

The Napoleon Series

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

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THE
REGIMENT OF THE SAXON DUCHIES

CHAPTER V

THE RUSSIAN CAMPAIGN (1812)

III. -- March of the Loison Division on Vilnius.

The regiment of Duchies, since the departure from its the native soil, had hitherto marched on good (feminine) and good (masculine) roads, and the numerous stages which it had covered had been painful only by their length, often quite considerable. From the beginning of Königsberg, the roads become more difficult; the season advanced, moreover, and the cold would become a new enemy to fight. The depots had been good in Germany, Pomerania and Prussia: in Poland it would not be the same; the miserable huts of the peasants would make them regret their comfortable German houses. The language of the populations in which they passed became unknown, and many officers, to be understood, were forced to resort to their elements of Latin painfully understood by the ecclesiastics of the towns ... Finally, the means of existence which had never been lacking until then became more and more rare: in certain cantonments, as in Melanken, for example, there was nothing, and nothing could be found for any sum of gold.

The march was executed by Tilsit, where a day's stay was employed in making ear-muffs to protect from the cold: in the night of the 11th to the 12th of November, the freezing of the temperature that took place had been so sudden that the Niemen, the day before without any ice, was completely taken in the morning by ice and became passable for heavily loaded carriages.

The dysentery appeared at the same time as the cold: Major von Bose was affected and remained ill at Tilsit.

On 18 November, the Saxons arrive at Kowno where they were given a day's rest. This point, which has become historic since the crossing of the Niemen by the Grande Armée, was almost deserted by its inhabitants. Only some Jews had remained; large hospitals, established by the care of Dr. Larrey, received the first wounded of the campaign; many patients were there again, and the Duchies Regiment had a number of its soldiers admitted to it. From Kowno the musicians of the Saxon regiment were sent back to Königsberg.

On the following day, 20 November, the regiment resumed its course in the direction of Vilnius where the diplomatic corps and the Duke of Bassano were. The earth was covered with snow; dead horses lined the path and often human corpses could be divined in the snow, near the villages half-burned and devastated. At Jismoroni (Žiežmariai), the cantonment was painful; the soldiers were divided into groups of 20 to 40 men in the houses available; the light battalion, installed at the bivouac near a castle belonging to Prince Gallitzin, was reduced to maintaining its fires by burning the windows and doors of this rich dwelling.

Finally, on the 23rd of November, at 8 o'clock in the evening, the column still in progress heard the sound of the bells: it had reached Vilnius where a few days' rest would be given to it.

The Duke of Bassano administered this whole region of Lithuania, corresponding directly with the Prince of Neufchâtel, organizing and setting in motion the march battalions formed of isolated, convalescent, recruits and supervising hospitals and stores.

With the exception of the 5th Regiment of the Rhine (Anhalt-Lippe) left at Königsberg, and a battalion of the 6th Regiment (Schwarzburg-Waldeck Reuss), which was maintained as a garrison at Kowno, the Loison Division was concentrated at Vilnius; General van Hogendorp, governor of that place, passed it in review on the 26th of November, half an hour's march from the city, on a thick snow; after marching on foot, because of the bad weather, the front of the division, he made it pass by and then sent it back to its quarters, satisfied with this inspection; the Duchies Regiment had presented more than 2,000 men under arms.

A new review took place on 2 December on the occasion of the anniversary of the coronation of the Emperor; on this feast day there were double ration for the troop, a ball (for senior officers only) and a general illumination; luminous inscriptions, many transparencies celebrated the restoration of Poland, the arrival and reception of the Emperor in the city, the battle of the Moskowa and the burning of Moscow. The next day a battalion of march arrived at Vilnius, bringing for the regiment of the Duchies some officers, convalescents and recruits. A courier from Saxony also arrived the same day, bringing letters and news of the country: for many soldiers of the regiment it was the last communication with the country and the family. The regiment left Vilnius on 4 December, where no one knew yet of the occupation of Minsk by the Russians, nor of the loss of Polotsk: it was rumored, on the contrary, of a great victory of Oudinot at Borisow...

On leaving Vilnius, the troops of the Loison Division had completed their provisions and cartridges. Dr. Geissler -- who belonged as a military doctor to the Duchies regiment -- gives us a curious detail of the equipping of the soldiers at this time of the campaign:

"... It was very important to supply the men who were going to an exhausted region for several months by many armies. Each soldier had in his bag: 2 shirts, 2 pairs of shoes, spare nails and soles, 2 pairs of breeches and gaiters (in gray cloth or canvas), brushes and 60 cartridges. On both sides of the bag, 4 16-ounce biscuits; on top of the bag, a long bag of linen containing 10 pounds of flour. The weight of the bag thus loaded, with its straps and the rolled coat, amounted to 34 pounds. In addition, each man carried a linen bag containing two loaves of three pounds, and one bag of canvas encampments; with the sword, the bandolier, 3 flints for firearms, 1 screwdriver, the fusil and its trim, the soldier carried a weight of 58 pounds, possessed 4 days of bread, 4 days of biscuit, 7 days of flour, and had 60 rounds for the fight."

The 1st Battalion of the 5th Regiment of the Rhine (Anhalt), arrived recently with a column of ammunition, remained in garrison at Vilnius as well as a battalion of the Neapolitan Guard. General Loison, who was ill, was provisionally replaced by General Gratien, who took 14 battalions, 4 squadrons of the Neapolitan Guard (dragoons and hussars) and a French battery hitching large pieces; it was a division of 10,000 to 12,000 men which headed in the direction of Miednicky (Mickūnai) and arrived there at night; the cold was so violent that nobody could sleep, even around the campfires.

The Duchies Regiment has 1,620 men under arms; 110 remained in Königsberg and 879 were left in the various hospitals of the road.

5 December. --After this terrible night when the thermometer went down to 20 ° below zero and during which many cases of freezing occurred, marching was resumed and Osmiana was reached around 4 o'clock in the evening. The barracking of the troop was scarcely finished when they heard the general beating, and soon, close shots of the cannon. Then, cries: "The Cossacks! It was the body of Seslavin's partisans, with two cannons on sledges, which ran into the village itself at the troops of the division; the picket placed in front of General Gratien's quarters (a company of grenadiers from Cobourg) shot the Cossacks; astonished to find themselves in the presence of organized troops, the Russians soon retired, and the regiment of the Duchies, who came to support their bivouac pickets on the Place du Marche, ready for any event; this little fight cost the regiment some fifty wounded, many of which were not transportable and had to be left in Osmiana.

A few hours later, at 10 o'clock in the evening, the Emperor Napoleon arrived at Osmiana, escorted by a detachment of Polish cavalry.

"...He was," said Geissler, "in a Berlin pulled by six little Lithuanian horses; the Duke of Vicence, Caulaincourt, was seated at his side; on the carriage-box, the famous Mamluk Roustan and the captain of the Guard Bukasowitch, who would act as interpreter. In a sleigh followed the Grand Marshal Duroc, Duke of Frioul, and Count Lobau (Mouton). Napoleon wore a green pelisse trimmed with braids of gold, and a cap of the same stuff; he seemed sad, bearing up well. His face did not seem to change since I had seen him in Gotha in 1807, in Weimar in 1808, and the last time in Donauwörth in 1809. We were contemplating with great attention this powerful mortal to some not a few steps away from us, while generals Gratien and Vivier with the colonels of the regiments formed a semicircle" around him ... "

The Emperor soon departed for Vilnius, escorted this time by all the cavalry of the Neapolitan Guard of the division of Loison, about 800 horses; these Neapolitans were commanded by General Florestano Pepe (who was to be known later during the Revolution of 1821). These unfortunate horsemen, who had already had several of their comrades frozen the night before, were almost all to succumb to the cold in the terrible nights that followed.

It was very likely that the Duke of Bassano, by sending the Loison Division to Osmiana, prevented the Emperor from falling into the hands of the Cossacks of Seslavin, the feeble remains of the Polish lancers of the Guard, whom he had been escorting since Smorghoni not having the strength to save him from such danger.

6 December. --Few hours after the departure of the Emperor, began the defiling of the debris of the Grand Armée at Osmiana. Everyone then understood the extent of the disaster. The victory which had happily followed us to Moscow had become unfaithful to us, and the winter -- the terrible winter of 1812 -- had annihilated the army corps, the divisions, the regiments of the Imperial army... The burning of Moscow by the Russians, the necessary retreat, the heroic conduct of the rearguard with Marshal Ney, the suffering brought by the cold, the progressive disorganization of the troops, the fatal consequences of the loss of Minsk, the heroic combats and the crossing of the Berezina before the united Russian forces, finally the exhaustion of the rest of the troops after this last effort: all this dramatic tragedy unfolded in the thought of the soldiers of the Loison Division who saw passing before their eyes the waves of what had been the Great Armée ...

No more order, no more military groupings, no more subordinate bond ... 60,000 to 80,000 men in the most indefinable mixture, horsemen and infantry, generals, officers and soldiers, dragoons, cuirassiers, hussars, grenadiers, pontooners, here and there a drummer with his drum at the head of a column element, soldiers of the Guard, gunners with or without guns, Frenchmen, soldiers of all the nations of Europe, a mass, a chaos, passing without any other idea, with no other sustained preoccupation than to go, to go faster, to go further ...

This gloomy procession lasted without interruption, from the 5th of December to the evening of the 7th of December.

The troops of Marshal Oudinot and those of Marshal Victor, as well as the Imperial Old Guard, still preserved a military organization and seemed to channel the human torrent; but this organization was soon to break, human forces having a limit that the excess of misery and suffering seemed to have exceeded already. The cold, becoming terrible, was soon to disperse the few soldiers still in order ...

The Loison Division understood that it remained the last and only reserve of the army.

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