regiments; this imprudence was to contribute to the disasters of the end of his reign.

The conduct of the troops deserved all praise:

The Polish and German divisions, writes Mortier to the Emperor, engaged the combat and showed great value. The German regiments have all competed with ardor and dedication.

Dalberg, flattered with compliments addressed to his battalion, sent them six gold and twelve silver medals.

The Frankfurters then returned to Madrid. Lieutenant-Colonel Welsch asked for his leave:

My health is compromised, -- he wrote -- and I am exhausted...I attended all the engagements; and as everyone, me or my horse were injured...

In December, the battalion provided a detachment to escort 11,000 prisoners to Bayonne; Colonel Kruse, of Nassau, commanded this column, and allowed more than 3,000 Spaniards to escape on the way.

Towards the 24th of the same month, the battalion was commanded with the baggage and artillery on Palencia, between Burgos and Valladolid: the whole division was united at this point.



Bataille d'Ocaña.

Battle of Ocaña.