

The Napoleon Series

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

By Commandant Sauzey

Translated by [Greg Gorsuch](#)

THE
REGIMENT OF THE SAXON DUCHIES

FIRST CHAPTER

THE CAMPAIGN OF JENA AND THE SAXON DUCHIES

(1806)

I. -- The Duchy of Weimar furnishes to the Prussians a contingent to fight at Auerstaedt, and accompanies Blücher in his retreat on Lübeck.

We are in the autumn of the year 1806: the Prussian monarchy, carried away by a wind of military folly, shortly before the catastrophes to follow; its army, placed on the a war footing, approached Saxony: in spite of its desire to remain neutral, the Elector was obliged to yield to the pressure of events; the Prussians were very close, and the Emperor Napoleon was still far away... The Saxon Electorate troops are thus incorporated into the Prussian ranks.

But all the Allies were good for the war which was about to begin: a convention of the 4th of October, 1806, signed by the Colonel and Quartermaster General von Guyonneau on the side of the Prussia, and on the side of the Duchy of Saxe-Weimar by the Chamberlain and Major von Pappenheim, put at the service of Prussia for a period of twelve months a battalion of jäger and 40 hussars of Saxe-Weimar: these troops, together with those of the Electorate of Saxony, were to fight against the Emperor Napoleon and his allies of the Confederation of the Rhine.

It was the establishment of this "Confederation of the Rhine" which was for Prussia the real pretext of war: the ancient Austrian hegemony, ruined by the victories of the Revolution and the Empire, had been replaced by a grouping of the German states, of which Napoleon had declared himself a protector: there was no Emperor of Germany but only an Emperor of Austria; the Holy German Empire, collapsed, had abandoned the clientele of small states; and Bavaria, Württemberg, Frankfurt, Baden, Cleves-Berg, Hesse-Darmstadt, the two principalities of Nassau, those of Hohenzollern and Salm, Isembourg, Arenberg, and La Leyen, by the act of 12 July 1806, had confederated and placed under the effective protection of the French flag.

Prussia was unable to accept that these German states should be "disempowered" under French influence; and to bring back under her own aegis these strayed sheep, in order to tear them from a Frenchification which it saw too well, it drew the sword from the scabbard and insolently summoned France to return to her former frontiers and dissolve the Confederation of the Rhine.

The Emperor Napoleon took up the challenge. His army, by a double blow of thunder, simultaneously destroyed the Prussian armies at Jena and Auerstaedt. Prussia was conquered in a month, and her king obliged to sign the most

humiliating and dearly bought peace.

The battalion of the jäger of Weimar had its share of adventures in the military events which took place so rapidly during the months of October and November 1806.

The contingent of Weimar, with 24 officers and 718 non-commissioned officers and soldiers, marched on 8 October at Erfurt before the King of Prussia, and immediately entered Oswald's light brigade of the division of the Prince of Orange, part of the Prussian main army under the direct orders of the King and the Duke of Brunswick. The Oswald Brigade included, besides the Battalion of Saxe-Weimar, the battalion of fusiliers of Oswald and 5 squadrons of hussars of the regiment "Duke of Württemberg".

Ranked the 11th of October in the advanced guard corps under the orders of Blücher, the Oswald Brigade, was on the evening of the 13th at Auerstaedt, and took part the next day in the great battle of that name, where the principal Prussian army formed of 36,000 infantry and 9,600 horsemen (52 battalions, 70 squadrons, and 15 batteries) was defeated by the 3 corps divisions of Marshal Davout, --while the Emperor routed the army of the Prince of Hohenlohe at Jena.

At Auerstaedt, the Weimar battalion lost 14 killed or wounded, and then had the honor of forming the extreme rear guard of Blücher, who beat a retreat, followed by the heads of columns of the victorious French army; but it was not to play that glorious and ungrateful part until the inevitable capitulation which awaited the Prussian ruins.

II. -- Recall of the Weimar contingent.

Napoleon, after having broken the Prussian force, immediately enacted diplomacy: the Saxons prisoners were sent back to their homes, instead of being taken into captivity in the interior of France; the Elector detached himself from Prussia, recalled his troops, and approached the Emperor. The Weimar still appearing in the Prussian ranks, were ordered to return without delay to their country.

This summoning soon produced its effect. On the 2nd of November, in the neighborhood of Goldberg, the captain of Arnswald arrived from the headquarters, and ordered the battalion of Saxe Weimar to leave the Prussian troops, and to return immediately to Saxony. This order was the consequence of the following letter from the King of Prussia to the Duke of Saxe-Weimar:

Custrin, (now Kostrzyn nad Odrą) 24 October 1806.

Most Serene Duke, dear and beloved Cousin,

While thanking Your Serene Highness for having hitherto ordered the corps of my troops under his command, I find myself obliged to demand from his true friendship that he should immediately resign his command and return to his country.

M. de Wollzogen informed me at Magdeburg that the Emperor Napoleon had categorically demanded within 24 hours your recall and the return of your jäger employed in my army; I beg you, therefore, to comply without delay with this desire, as a faithful vassal and subject. The danger to which a refusal would expose me is obviously considerable.

I had therefore charged M. de Wollzogen, not knowing where your Highness is at present with the troops under his command, to send you my intentions as quickly as possible. He has probably not been able to do so until now, and I hasten to ask you to conform to the wish of the Emperor Napoleon as soon as you can, the commandment to the general who marches after you. For the salvation of your country and of your House, you will take the measures which you will judge the best, however contrary they may be to you; I release you from all obligations towards me. Your Highness knows me, and I need not add how sorry I am to be separated from an ally so faithful as Her (meaning ally).

But this sacrifice is necessary, for Her as for me, by the unfortunate circumstances present; I will defend your interests, those of your House and those of your State, as though they were my own.

I remain, in consideration and in friendship, Your Highness, the affectionate cousin.

FREDERICK-WILHELM.

Accordingly, the battalion of Weimar, meeting the next day, November 3rd, with the advance guards of Marshal Soult near Parchim, immediately informed him of its intention to return to Saxony, and received from the Marshal an itinerary which brought it back to Weimar on the 17th of November.

The battalion consisted of only 8 officers and 239 men.

The officers had to give the French Colonel Denzel, Commandant at Weimar, their word not to serve France until the end of the campaign. As for Blücher, pursued to Lübeck, he had had to lay down his arms on the 7th of November at Ratkau with the 9,400 men who still remained.

III. -- The Emperor admits the five Duchies of Saxony into the Confederation of the Rhine. -- Treaty of Posen (15 December 1806).

Napoleon had not waited for the final crushing of Prussia to push his negotiations with the Elector of Saxony. The latter, quite disposed to enter into the French calculations, was only asking to exchange his elector's cap for a crown of King: he therefore brought his accession to the Confederation of the Rhine at the beginning of December; arrived at Berlin, where he no longer found the Emperor, he finally rejoined at Posen, where he signed the treaty of 11 December: 20,000 Saxons came to augment our federated contingents.

As for the five houses of Saxony on the Ernestine line, Weimar, Gotha, Meiningen, Hildburghausen, and Coburg, the Emperor still hesitated for some time about the fate which he intended for them: would he suppress them with a pen from the list of royal houses, as he had done for those of Hanover, Brunswick, Hesse-Cassel? Or would he retain them by attaching them to "his" Confederation? Five days before the treaty which brought them into it, he wrote to Talleyrand:

"... My ideas are not yet clear on all this ..."

Finally, the light had to have been made fairly quickly, for the five duchies were admitted on 15 December into Confederation by a second treaty of Posen.

The head of the house of Saxe-Weimar, Karl August,¹ had been in the service of Prussia for twenty years; he had voluntarily served against France in 1792 and 1793. In 1806, he commanded this Prussian corps of 10,000 men who, sent to Eisenach, could not participate in the battle of Jena or Auerstaedt. He made his junction with the debris brought back by Blücher, accompanied him to his retreat as far as Lübeck, and laid down his arms only at the surrender of Ratkau. Napoleon's anger against him was great; his wife saved him; it was Louisa, Princess of Hesse-Darmstadt. The Emperor assured the latter that "all he had done for the Duke was solely due to this consideration." But the duchy was severely imposed of 2,200,000 francs of war contribution.

The duchies of Saxe-Gotha² and Saxe-Meiningen,³ having justified their having taken no part in the war, were

¹Karl August of Saxe-Weimar, born on 3 September 1757, married in 1775 to Louisa of Hesse-Darmstadt; from this marriage were born: in 1783, Karl-Friedrich (who married in 1804 Maria Pavlovna, daughter of the emperor Paul I of Russia), and, in 1792, Karl-Bernhard.

²August, Duke of Saxe-Gotha, born on 23 November 1772, married in second marriage in 1802 to Karoline-Amalie of Hesse; Duke Augustus had, from his first marriage, a daughter, Louise Dorothea Pauline Charlotte Friedrich August.

³Bernhard August Freund, Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, was born on 17 December 1800; he was then only six years old; the regency of the duchy was exercised by the Duchess Dowager Louise Eleonore of Hohenlohe Langenburg.

relieved of the contributions they had been struck: the 42nd Bulletin of the Grand Army (Posen, 1 December 1806) says in effect:

"His Majesty has disapproved of the levying of the contributions levied on the States of Saxe-Gotha and Saxe-Meiningen, and has ordered the restoration of what has been collected. These princes, having not been at war with France, and not having furnished contingent to Prussia, ought not to be subject to war contributions."

This good fortune was shared by the Duke of Saxe-Hildburghausen,⁴ who, at first had imposed a sum of 548,750 francs, succeeded in obtaining repayment.

As for the Duke of Saxe-Coburg, Franz Friederich,⁵ he almost failed to be included in the treaty, because his heir, Duke Ernst of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, was in the service of Russia; in the end, at the last moment he was authorized to send a plenipotentiary to Posen, and finally admitted himself also into Confederation.

IV. Military Contribution of the Duchies. The regiment of the five Saxon Duchies.

The Federal contingent fixed by the Treaty of Posen for each of the duchies was as follows:

	Men.	
Saxe-Weimar	800	5 companies of jäger.
Saxe-Gotha	1,100	8 companies.
Saxe-Meiningen	300	2 companies.
Saxe-Coburg	400	2 companies.
Saxony Hildburghausen	200	1 company.

The companies of Gotha and Meiningen composed two line battalions; Meiningen wore the uniform of Gotha.

The companies of Weimar, Hildburghausen, and Coburg were to form a light battalion of 1,400 men. The company of Hildburghausen had the same outfit as those of Weimar.

The three battalions constituted the "4th Infantry Regiment of the Division of the Princes of the Confederation of the Rhine." This corps is better known under the name of the "Regiment of the Five Saxon Duchies," which we shall preserve for the convenience of this account. Let us recall how the "Princely Division" was then composed:

1 st	Regiment of the Confederation of the Rhine	...	Würzburg.
2 nd	"	"	Nassau.
3 rd	"	"	Nassau.
4 th	"	"	Saxon Duchies.

⁴The reigning Duke of Saxe-Hildburghausen, Frederick Feldmar, born on 29 April 1763, and married in 1783 to Charlotte-Georgine-Louise of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, had seven children from this marriage: Joseph Georg Karl Friederich, Crown Prince, born in 1789, three other sons and three daughters, whose eldest daughter, Catherine-Charlotte-Georgine, had married in 1805 Prince Paul Heinrich Karl Friedrich August, second son of the King of Württemberg.

⁵Franz of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld, reigning duke, died in December 1806, had as his heir Ernst Aton Karl Ludwig, born 2 January 1784; the latter, who was in the service of Russia, took possession of his dominions only after the peace of Tilsit; he had two brothers and four sisters, one of whom, Antoinette-Ernestine-Amalie, married in 1798 Alexander Frederick Charles, one of the brothers of the King of Württemberg; another of his sisters, Juliene Henriette Ulrika, had been married in 1796 to Grand Duke Constantine of Russia.

It was to be composed later with:

5 th	Regiment of the Confederation of the Rhine	...	Anhalt-Lippe.
6 th	" " " "	...	Schwarzburg-Waldeck-Reuss.
7 th	" " " "	...	Mecklenburg-Schwerin and Strelitz.

The regiment of the Saxon Duchies, with a strength of 2,800 men, was immediately organized: Major d'Egloffstein, of Weimar, received the command and became colonel on 20 January 1807.

The formation of the regiment was rather difficult; besides the men at the time present under the colors and recruits, there was a considerable number of deserters and Prussian prisoners. As for the contingent of Coburg, it did not rejoin the regiment during the campaign of 1807; the reigning Duke Francis of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld had died in December 1806, and his heir, Duke Ernest of Saxe-Coburg, was at that time in the service of Russia; it was a French commission which administered the duchy until the Peace of Tilsit (9 July 1807), when Duke Ernst became duke and took possession of his dominions.

It is worth noting the originality of the regiment of the Duchies, whose contingents bore three distinct uniforms: the green coat and the gray trousers of the Weimar and Hildburghausen jäger; the blue coat with collar, cuffs and red trim and the white breeches of Gotha and Meiningen; finally, the green coat with collar and yellow facings and the Hungarian blue sky trousers from Cobourg.

V. -- A short summary of the services of the regiment of the Saxon Duchies during the period of the First Empire.

The battalion of the jäger of Weimar, which we have already seen at Auerstaedt, had existed since 1788; it appeared on the Rhine for the first time in 1796, at the outposts of the Archduke Karl, and struggled at Wetzlar, on 15 June that year, against the French troops of General Lefebvre; it came there for the last time, and again as an enemy, in 1815, in the corps of the Confederation of Northern Germany. In the meantime, and under the French eagles, the Weimar jäger would go from Fez to the Berezina, from the Alps to the Baltic and to the North Sea ...

1807. --The 4th Regiment of the Confederation of the Rhine took part in the campaign against Prussia; the soldiers of Weimar had begun it in the Prussian ranks. For the officers, the feeling of military duty stifled every personal aspiration; but it was very difficult to make the soldiers understand this change; they knew their Prince, relative and personal friend of the King of Prussia Friederich Wilhelm, was devoted to Prussia with heart and soul; they believed that their sovereign had been obliged to hand them over to the French, and many observations confirmed them in this thought: inspections of French generals, change of their arms against French arms, adoption of equipment and distinction of ranks to the ordinance of France, etc. Thus, in spite of the efforts of the officers, public opinion was established among them that to desert the service of France was to return to their Prince. At the formation of the regiment, out of 700 men of Saxe-Weimar, 600 quit and returned home; they were brought back, but it was a considerable delay for the organization and use of the battalion; it was understood that these Saxons did not wish to serve against the Prussians.

The regiment was employed, however, at the siege of Kolberg, where it remained until the Treaty of Tilsit; after which it was employed a few months in the occupation of Swedish Pomerania.

1809. --In the war against Austria, the regiment of the Duchies was brought to the camp of Passau, where its contingents, joined to those of the other little German princes, entered the composition of the "Princely Division." Then it went to fight in the Tyrol, and behaved with such a distinction that the Emperor, passing it in review at Schönbrunn, traversed its ranks, speaking to almost all the officers, distributing crosses of the Legion of Honor, made promotions and gave two pieces of cannon to the regiment. Did the Emperor wish to win over to him that German division which he might already have proposed to send to Spain?

Spain. --Napoleon's predictions were scarcely realized in regard to the services rendered to him by the Germans in the Peninsula, except that they saved him a great deal of French blood, --and this was a result which had its value-- they showed themselves ill adapted to fight in this distant country, and with a climate so different from their own; accustomed in Germany to abundant food, and to share that of the inhabitants, the Saxons could not afford the

privations of Spain, where they found nothing to live on, and where the inhabitants shared nothing with them. Desertion began again, and it must be admitted that without the presence of the Germans in Spain, the foreign corps formed by the Spaniards and the English against France would certainly not have been constituted: indeed, there were only deserters and prisoners.

However, the regiment had its days of glory in the bloody expedition of Manresa; then employed to keep some fortified points, to serve as escort of the convoys, it melted quickly away, succumbing to fatigue. What remained of these Saxons, after two years of absence, returned to Germany in 1811 to undergo a new formation.

1812. --Marching with the "Princely Division," the regiment of the Duchies assembled at Hamburg, and then proceeded to Danzig and Königsberg. There, orders arrived to descend on Smolensk "in the corps of 20,000 men": General Loison leading the last reserve of the Grand Army of Napoleon arrived at Vilnius; he had no Frenchman with him except the 29th Regiment of Infantry and his artillery; the rest was Corsican or Piedmontese (the 113th Regiment of Infantry) and German; in this gathering of soldiers, one heard all the languages of Europe.

At two marches beyond Vilnius, at Osmiana, the corps of Loison saw the remains of the Grande Armée pass, which had not yet fallen into the great icy shroud of Russia; then, at a cannonade, Cossack cavalry were springing up on all sides. Without the troops of General Loison, Vilnius would be carried off by the Russians, and the Emperor who arrived at Osmiana himself with the Sacred Squadron would also fall into the hands of the enemy ...

The remains of the Princely Division, enclosed in Danzig, contributed to the defense of this place.

1813. At the beginning of the campaign of 1813 a new battalion, furnished by the duchies of Saxony, under the name of the "battalion of Thuringia," defected to Altenburg on the 20th of April, and fought against us at the battle of the Katzbach, in the corps of Yorck.

Another contingent levied for France left Magdeburg with General Girard, was beaten at Lübnitz by the Prussian landwehr, and returned to Magdeburg, where it was disarmed by the French and dismissed.

1814. The Allies united the remains of the regiment of the Duchies, who, under Rapp, gloriously defended Danzig, with those of the battalion of Thuringia, those who had returned from Magdeburg; reinforced by volunteers on foot and on horseback and formed into two battalions, these Saxons would fight against us in the Low Countries under the orders of the Duke of Weimar, who had faithfully returned to his bonds of friendship with Prussia. The glorious Colonel of Egloffstein, who had distinguished himself in all the campaigns of the Empire, would defend Tournay against General Maison ...

Let us add, in conclusion, that in 1815, the contingent of the Saxon Duchies, recalled to activity, participated with the Prussians in the sieges of the frontier fortresses of France.

In the following chapters, we shall follow more closely the contingents of the five Saxon Duchies in the sieges, expeditions, or wars which they carried out on our side.

Of the curious and very documented memories that were left by several of the officers who served at that time in the Duchies regiment; we shall often refer to those of Major de Seebach, who wrote the history of the battalion of the jäger of Weimar in 1806, and the account of the campaigns of the Duchy regiment from 1807 to 1811; -- to the history of the troops of Gotha from 1807 to 1815, by Captain Jacobs, of the contingent of Gotha; -- finally, to the history of the regiment of the Duchies during the war against Russia in 1812, by the military doctor Geissler, of the contingent of Weimar.

The fairly frequent contradictions between these German sources have been corrected by their comparison with many French texts.

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