

The Napoleon Series

The Germans under the French Eagles: Volume III the Saxons in Our Ranks Chapter Three Part VIII: Campaign of 1812

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CHAPTER III

CAMPAIGN OF 1812¹

2. -- COMBATS OF CZAŚNICKI, SMOLNA AND LUKOML.

Prince Wittgenstein had, on 18 October, a second battle of Polotsk, forcing the 2nd Corps (Saint-Cyr) and the 6th (Bavarian) to abandon their positions on the Dvina. The 2nd Corps had withdrawn on the line of Ulla and the Bavarians on Vilna. Marshal Victor, at the end of October, conducted the 9th Corps to Czaśniki (now Chashniki), to assemble with the troops of the 2nd Corps, and to attack with them the Russian forces descending from the north on the Smolensk highway: he thus covered the retreat of the Great Army.

The Daendels Division and the "Prince Jean" Light Horse had also withdrawn to the position of the Ulla: the Girard Division occupied the right; the Poles held the village of Czaśniki; the left stretched as far as Neu-Lepel.

The enemy attacked 31 October; it seized the village of Czaśniki after a long struggle, and thus obliged the Saxon regiments posted on the right of the village to retire: this retreat, under a violent fire of artillery, was protected by the tirailleurs of the regiment of "Rechten." And was made by the bridge west of Smolna; Lieutenant von Koppenfels, who had been seriously wounded, nevertheless defended the bridge for two hours against the enemy's infantry: it was necessary to send him the order to rally his regiment.

The regiment of "Rechten" lost 1 officer and 18 men; that of "Low", 1 officer and 56 men. The two canons of this last regiment having been disassembled had to be sent to Minsk.

On 3 November, Major General Girard issued the order of the day:

"The general of division testifies his keen satisfaction for the intrepidity that the troops showed on the day of the fight of Czaśniki. The Saxon artillery and French artillery have performed remarkably well."

Wittgenstein occupied the line of the Ulla after the fight of 31 October. Victor retreated to Lukoml and Tchereia with the 9th Corps -- and the 2nd, which he also commanded as a result of General Oudinot's injury. On 6 November, at Lukoml, Fournier's cavalry division was attacked unexpectedly who scarcely had time to mount; they charged and repulsed the enemy. Major Ziegler commanded the Saxon light horse at this affair, where the Lieutenants v. Planitz and Bose were wounded with sabers.

¹ This chapter is based on the excellent work of M. Lieutenant-Colonel Exner: *Der Antheil der Königlich Sächsischen Armee am Feldzuge Gegen Russland 1812* (Leipzig, Dunker and Humblot, 1896). -- We have followed the same divisions in material, and we have happily followed the rich contribution made by the Saxon Archives of War in this part of our national history.

The next day the Russians attacked Lukoml again and captured it at first, but the village was soon taken over by a Baden battalion, while the cavalry division of Fournier marched against the Russian cavalry and jostled them. The Saxon light horse lost only one cavalryman in that charge where the Lieutenant von Altrock was wounded.

Lieutenant-Colonel Polentz, from the "Low" Regiment, says in his 8 November report to the Saxon Minister of War:

"The regiment is in a sad situation, after so many long marches and so many bivouacs in the water and without wood; during the stay in Smolensk, the men had to sleep ten nights in the streets in an intense cold, and during this time they only had two distributions of bread and bad meat. The carriages had been sent back for a fortnight: they could no longer follow these bad roads. Many men go barefoot; 10 officers and 328 soldiers are in hospitals or convalescent depots; 46 men died of exhaustion during the last stages."

Napoleon renewed the order to remove the enemy from the line of retreat. Victor advanced on the 11th of December to Czaśniki; the Russians retreated slowly; they fought a serious battle on the 14th near Smolna. The regiment of "Rechten", scarcely 500 men, distinguished itself there; placed at the far right and under the fire of the artillery (Colonel von Bose was wounded), it had to withdraw. For the rest of this fight, let us refer to the account of Captain Obernitz, attached to the report of Colonel Einsiedel who had taken command of the regiment:

"On arriving at Smolna, the 1st Division of the 1st Battalion was sent (forward) as skirmishers, but it was not sufficient, and the other two divisions followed, so that I had the whole battalion under my command. We advanced first as tirailleurs to the right of the village; it was full of Russians sheltering behind the houses; there were also some in a hollow road. Five times I drove the Russians out of the village with bayonets; but they always retreated to a height from which we received bundles of grape; also, fearing to be turned by the right and having no support, we were forced to return to our first position. The evening arrived; the soldiers had burned their cartridges and those which they had twice received during the combat: finally the French arrived, took our place, and I received the order to retire."

"I can and must say that my soldiers bravely led and followed me immediately when I led them to attack."

The regiment lost 8 officers and 90 men killed or wounded, and bivouacked in the evening west of Smolna.

Although the fight of the 14th remained undecided, and a reconnaissance of the chief of staff, Colonel Duchâteau, made the next day with the 2nd Battalion of "Low" and the lancers of Berg had found that the enemy did not follow, Marshal Victor decided on a new retreat on Lukoml to get closer to the road by which the Grand Army was withdrawing, already in disorder.

The 9th Corps arrived on the evening of November 25th in Borisow, harassed by the Cossacks, and after daily engagements with the enemy. The troops had suffered terribly from the cold and almost absolute lack of food.

"Most of our men" -- say v. der Planitz -- "had nothing on the body but shreds of clothing. The horses have had no more fodder for many days, and wore skins wrapped around their hooves; we attended at Borisow the retreat at the Grande Armée: a spectacle full of horror! -- It passed pell-mell, unarmed infantry, cavalry without horses, in rags, exhausted with hunger and misery..."

3. -- THE BEREZINA.

On 23 November, attacked during his march on Borisow, Marshal Oudinot fought the vanguard of Admiral Chichagov: the latter, mistakenly believing he had before him the entire French army, drew back, and had the Borisow bridge destroyed. Marshal Victor, on the other hand, had stopped Wittgenstein on the road to Chereya. Returning to Loshnitsa, the 9th Corps had soon received orders from Napoleon to march against Russian troops coming from the north.

As a result of the measures taken by the Emperor, the points chosen to pass the Berezina, between Studyanka and Veselovo, were almost completely depleted by the Russians, of whom only one division remained in front of Studyanka, near Brili.

On the 26th, at 8 o'clock in the morning, the construction of the bridges began. The one reserved for infantry and cavalry was completed at one o'clock; -- that for the carriages was at 4 o'clock: this last, several times broken, ended up being unserviceable.

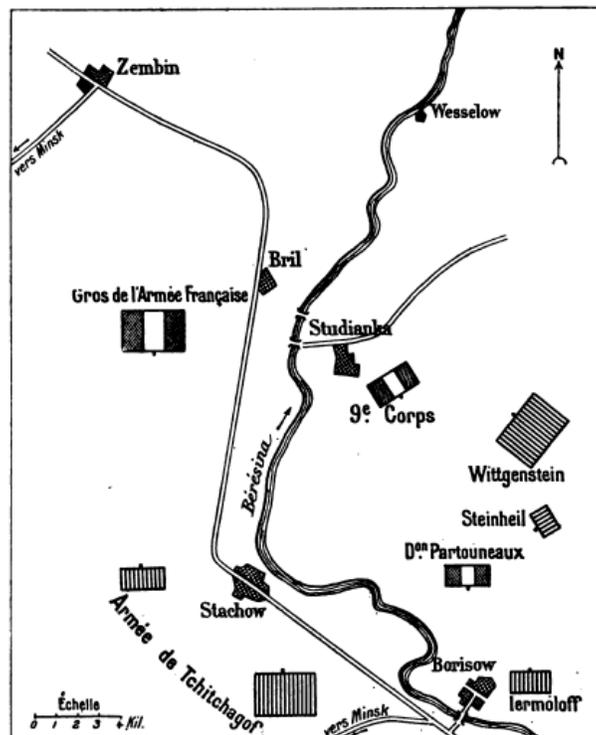
The Berezina, 100 feet wide and 3 feet and a half to 5 feet deep, had marshy banks covered with bunches of wood. The construction of the bridges, led by General Eblé, proceeded with extreme rapidity, in spite of the difficulties presented by the insufficiency of the equipment and the sudden arrival of the thaw.

"But," -- says Chambray (III.59-61) -- "nothing stopped the brave pontooners. Exhausted by the privations and deprived for a long time of all restorative nourishment, they worked day and night, in the water to the shoulders, and died for the safety of the army."

After having crossed the Berezina, Oudinot drove from Brili the Russian division which was established there and occupied Zembino: the road was free, and one thus had the possibility to save at least a part of the army.

On the evening of the 26th, the French army was reunited between Zembino, Borisow, Loshnitsa, and Studyanka. Kutuzov, who was hesitantly advancing, had the bulk of his forces south of Kokhanovo, with small detachments in the direction of Ratulitz. Wittgenstein was halfway between Barany and Borisow. Chichagov occupied Zabashevichi, with an advance guard on the right bank of the Berezina, opposite Borisow.

The situation of the French army was critical. It was threatened with envelopment by the very superior forces of the enemy. The complete lack of Russian armies alone could save her: this was what happily happened for Napoleon, who began the crossing of the river on the 27th, at Studyanka, as soon as his forces were united. Only the Girard and Fournier divisions of the 9th Corps remained on the left bank to cover the bridges, while the Partouneaux Division took up a position near Borisow in order to deceive the enemy on the point chosen for the passage.



Positions des armées sur la Bérésina, le 27 novembre, à 4 heures du soir.

(D'après Exner.)

Positions of the armies on the Berezina, 27 November, at 4 o'clock in the evening.
(According to Exner.)

On the 27th the advance guard of Admiral Chichagov and General Chaplits furiously attacked the weak troops of Oudinot on both banks of the river, but without success. Towards evening, the division of Partouneaux (commanded by General Camus, replacing injured Partouneaux) who had been sent as support the Saxon Light Horse "Prince Jean" and the Hessian uhlans -- surrounded on all sides in withdrawing from Borisow the army corps had been forced to surrender.

Second Lieutenant von Wolf, Light Horse, says in his "Diary" about this event:

"The Partouneaux Division was set in retreat on the 27th at nightfall. The two cavalry regiments remained near Borisow to collect the few detachments which remained behind. When our regiment set out in its turn, the proximity of the enemy was divined from the fires that surrounded us on all sides. The broken and exhausted horses could scarcely support themselves on the slippery ground and moved at a walk or trot when they were vigorously pushed. The previous days had been so painful that we were under the influence of a real physical and moral torpor. In this state of prostration, we could scarcely render services as cavalry; but we were not afraid that we had to open a passage. After a short movement backwards, we took a new position on the right wing, north of Borisow, while the infantry formed in squares was on the heights north of the city. Thousands of stragglers crashed on the bridges, and their cries and cannonade filled the air. By the light of the burning houses, we saw ourselves surrounded on all sides, but did not receive any of the shots fired at us from afar."

"The regiment spent the night dismounted, behind a little height, in thick snow, without a crumb of bread, without shelter against the cold, which an icy wind rendered barely bearable. It had to choose between surrender, or die of hunger and cold. During this night, which cost the lives of many of our men, a parliamentarian came to our bivouac to inform us that a brigade of the division had already laid down their arms, and that the rest were surrounded by very superior forces. On the morning of the 28th, General Delaitre announced, in the midst of a great silence, the news of our inevitable capitulation. The regiment went to the Russian bivouacs of Borisow, where our horses were immediately handed over to the regiment of the hussars of Grodno; this scene was poignant!"

"It was the end of the campaign for the Regiment of Light Horse of "Prince Jean" and could be considered as if vanished. Without having found the opportunity to distinguish itself as in the campaigns of 1806 and 1809, it had fulfilled its task in Russia until the last moment, and had never forgotten his duties towards his King and the Homeland!"

Under the terms of the capitulation, the officers kept their arms, their equipment, and their horses. The 6,000 men of the division were first taken to Vitebsk, and then interned west of Saint-Petersburg.

Lieutenant v. Der Planitz relates that the stay at Vitebsk was frightful: the greater number of men, unwilling to enter the service of Russia, died of hunger and misery.

An order of the Emperor Alexander of 30 November 1813, put an end to the captivity during which the regiment of Light Horse "Prince-Jean" had seen eight of its officers die: Colonel von Raysky was one of them; only 18 officers and some horsemen returned to Saxony in January 1814.

The division of Girard -- consisting of the Polish, Berg and Saxon brigades, and seven squadrons -- had taken up positions, on the 27th of November, in the afternoon near Studyanka, on the left bank of the Berezina, to cover the bridges: the right was supported by the Berezina, the left was exposed. The village, consisting of huts and barns, was not suitable for defense. The regiments, arranged in order of battle under the cannon of the Russians, were often obliged to form squares before the attacks of the enemy cavalry. Many men died of cold during the night of the 27th, when they had to pass without wood, without straw, and without provisions, under an icy wind; the regiment of "Rechten", however, lost only four men.

To be able to contain Wittgenstein's expected attack long enough, Napoleon ordered the Badin Brigade, which had already crossed the river, to return to Studyanka. The infantry recrossed the bridges, at the price of incredible efforts, while the artillery, left on the right bank, held under its fire all the ground which extended in front of the right wing.

On the 28th in the afternoon Marshal Victor's position was as follows: on the right wing, south of the village, the Baden Brigade and a French battalion; in the center, the brigade of Berg's troops and the Poles; on the left wing, the Saxon brigade with four guns; lastly, on the far left, General Fournier and 7 squadrons (Hussars of Hesse and Light Horse of Hesse). The force of the 9th Corps was from 6,500 to 7,000 men. The regiment of "Rechten" still had 300 men under arms, and that of "Low" 500; this last regiment was commanded by Major Wolan, replacing Colonel von Jeschky, who had died.

Wittgenstein, who remained in Borisow, attacked the 9th Corps with only half of the forces at his disposal. The Baden battalions, commanded by the brave Prince William of Baden, repulsed the attack of the Russians on the right wing; who recommenced the attack of Girard's division with fresh troops. The fight remained a long time undecided. The Hussars of Baden (whose chief, Colonel von Laroche, was wounded in this affair) and the Light Horse of Hesse found the occasion to charge and with success.



(D'après une gravure sur bois de l'époque.)

VICTOR DUKE OF BELLUNE MARSHAL OF THE EMPIRE.

(After an wood engraving of the time.)

Night alone stopped the fight and gave the opportunity to retire to the bridges. It took three hours, in the midst of a frightful mob, to cover a distance which would ordinarily have been reached in 30 minutes.

Another battle was fought at the same time on the left bank of the Berezina, where Marshals Ney and Oudinot had taken up positions south of Brili, with the debris of the 3rd and 5th Corps, and the Guard in reserve behind them: in all, about 16,000 men. The attack of General Chaplits and the advance guard of Admiral Chichagov was repulsed successfully.

During the battles of Brili and Studyanka, which were called the battle of the Berezina, was the passage of the innumerable crowd of stragglers of all the corps. Disorder and panic reached the highest pitch, when the Russian batteries opened fire, from the heights of the left bank:

"The balls and shells" -- says the report of the French Colonel Chapelle -- "arrived in this pressed mass of men, horses and carriages, and caused an inexpressible confusion."

Officers and soldiers were trampled underfoot. Many men threw themselves into the Berezina and perished there; many horses, pushed into the river, remained caught by the ice. It was impossible to remedy the disorder. The fire ceased on either side at about five o'clock, at nightfall. Only the 9th Corps crossed the bridges in good order, taking its artillery; it had retired only at 10 o'clock in the evening, leaving in its position a rearguard, of which the two Saxon regiments belonged.

Major von Hausen of the "Rechten" Regiment recounts the following story of the fight at Studyanka, where the regiment fought on the left wing:

"On the 28th, the vanguard of Wittgenstein's corps attacked the position of our corps. The Russians attacked at 2 o'clock the left wing, where our brigade was stationed: we repulsed the attack, but without gaining ground; we were too weak for that. The Captains von Obornitz and Bose fell, Colonel Einsiedel received a grape shot in the chest; Durrfeld's adjutant was wounded in the heel, a shell took one leg from Heldreich's adjutant, who remained on the ground and was taken prisoner. Captain von Dörring was wounded in the mouth, a ball grazed my head. I went back to get dressed, and I waited from 7 o'clock in the evening until midnight at the entrance of the bridge before I could cross. The French plundered before my eyes all the carriages that were waiting there, and set out in the greatest disorder. The regiment crossed the bridge before daylight, and I rejoined it."

The Saxon troops were the last to pass the Berezina; the bridges were destroyed and burned on the 29th at 9 o'clock in the morning. Thousands of stragglers, wounded and sick to whom it had not been possible to make their way, saw themselves cut off. Their position, with a cold of more than 20°, was appalling.

Napoleon had arrived at Berezina on the 26th of November, with 40,000 men; 3 days later, he had a total of 9,000 men in a state to fight.

"The passage of the Berezina" -- said Bogdanovich -- "marked the end of the existence of the Grand Army led by Napoleon against Russia. The small remaining debris was unable to defend the many stragglers who followed them, nor to defend themselves. Escape alone could still save them."

Of the 600,000 men he had brought, Napoleon brought back only a few thousand; but among these, all his marshals, many generals, officers, and old non-commissioned officers seasoned by many campaigns. If Napoleon had not saved this debris, he would not have been able to reconstitute in the four months after a new army of conscripts, and to fight successfully against the Russians and Prussians together. If the Russians had made a decisive effort at the Berezina, it is most likely that the bloody battles of 1813, 1814 and 1815 would have been avoided.

Clausewitz speaks in the same sense:

"Bonaparte escaped with 40,000 men: if the will of On-High had not allowed him to escape with some of his family, he would have been forced into a dead end where his loss was certain. If Admiral Chichagov had occupied, with only 10,000 men, the point of Zembino, which was only half a mile distant from his position of Borisow, Bonaparte could not have made his opening, -- any other way than that was impossible from then on: in twenty-four hours, hunger was doing its work and it would forever allow Napoleon's rule." -- (Letter to Stein, 30 November 1812.)

4. -- RETIREMENT ON VILNA. -- COMBAT OF MALADZYECHNA. RETURN TO SAXONY.

The division of Girard covered the retreat in the direction of Vilna (Vilnius). The two Saxon regiments still had 200 men under arms, but the cold diminished this number day by day. After the fight of Pleshchenitsy, where the grape shot stopped the pursuit of the Russians, the debris of the 9th Corps arrived on the 3rd of December at Maladzyechna. The cold having taken 140 men from the Saxon brigade the previous days, only 60 men and 30 officers remained; On the 4th, they were given the defense and the destruction of the bridge over the Usha which brings one to Maladzyechna. Captain von Lichtenhayn and the Lieutenants von Brandenstein and Biela (the latter of the "Low"

Regiment) commanded the little troop charged with this mission: all the officers and 44 men remained there; during the fight, the non-employed officers kept the four flags of the two regiments, which had hitherto been able to be kept safe.

At the defeat of 10 December near Ochmiana, south-east of Vilna, these flags, given to the regiment in 1811 and so faithfully guarded, disappeared in an unexplained manner to this day; 16 Saxons armed with fusils took part in this fight, defending a bridge against enemy eiger; this combat ended in a disorderly retreat on Vilna: Colonel Einsiedel, Major von Wolan and a lieutenant were taken prisoner.

The 9th Corps had kept its cohesion as far as Vilna; it was completely dissolved there; by groups, by fractions, these debris went to Marienwerder, where their assembly point was fixed.

In the middle and at the end of January 1813, the remains of the Saxon regiments returned to their homeland: from the "Rechten" Regiment, 6 officers returned, including Major von Hausen. From the regiment of "Low" 10 officers -- 27 men had rejoined at Marienwerder, but died soon after from illness.

In eight weeks, the Saxon troops attached to the 9th Corps, after having distinguished themselves in the fighting south of Vitebsk and Berezina, had been almost entirely destroyed.

On 1 January 1813, Brigadier General Baron von Villiers wrote from Königsberg to the Saxon Minister of War von Cerrini in Dresden:

"Having had the honor, in the 9th Corps of the Grand Army, of commanding during the campaign the two Saxon regiments "Rechten" and "Low", I leave it to myself to report to Your Excellency the remarkable conduct of these two regiments, and send him my report on some officers. I certify that, from the point of view of fearlessness and discipline, the officers and soldiers of these regiments left nothing to be desired. In the many battles fought by the 28th Division of which these regiments were a part, the "Low" and "Rechten" Regiments have always been covered with glory. They showed their cold bloodedness (sang-froid) under cannon fire as under bullets, at Smolna, at Czasniki, at Berezina, at Malotetchino. I regret not being able to remember the names of all the officers who have distinguished themselves, but I hasten to inform Your Excellency of the names of those whose feats of arms are still present in my memory:"

"I will first mention Colonel von Bose, an officer of the greatest bravery, always animated by the greatest zeal in the service, until he was wounded in the left arm by a cannonball on the 14th of November."

"Then Major von Hausen, an officer of high intelligence, to whom I owe a special mention for the services he rendered to me in the drafting and execution of my orders. He was wounded in the head on 28 November, at a critical moment, executing an order I had given him. I particularly recommend him to Your Excellency."

"The two officers who commanded the skirmisher platoons of the "Rechten" Regiment -- and whose names escape me -- showed great fearlessness and were both wounded."

"Major Wolan of the "Rechten" Regiment received from me the command of the "Low" Regiment, when the latter regiment lost all its superior officers."

"Finally, I will cite Colonel von Einsiedel from the "Rechten: Regiment."

"After having been wounded myself a second time in the battle of Malotetchino, at the head of these two brave regiments, I was forced to give up their command and I do not know what has become of them."

"Very few officers and soldiers must remain in the ranks; but if these two regiments have been largely annihilated, they have the glory of having been decimated by the fire of the enemy, of inflicting until the last moment upon it enormous losses, and of having preserved up to their destruction the order and the discipline, which is proper to valiant soldiers. His Majesty the King of Saxony can rest assured that the "Low" and "Rechten" Regiments have, in a remarkable way, supported the honor of the Saxon arms."

"I have the honor to be, of Your Excellency, the most devoted and obedient servant."

Baron von Villiers, Brigadier General
in the service of His Majesty the Emperor.

769 Saxon officers and 25,997 men had taken part in the campaign against Russia. In these figures are included the reinforcements arrived at the Grand Army, but not the troops attached to the division of Morand, in Pomerania.

Only 3,500 men returned to their homeland.

298 officers and 5,100 men were killed, wounded or taken prisoner.

99 officers and 22,500 men died as a result of fatigues of the campaign or contagious diseases.

According to the reports of the contemporaries, of our Austrian allies, and even of the enemy, the Saxon army showed in all the battles and in all the combats discipline, endurance and intrepidity; it distinguished itself above all by enduring -- often without food -- unheard-of fatigues in an inhospitable country and in the most inclement climate.

The Russian campaign, so full of glorious and harmful events, was over; but after the battles in Poland and Volhynia, after the battles of Moskowa and Berezina, a new war was soon to begin, to which the Saxon army was still to take part.

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