

Beresina 1812

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BERESINA 1812

The day-by-day calendar in my office shows a pretty Swiss picture on the front. On the back each day special anniversaries are recorded, the birthday of a famous man or some historic event. Thus, quite accidentally, I came across the notice, "Heroic fight of the Helvetic Legion on the Beresina, 26th November 1812". Immediately that brought to my mind the solemn words of the "Beresina Song", "Our life is like the journey of a wanderer in the night".

Exactly a century and a half have passed since then and it seems fitting to pause a moment and recall the events of that time.

The political map of Europe of 150 years ago showed the French Empire considerably enlarged towards the East through the annexation of the Netherlands, the countries on the left bank of the Rhine, the Bishopric of Basle including the town of Bienne, the Principality of Neuchâtel, Geneva, the Department of the Simplon and the Canton of Valais. Beyond this Eastern "frontier" was the belt of so far not yet annexed, but more or less dependent states: the Kingdom of Naples under Napoleon's brother-in-law Murat, Italy under his stepson Prince Eugene. The Veltlin and the Duchy of Clevn were annexed, the lower part of the Ticino actually occupied. Then there were the coastal countries on the Adriatic and the Islands. The remainder of Switzerland was "allied" to France according to the treaty of 27th September 1803, but was not very happy under "the August Mediator". The Confederate States of the Rhineland were protectorates under Napoleon, the new kingdoms of Bavaria, Württemberg, Saxony and Westphalia were ruled by Jérôme, Napoleon's youngest brother. The Hansatowns like Bremen, Hamburg and Lübeck were under Napoleon's influence, and Prussia and Austria were obliged to do his bidding. In the same way Russia had had to commit herself in the treaty of Tilsit — commitments which limited her freedom.

Beyond the Pyrenees heavy battles raged. Napoleon had dethroned the legitimate King of Spain and had replaced him by his brother Joseph. Thanks to the help Portugal received from the British, he was unable to keep Portugal permanently occupied. Only England was unbeaten and since the Battle of Trafalgar mistress of the seas. Napoleon never started his planned invasion of the British Isles, as England's clever politics managed to keep him in check by fostering rebellion in Spain and by engaging him in new wars with Austria. Though many nations were dominated by the mighty "Eagle" of France, large parts of the population in many countries were restive and began to rebel.

There was a marked contrast between government and people in Switzerland, a contrast which showed itself clearly on the battlefronts as well as at home in the Diet and the Cantonal Councils. Whilst the Federal as well as the Cantonal authorities with French sympathies spent large sums on recruiting men for service with the French forces, the population gave passive resistance to this enlistment. Napoleon had assumed the right to recruit soldiers for four regiments under the Mediation Constitution which he had enforced on Switzerland in 1803.

The soldiers of the four regiments had red tunics — hence they were called the "Red Swiss". Helvetic soldiers were everywhere. There exists a legend that it was a Swiss Sharpshooter who sent the deadly bullet to Admiral Lord Nelson. Napoleon gave the first Swiss regiment to his brother Joseph on his ascension of the throne of Naples, "Swiss, as many as you like — they are good people, they will never betray you". Swiss soldiers in Napoleon's service fought as far away as Santo Domingo (Haiti) whence seven men returned out of a total of 840. The second regiment was stationed at Marseille, the third at Lille, the fourth at Rennes, always under the command of members of well-known Swiss families. Individual battalions were sent to the Iberian Peninsula, where fighting flared up again and again.

There were also other Swiss units abroad; six regiments of the "Blue Swiss" were in the pay of His Catholic Majesty the King of Spain, though only about a third of the soldiers were really of Swiss nationality. It should be said, too, that several Swiss regiments stood in the pay of England, a fact which Napoleon regarded with displeasure.

By 1810 Europe was hoping for peace, since Napoleon had made treaties of alliance with most states on the Continent. But the Emperor had begun to prepare for war with Russia. In a history of "The Red Swiss of 1812" which Colonel C. Th. Hellmueller wrote for the centenary of the battles on the Duena and Beresina, he quoted 160,000 first line and 100,000 second line troops which were ready to march as early as 1810. But Napoleon was not satisfied; more than half a million men was what he wanted. Nor was he pleased with Switzerland any more and the way the Helvetic authorities conducted recruitment. He demanded that enlistment should be enforced to bring the regiments up to strength. He also asked that the Swiss soldiers in English pay should be withdrawn in 1811. As all these illegal demands coincided with the permanent occupation of the lower Ticino and great damage to Swiss industry and commerce due to the trade embargo, it evoked much bad feeling in the Diet and amongst the Swiss people.

At the height of his power the mighty French Emperor started his disastrous campaign against Russia. The "Ordre de Bataille pour la Grande Armée" was finished by Napoleon in Paris on 10th January 1812. It is impossible to go into details of the vast campaign. The four Swiss regiments were employed in the advance on various sectors of the front. The Emperor himself led the 220,000 men on the left flank. His plan was no doubt that of a military genius but depended on capable army commanders to execute it simultaneously on all fronts. These he lacked and the conditions he encountered were much worse than he had bargained for. There were difficulties from the start. At first the Russian army retreated from Kowno and Vilna and Napoleon did not get his chance of beating them decisively as he had hoped. The Swiss soldiers had already suffered great losses. For months they had no bread, mail from their families got lost or only reached them after several months. Due to

scorched earth policy of the retreating peasants the advancing armies found nothing worth having. The weather was appalling and sickness spread.

The Swiss fought bravely wherever they were used. They took part in several battles, notably on the Duena near Polozk in August 1812. Napoleon advanced on Moscow and occupied the town. But his hope that Alexander would be ready to sign a peace treaty collapsed. The Governor of Moscow set fire to the city, which infuriated the Russian people, who believed the invaders to have done it. Napoleon had to make new plans.

The second big battle at Polozk took place from 16th to 20th October. It was at Smolensk early in November when Napoleon said in the 28th bulletin of "La Grande Armée" that "La division Suisse s'est fait remarquer par son sang-froid et sa bravoure". He awarded them 34 crosses of the Legion of Honour. Well-known Swiss names like Blattmann, Zingg, Ragetti, v. Castella, v. Graffenried, d'Affry, Bleuler, Inthurm and others figured in the dispatches and on the lists of promotion.

Napoleon's army had to retreat from the Duena after the battle of Polozk. The reduced Swiss regiments were exposed to great suffering. The cold was severe, marching in bad footwear was an ordeal. Their condition, as one of their commanders reported, was "deplorable". Yet they went on bravely. Napoleon's predicament was considerable. But as his physical condition remained excellent in spite of great privation on the vast marches he was able once more to let "his brilliance and genius shine and also the virtue of his army".

The problem which he mastered at that moment was the crossing of the river Beresina, which was held by the enemy. On the evening of 25th November the Emperor and his staff arrived at Borysow. By cleverly pretending that the crossing would take place elsewhere, Napoleon managed to concentrate his army near Studianka, during the night of 25th/26th November. Unfortunately for him the sudden thaw and consequent rising of the river made all previous pontoon construction work useless and everything had to be started again. The army had to wait, tense and cold, all night. The bridge-building troops worked in the icy water until exhausted and drowned. By one o'clock the next morning the first bridge was ready and the crossing began. By the 27th most of the French artillery had crossed. Then followed 40,000 to 60,000 unarmed men. Chaos broke out and in the scuffle the bridges were damaged several times. Therefore Napoleon decided to accept battle which the Russians were seeking.

The Swiss were left to cover the bridges at Studianka. It is known that all four regiments were there. Food was scarce — even a piece of candle made a welcome snack. It snowed heavily. The Swiss realised that it was an honour for them to cover the key point in the French position, the wooded road Brill-Stachow. They solemnly swore not to leave their positions, even if wounded. They promised to fight like their forefathers had done. It was then that Lieutenant Thomas Legler started the famous hymn.

Very soon afterwards the battle began, and some of the most able officers fell in the first hours. Ammunition ran out and Legler, the composer of the song, ordered bayonet charge. This energetic attack was successful; it frightened the Russians. They retreated. But they got help and advanced again. Munitions had been brought

for Napoleon's men, but not sufficient, and the bayonet was put to use again. A French general managed to attack on the flank, and the Russians were hemmed in, had to surrender, and nearly 2,000 prisoners were taken. This gave a short breathing space to the men on that sector. Soon the Swiss sharpshooters were engaged again, this time by an equal enemy. The snow became covered in red — the red of the blood and the Swiss tunics. Heroically they fought seven more bayonet charges. The position was held into the night. With the Swiss were some Polish and French troops and admiration for their courage and tenacity was mutual. After the battle, 300 men were left, one-third of them wounded. The Swiss had lost 1,200 men. The Emperor, who was with his guardsmen at Brill, was so impressed by the report that he awarded the four Swiss regiments sixty-two crosses of the Legion of Honour on the spot. They were told that they had saved the army, for if they had not fought so bravely the Russians would have overwhelmed the French and the guards would have been unable to throw back the victors.

But the Swiss were a sad little remainder of their once so proud ranks. What gave them the strength to fight? It was the love of their country. They knew that they were upholding the good name of Switzerland. The Swiss soldier did not fight for the Emperor of France, but for the honour and glory of his own country. And many of us will find courage from the words of the "Beresina song", one of the finest hymns bequeathed to us:

"Our life is like the journey of a wanderer in the night; Each one carries a burden which weighs him down.

But night and darkness disappear unexpectedly and the badly tried finds relief from his sufferings.

Therefore let us go on; let us not retreat; for beyond those hills far away some happiness yet awaits us.

Courage, courage, dear fellows; give up the troubling worries: to-morrow the sun will rise again on the benevolent sky."

Mariann.

THOUGHTS OF A BRITON ON THE SUBJUGATION OF SWITZERLAND

Two voices are there; one is of the sea,
One of the mountains; each a mighty Voice:
In both from age to age thou didst rejoice,
They were thy chosen music, Liberty!
There came a Tyrant, and with holy glee
Thou fought'st against him; but hast vainly striven;
Thou from thy Alpine holds at length art driven.
Where not a torrent murmurs heard by thee.
Of one deep bliss thine ear hath been bereft:
Then cleave, O cleave to that which still is left;
For, high-souled Maid, what sorrow would it be
That Mountain floods should thunder as before,
And Ocean bellow from his rocky shore,
And neither awful Voice be heard by thee!

William Wordsworth.