

The Imperial Guard and Polish Nationalism: 1812-1814

By Paul L Dawson BSc Hons FINS

The Imperial Guard of Napoleon Iere, is perhaps best known for being the ultimate battle field reserve of unbreakable veteran soldiers, committed only at a critical point in a battle to confirm a victory. Its charge was looked upon as an unalterable decree against the enemy written in the book of fate.

However, such was the status and prestige attached to being a member of the Imperial Guard, that membership of this elite of an elite was used by Napoleon to aid his political and military designs.

On 23 June 1812, the Grande Armée crossed the river Niemen, which separated Poland from Lithuania, heading towards Vilna (now Vilnius), the capital of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Filled with hope for the restoration of a fully independent Poland, the Polish Diet in Warsaw jumped the gun and proclaimed unilaterally the restoration of the Kingdom of Poland, uniting the Grand Duchy of Warsaw with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The confederation of Poland named Prince Adam Czartoryski as President. This had not been done with Napoleon's blessing for fear of alienating the Tsar with whom he wished to conclude a peace. Napoleon had promised the Poles that he would create an independent state, the Duchy of Warsaw being an interim measure. This action guaranteed an army of loyal Poles, but enraged Alexander and his nobles, who demanded that Napoleon abandon the Duchy. Poland was important to Napoleon as it created a buffer between the Empire and Russia. However this act had an even worse effect on Lithuanian landowners, who were uneasy about an association with Poland and Napoleon's threat to free the serfs, and whose support he needed for the invasion of Russia. Napoleon himself kept the issues cloudy, neither recognizing the Kingdom of Poland beyond its status as a Grand Duchy, nor squelching Polish or Lithuanian national aspirations.

Indeed, Napoleon actively encouraged them. On 1st July Napoleon created a temporary government for the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as well raising a National Guard of two battalions, and a police force of Gendamarie at Vilna, Grodno, Minsk and Byalystock. Both organisations were to uniformed like the Poles. Napoleon also authorised the creation of another regiment of lancers, recruited from wealthy Lithuanian landowners, and honoured them by admitting the regiment in to his Imperial Guard as the 3rd Regiment of Light Horse Lancers. Napoleon explained that 'by paying the light horse the same as my Guard, I intend to procure educated and experienced horsemen, and no peasants who need polishing, which would be a lengthy operation'. At the same time a regiment of Tatars was also raised. With the formation of two Lithuanian regiments attached to his Guard Napoleon was attempting to establish political support among the conquered western provinces of Russia. Such political support would minimize the threat to his lines of communication across this conquered territory as well as to encourage the recruitment of new troops for his cause.

In fact, all three of the Guard Lancer regiments were created for political reasons. The *2eme Chevauleger-lanciers de la garde (hollandaise)*, became part of the Imperial Guard in 1810 and rose from the status of Middle Guard in 1811 to the having its first five squadrons designated as Old Guard in 1813. The promotion to the status of Old Guard put the Dutch lancers on the pinnacle of the pecking order of the French army. How much more prestige could a unit be granted?

The support of Holland was important to France for several reasons and by making Dutchmen members of his personal Guard Napoleon sought to show the Dutch that they were highly regarded members of French society. The military contribution of Holland to the regular French army was very small and consisted of four infantry regiments and some artillery. The significance of Holland lay in its commercial and financial support of the Empire, not its military resources. By making such a major portion of its army members of the Imperial Guard Napoleon sought to demonstrate to the Dutch people the esteem in which he held them, and thereby, bind them to him and the French Empire.

On 5 July, Napoleon signed a decree to form a regiment for the French Imperial Guard from Lithuanian volunteers. This regiment became the 3eme Regiment des Chevaulegers Lancier (light horse lancers). The Regiment was to consist of 5 squadrons of 2 companies each for a total of 1280 men (62 officers and 1218 enlisted men), however only 4 squadrons were formed. Major General Konopka of the 1ere Regiment des Chevaulegers Lancier de la Garde Imperiale was named colonel of the newly formed regiment. Jean Konopka, was born on 27 December 1777 and was appointed Colonel 15 July 1807 of the *1ere Regiment de Lanciers Polonaise*, commander of the Legion d'Honneur 11 December 1808, and General de Brigade on 6th August 1811.

Other regimental officers were officers of distinguished conduct. For example, Casimir-Alexandre Tanski, born 4 March 1774, became chevalier of the Legion d'Honneur 29th May 1808, and was appointed Major on 1st August 1812, and Colonel on 2 July 1813. He died on 7th March 1853. Joseph Chlusowicz, was born on 19 March 1776. He was appointed Colonel on 22 March 1812 of the *2eme Regiment d'Infanterie de la Legion de la Vistule*, and became the Major of the *3eme Regiment de Chevaulegers-Lanciers* on 3 August 1812. He was made Officer of the Legion d'Honneur 23 June 1810, and a Baron of the Empire on 31st March 1812.

The 3rd Guard Lancers were attached to the VII Corps (Saxon), which fought at Wolynie. On 19 October, the regiment was suddenly attacked in Slonim by Russian forces under General Chaplitz and was completely destroyed. General Konopka, 13 officers, and 253 men were captured. The only survivors came from its depot.

The squadron of Lithuanian Tartars was created at Vilna on October 8, 1812 to be raised, interestingly enough, from the Moslem descendants of Genghis Khan who had settled in Lithuania during the Middle Ages. The idea for the unit was proposed in July of that year to one of the Emperor's aides-de-camp, General Count Van Hogendorp, then Governor-General of the Grand Duchy. Major Mustapha Mura Achrnatowicz, a Lieutenant Colonel in the Polish cavalry, actually suggested the idea and offered to raise the unit if it were incorporated into Napoleon's Imperial Guard.

Napoleon appointed Major Achrnatowicz as the *chef d'escadron*, and on 24 August 1812 charged him with raising a regiment. But due to the lack of patriotic vigour among Lithuanians, and the already disastrous consequences of the campaign, the major was only able to raise a squadron.



Lithuanian Tartar of the Guard
From the Vernet-Lami Collection

On 22 March 1813, Marshal Bessieres incorporated the squadron of the Lithuanian Tartars, now reduced to 50 men and 3 officers, into the debris of the 3rd Regiment of Lancers of the Guard. At the same time, the 3rd Guard Light Horse was disbanded and the remnants became the 7th Squadron of the famous *1ere Chevaulegers Lanciers Polonais* of a Napoleon's Imperial Guard. The Tartars became the 15th Company (French squadrons consisted of a 2 companies), but on the 9 December 1813 it was attached to form the new 3rd Eclaireurs (Scouts) Regiment.

The strength of the Tartar squadron was recorded at 24 men on June 22, and at 26 Tartars on July 11, of which 6 still wore the old uniforms

As an independent formations, the two Lithuanian units in the Imperial Guard ceased to exist. The Polish and Lithuanian contingents in the French army seemed destined to merge, but however, they would continue to serve as separate fighting units within the Polish lancer regiment throughout the campaigns of Germany and France.

Organizationally, the first six companies of the now augmented 1st Regiment of Lancers, were considered "Old Guard"; the next six companies as "Middle Guard"; and the 13th and 14th companies as "Young Guard". The Lithuanian Tartars comprised the 15th company, under Ulan with Jorahim and Assan as officers, and were considered "Middle Guard" as of August 1813. They fought at Leipzig and Hanau under Captain Ulan and

Lieutenant Ibraim, with Assan-Alny as their Iman. Fifty men and three officers were recorded present at the battle of Dresden on August 27, 1813.



**Polish Lancers of the Guard
From the Vernet-Lami Collection**

On December 9, 1813, the Guard cavalry underwent further reorganization with the creation of three *eclaireur* or scout regiments, attached to the Grenadiers, Dragoons and 1st Lancer regiments of the French Imperial Guard respectively. Napoleon had in mind a French counterpart to the Russian cossacks that had harrassed so effectively the French flanks during the retreat from Moscow.

As a consequence of this reorganization, the last eight companies of the 1st Lancers became the *3eme Eclaireurs*. This regiment placed under the overall command of its colonel, General Count Krasinski. The chef d'escadron of the *3rd Eclaireurs* was Major Jean Koziatowski. It was as scout lancers that the Lithuanian Tartars fought the campaign of France. In January 1814 the 3e Eclaireurs had men drafted to them from the light cavalry of the Royal Guard of King Joseph of Spain.

Napoleon's army was decimated in the invasion of Russia and he had a desperate need for men. The Grand Duchy of Warsaw, the natural base for the Polish Troops, had been overrun and the King of Saxony, the nominal ruler could hardly afford to pay for both the Saxon and Polish armies. If Napoleon could strengthen his ties with the Poles and Germans, it would provide him with more loyal troops for his army.

To reinforce this loyalty, Napoleon attempted to re-establish his ties to the Polish and German people, and to do this by honouring the Poles and Germans with positions in his Guard, by the formation of a Grenadier Corps attached to the Imperial Guard.

This new Grenadier Corps was composed of three battalions, the 1st Polish, 2nd Saxon, 3rd Westphalian, and was formed in May 1813. Each battalion consisted of 4 companies, each company (theoretically) consisted of 183 grenadiers, 3 drummers, 8 corporals, 1 fourier, 4 sergeants, 1 sergeant-major and 4 officers. The commander of the battalion had 3 servants and 3 mule drivers assigned to him. This battalion was without an Eagle but had 8 sappers.

This would be the fourth Polish regiment attached to the Imperial Guard that had been raised out of a desire to bind the Poles to Napoleon. This number of 'foreign' units attached to the Guard was unique, and clearly demonstrates how important Poland was to Napoleon.

On 14 September 1813, Napoleon ordered that another division of the Old Guard be organized. This new division would be commanded by General Curial, and would consist of the two battalions of Velites from Florence and Turin, two battalions of the Saxon Guard, and one battalion of Polish Grenadiers. In the case of the Saxons, they were already part of the Saxon Royal Leibgrenadiergarde and were transferred from the 7th Corps, under the command of General Reynier, which consisted of the following:

24th Division (Saxon)

1ere Brigade, Colonel von Brause

2e Bataillon Leibgrenadiergarde, Chef de Bataillon Jeschki

1ere regiment Legere Saxon

Regiment d'infanterie Maximilien

Regiment d'Infanterie Rechten

Chasseurs a Pied Saxon

Unfortunately for the King of Saxony, the Saxon troops ultimately remained at his cost. The 4th Brigade of the 2nd Division was formed by an imperial decree of 14 September 1813. Article 10 of the decree stated that the battalion of Saxon Leibgrenadiergarde formed by the government of Saxony in the service of the French Army, would consist of 800 men, aged 23 or over and have served for at least 2 years before entering the regiment. Article 11 stated that the grenadiers would be given the same status and pay of the 2eme Regiment des Grenadiers a Pied de la Garde Imperiale. Article 14 attached to the Reserve Park of the Guard a Westphalian battalion, consisting of the Fusiliers of the Westphalian Guard, and 4 companies of Grenadiers, which were taken from the 2eme and 3eme Westphalian Line infantry regiments.



**Officer, Saxon
Liebgrenadiers
de la Garde
Imperiale**

The 15th Article created a Hessian battalion also attached to the Guard Equipment Train and Imperial Staff, and consisted of the 2nd Battalion of the Hessian Guard Fusiliers, under the command of Major Karlsen. A Neuchatel Battalion was also attached to the Guard to provide a Guard to the Equipment Train of the Imperial Staff.



Saxon Liebgrenadiers bonnet a poil. The rear patch is scarlet, and the grenade is white. The brass plate was lower than the French pattern, bearing the Royal Cipher interlaced and surmounted with the coat of arms, flanked on each side by a grenade.

The Poles were to be taken from Poniatowski's 8th Corps. Articles 12 and 13 of the order specified both the recruitment and equipment of this new unit. Poniatowski was to pick chosen men of more than 23 years of age and two years service.

Stanislaw Kurcysz was the unchallenged and unanimous choice as the commander for the Poles. He was only 29 years of age, had fought in the Campaigns of 1807, 1809, and 1812, and was one of the most decorated soldiers of the Polish forces, having earned both the Virtuti Militari medal and Legion of Honor. Only one officer was French, the paymaster. The Saxon troops were commanded by Captain Von Dressler und Scharffenstein, who was appointed on 28th September.



Saxon Liebgrenadier, Leipzig. On 24 October 1813, Napoleon ordered the Saxon Grenadier Battalion drawn up in front of the Kings Palace at Leipzig, to be his bodyguard, and to protect him and the Imperial Staff from the first movement of the enemy

By creating this regiment, Napoleon had a clear political aim: to honor his 'best' allies and ensure their trust during the coming campaign. A decree signed on 5 October confirmed this - but recruiting had already started. Despite the rough times, recruiting was brisk. The fact that this meant transfer to French service (not an easy decision in the autumn of 1813), plus the history of Polish units under direct French command, save for the Guard Lancers (not exactly the best postings in the Grande Armée), and the attraction of the Imperial Guard was such that Poniatowski had to involve himself to choose the 22 officers from the numerous applicants. Only one officer was French: Echandi the paymaster. Traditionally Polish units had shown a total disdain for this practice and the French had quickly understood that it was best to entrust this duty to a non-Pole.

General Drouot, was in favour of the project and formed the battalion on 2nd October. Article 12 of the decree stipulated that the Polish Battalion of the Guard was to be moved to Dresden, Prince Poniatowski to form the cadres and provided the necessary men from his army corps. Article 13 of the decree entitled the Grenadiers to wear the bonnet a poil, to be drawn from the French magazines in Dresden. On 5 October Drouot appointed a port-aigle (1 officer and 2 NCOs). The battalion was to have four companies, the état major to consist of:

1 chef du bataillon, 1 capitain-Adjutant-Major, 1 Lieutenant en Première as sous-adjutant-major, 1 Lieutenant en second as sous-adjutant-major, surgeon aide major. The small staff was to be a vaugmestre (post master), 1 corporal drummer, 1 master armourer, 3 mule drivers and head. Each company was to have 1 captain, 1 lieutenant en premier, 2 lieutenants en second, 1 sergent-major, 4 sergents, 1 fourier, 8 corporals, 183 grenadiers, 3 drummers, 2 sapeurs and 1 sapeur corporal. Company captains were Chmielewski, Sulejewski, Czerwinski, Loski, Smett and Desmire (French), the lieutenants were Diski, Frergiss, Gawronski, Kobykubsum Dembinski, Echandi, and the sous lieutenants were Ditrich, Lisicki, Jelmaik, Rzeszotowski, Szluc and Kondracki.

On the 16th October, the 2nd Division of the Old Guard attacked the Austrian corps under General Merveldt. The Poles captured the wounded general.

On 18th October, the Polish battalion fought in the village of Prolostheyda coming to the help of the Polish troops under Poniatowski and the French troops under Victor and Lauriston.

On the 19th October, in Leipzig, the 2nd Division paraded for the last time - the Saxon battalion was still within its ranks (whereas the rest of the Saxon troops had defected the day before). The Poles crossed the Pleisse and headed towards Lindenau. Meanwhile Poniatowski died while crossing the Elster.

The quasi-destruction of the 8th corps and the death of Prince Poniatowski had a decisive impact on the morale of all Polish units - including the Guard battalion. Both its commander, Kurcysz and Captain Loski surrendered near Weissenfels. Given this example from high above, the ranks are depleted by desertion.

On 30th October, the remnants of the battalion under its new commander, Captain Smett, former commander of the 1e company, took part in the battle of Hanau. Finally on November 1st, the battalion reaches Mainz, via Frankfurt where a report states that only 15 officers (!) and 82 men and NCO's arrived. The desertion appears to have stopped by the end of November and by mid-December at the battalions depot at Sedan, the unit is about the same size. Many of the missing troops eventually turn up in other Polish units - seemingly the impact of the defeat in Leipzig being overcome, they joined national units.

At the end of 1813, the battalion is disbanded and its men are transferred to Paris to become part of the 3rd Eclaireurs (linked to the 1st Cheval-Legers and also dressed in Polish outfit).

As for the commander of the battalion, Kurcysz. His surrender had tarnished his reputation for the rest of his life. He did not dare pick up a command in the army of the 'Krolestwa' - the little kingdom between 1815 and 1830. Furthermore, he was refused the right to levy and command a unit during the insurrection of 1830. He died an inspector of the Treasury in 1850.

At Leipzig, the brigade paraded for the last time - the Saxon battalion was still within its ranks (whereas the rest of the Saxon troops had defected the day before). As with other regiments of the Grande Armee, desertion became a major problem. By November 1st, the Polish battalion reached Mainz, where a report states that the battalion had 15 officers and 82 other ranks. The Saxon battalions had defected by 14th November, becoming the reactivated regiments Konnig and Spiegel, in Prussian service. At the end the year, the Polish battalion was disbanded and its men are transferred to Paris to become part of the 3rd Eclaireurs. Thus the Scout Lancers of the Guard were the remnants of the 3eme Lanciers, the Lithuanian Tartars and Polish Grenadier battalion. The Scout Lancers were disbanded along with the rest of the Imperial Guard in 1814, the remnants joining the Russian Service, as Poland was theoretically an independent kingdom administered by Russia.

To conclude, the Imperial Guard is more famous as a military machine, but its use went far beyond its original role as body Guard and battlefield reserve. Poland and Saxony had been some of Napoleons oldest allies, and by 1812 with the army decimated Napoleon had a need to reinforce his ties with these states to prevent invasion of French soil and collapse of the Empire. In using the common perception of what a Guardsmen was and the associated status of being a Guardsmen, and allowing soldiers of other nations to join the Guard, Napoleon hoped to demonstrate how important these countries were to him and the Empire. This honouring of Saxon, Polish and Lithuanian troops, and by definition their countries, Napoleon secured more troops for his army, but not any real loyalty. After Napoleon's defeat at Leipzig, Polish and Saxon units haemorrhaged men, as they deserted to join the coalition of Austria, Prussia, Russia, and England in the fight against Napoleonic France.

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