

The Napoleon Series

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

By Commandant Sauzey

Translated by [Greg Gorsuch](#)

PREFACE

Major Sauzey proposed to make the history of all the troops of the Confederation of the Rhine, and in three perfectly exact and complete volumes he has already presented us with three German contingents which served during the Empire under the French flags.

The first volume, published in 1902, is devoted to the Frankfurt Regiment, to the soldiers of Prince-Primate Dalberg, who presided over the Council of the Confederation of the Rhine, and who possessed, besides the title of Grand Duke, the sovereignty of the city of Frankfurt (am Main). These soldiers fought in Spain, in Russia, in Danzig, and M. Sauzey showed very well how many thought, felt like the French; how, when they left Spain and trampled our soil, they thought they were touching their native land: how Napoleonism was so deeply anchored in their soul that one of their officers, going to Russia, boasted of going to plant the Imperial eagle at the limits of the world.

The second volume, published in 1905, deals with the Baden contingent. It shows how the Baden, at first rather awkward and timid, had become brave and alert; after having remained in the rear of the army, after having secured the service of transports and convoys, they received at the siege of Danzig during the Prussian campaign the baptism of fire and, consequently, commanded by chiefs who were given the impulse by the hereditary Prince of Baden and by the young and energetic Graf Hochberg, they appear in our ranks in the first line on the Peninsula, at Essling and Wagram, during the expedition to Russia, whence only 145 -- out of 4,881 -- had escaped!

In his third volume, which dates from 1907, M. Sauzey studies the Saxons. He judges that they have always fought courageously when the French were numerous at their side, and that, being left to themselves in a separate corps, they frequently had failings, as they did not shine in 1809 when they had Bernadotte at their head, and Napoleon said, in fact, that they were mediocre, and that they did not deserve the praise which Bernadotte bestowed upon them. But M. Sauzey admits that they distinguished themselves in 1812, and showed, from one end of the country to the other, discipline, endurance, and fearlessness, that they often lacked food, and supported "unheard of fatigue in an inhospitable country and in the most inclement weather." In particular, he insisted at the Battle of the Moskowa, on the retreat, on the role of Thielmann, and when he shows at the end of his narrative how the Saxons passed over to the Allies on the day of Leipzig, he considers this defection, perhaps with excessive severity, as a dishonorable perfidy.

The fourth volume of Commander Sauzey, the one we praise, relates to the regiment of the Saxon Duchies. The same qualities will be found there as in the preceding volumes, those qualities which our neighbors of the other Vosges call scrupulous concern and accuracy, which we call exactitude and care. It is enough to read the list of the sources consulted to convince ourselves that M. Sauzey is, as they say, up to date, and we will gladly follow in his marches and campaigns the regiment of German infantry of which he traces the destinies.

This regiment is the fourth of the Princely Division or division of the princes of the Confederation of the Rhine. It consisted of three battalions: two line battalions (eight Saxe-Gotha companies and two Saxe-Meiningen companies)

and a light battalion of battalions (five Saxe-Weimar companies, two Saxe-Coburg companies and one Saxe-Hildburghausen).

The regiment was first employed in the investment of Kolberg (now Kołobrzeg): Napoleon wanted to test his Allies in the siege warfare and on leaving this school, to send them onto the battlefield. But many soldiers deserted not to compete with the Prussians, their brothers in arms of yesteryear.

In 1809, during the Austrian campaign, the regiment of the Duchies fought against the insurgents of the Tyrol.¹ It was to experience a disaster in the valley of Oberau which has since been called the defile of the Saxons, the *Sachsenklemme*. On the 4th of August it marched from Sterzing (Vipiteno) to Brixen (Bressanone). It was they who formed the vanguard. It occupied Mauls, Sack, Mittewald (Mittebald); it removed the abatis established on the road; it entered between the steep heights to the right, and the torrent of the Eisack (Isarco), to the left. Suddenly, from the mountains, at a given signal, fell and rolled with the rapidity of lightning, the trunks of trees and the quarters of rock which the insurgents prepared the day before to crush their enemies and precipitate them into the torrent. It was a frightful scene. It seemed to the Saxons that the mountains themselves crumbled upon them. There was a moment's silence; then, in the midst of the clouds of dust which the avalanche had raised, burst forth the painful cry of the wounded and the dying. However, in spite of the obstacles, despite the hail of stones and bullets, the Saxons advanced as far as Oberau. The bridge was burnt and the river impassable. They succeeded, however, in driving the peasants back to Brixen. But the next day the Saxons had a new setback. General Rouyer, who commanded the division, had decided to retreat to Sterzing, because Marshal Lefebvre was operating at the same time a retrograde movement on Innsbruck. Very imprudently, he ordered the Duchies Regiment to hold Oberau until the following day. Scarcely had he departed than the Saxons were surrounded by the mountaineers. After a desperate resistance in the gardens of the village, Colonel Egloffstein, lacking food and ammunition, put himself at the head of the able-bodied men, and retired to Mittewald and Sterzing. The wounded whom he had to leave defended themselves to the utmost in the houses and barns; in the evening they were slaughtered by the Tyrolese, or forced to surrender. 24 officers and 946 soldiers killed, wounded, or taken prisoners, were the losses sustained by the regiments of the Duchies in these unfortunate affairs of the 4th and 5th of August. This was almost half of his everyone, it had acquired, as M. Sauzey says, a true reputation for bravery, and where it had failed, Marshal Lefebvre also failed a few days later with much superior forces.

In 1810 and 1811, the regiment operated in Spain, but reluctantly and without much use. In the two nights preceding its departure, at Mannheim, two hundred of its men had deserted, and it had only one battalion of the line. These Germans, accustomed to abundant food, could not, in Spain, make do with privations; they found nothing to live on; desertion recommenced; if Napoleon, remarked Commandant Sauzey, had not sent Germans to the Peninsula, the foreign corps which the Spaniards and the English formed against France would not have existed, for they consisted only of prisoners and deserters. The regiment, however, distinguished itself at Manresa, on an expedition in which it had 12 officers and 350 soldiers killed, wounded or taken, and Augereau, who was commander in chief the Army of Catalonia, expressed his satisfaction with the Germans "for the brilliant manner in which they had behaved." But, little by little, the Saxe Regiment wore out and melted away; fatigue, sickness, misery consume it slowly; when it came to garrison at Gerona, in the month of August, 1810, it had only 650 men under arms; when it returned to Germany in June 1811, 32 officers and 2,100 non-commissioned officers and soldiers were missing. It may therefore be said, with Mr. Sauzey, that the campaign of Catalonia almost annihilated the 4th Regiment of the Rhine. The Russian campaign, writes our author, "brings a new hecatomb of our Saxon allies and again they communicate with us in sacrifice and in death." With 2,800 men, the Saxon regiment was first stationed at Hamburg and ... it smuggled there. Its field of operation was between Hamburg and Altona. The peasants stuffed the soldiers with prohibited goods: they put chocolate, coffee, spices in their sacks, shakos, cartridge belts, even into the barrel of their fusils, and all these commodities entered militarily into Hamburg, under the nose of the douaniers. The regiment then occupied Swedish Pomerania. Finally, in the month of November, 1812, it traveled to Russia; it was (part) of the Loison Division, that supreme reserve which joined the Grande Armée and which spoke all the languages of Europe.

It crossed the Russian frontier, leaving the sick in Kaunas; it arrived on the 23rd of November at Vilnius; it left that

¹Allow me to quote here a word from Goethe; he wrote in his *Annals*, dated 1809, that the departure of the jäger from Weimar to the Tyrol was sad and disturbing, *traurig und bedenklich*.

city on the 4th of December. The next day, at Ashmyana (Osmiana), it was attacked by the Cossacks of Seslavin, who wounded about fifty men, and it saw pass Napoleon who was hastily returning to his capital. Napoleon, wearing a fur-lined hat and wearing a green pelisse with golden tresses, Napoleon "sad, but well composed." Then the wreckage of the Grande Armée presents itself to Ashmyana, and the Loison Division understood that it remained the only troop still solid, still organized, the only ones capable of forming the rear. But, on the 7th, how many soldiers fell that would not rise again! On the 8th, when the regiment returned to Vilnius, it left more than 600 men on the snow. On the 10th it left Vilnius and, on its way, its second battalion was cut off, sabered, and captured. It crossed the pass of Ponary, climbed the plateau, and in the evening, while thinking with pain that it had lost in that day a quarter of its strength, it thawed before its bivouac fires the little bread it could save. But one must read in the book of Mr. Sauzey the account of this lamentable retreat. When, on the 28th of December, at Kaliningrad (Königsberg), Murat saw the troops of the Confederation of the Rhine march before him, the regiment of the Duchies had only 550 men, half of whom had no weapons. The King of Naples saluted it with these words: "Ah! These brave Saxons!" And the brave Saxons responded with the cry of: *Es lebe der Kaiser!* (Long live the Emperor!)

Besieged in Danzig and incorporated in the German brigade or European battalion, these Saxons who escaped from Russia contributed to the defense of the place, and when the capitulation took place, they separated with regret from the French, their companions in misfortune and of glory.

But the duchies had to supply Napoleon with new contingents. At the beginning of the campaign of 1813 a battalion, which they had formed under the name of the battalion of Thuringia, defected to Altenburg and fought against us, with Yorck at the Katzbach.

A ducal regiment belonged to the Girard Division. On the 27th of August, however, it was routed at Lübnitz by the Prussians. Enclosed in Magdeburg, where, commanded by Le Marois, the men deserted in great numbers. On the 12th of November Le Marois led the regiment, unarmed, in capote and police cap, to the advanced works, and allowed it to return to its homes or to remain in the city; the soldiers went off at once. The officers returned to the fortress; but, three days later, they too left, having given their word not to serve for a year against France.

This fourth volume of *the Germans under the French Eagles*, offers a useful reading, and certain parts, such as the Tyrolean campaign and the Oberau fights, such as the retreat of the Loison Division, are truly endearing. Let us hope Commander Sauzey continues a series so brilliantly begun and to have enough leisure to lead to a good and happy end of this series of studies on the allies of Napoleon. When it is finished, this collection of volumes, so patiently documented and so conscientiously made, will rank among the most solid publications of which the military history of the First Empire was the object. Mr. Sauzey successfully searches our archives and he consults, he cites all the German memoirs and books on the subject. Nothing or almost nothing escaped him. Thus, in the present volume, he has reproduced, in full, according to the work of Major de Seebach, the interesting itinerary of the Saxons, who traveled from the Rhine to the Pyrenees, through France. It must be added that the author has greatly enhanced the value of his work by his studies of his iconographic sources - he is, as we know, in the matter of military costumes, one of the most versed men in France - by the complete details he has brought on uniforms from 1806 to 1813, by plans and maps, by portraits, by very beautiful illustrations, very well received, several of which are in the hands of the excellent artist who is the captain of Mandres?

Arthur CHUQUET.

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