

# Napoleon's Lithuanian forces

## Part I



Uhlan of the 17<sup>th</sup> Lithuanian Lancer Regiment, 1812.

### INTRODUCTION: WHY FRANCE?

Review any history of the Lithuanian nation written in English and you will only find a brief reference to the existence of the Napoleonic Lithuanian. One of the major reasons for this obvious oversight is the fact that the majority of the Lithuanian leaders of the time had been Polonized and subscribed to the phrase "Gente Lituani, natione Poloni". They took pride in their Lithuanian heritage, but accepted the proposition that Lithuania had become a province in the State of Poland.

In 1772, Russia, Prussia, and Austria militarily forced the dismemberment of the Com-

monwealth with Lithuania losing large parts of its Latvian, Ukrainian, and Belorussian lands. The second partition of 1793 resulted in even greater loss of territory and brought the Russian Empire to the doorstep of ethnic Lithuania. A futile attempt to save the Commonwealth was lead by Lithuanian General Thaddeus Kosciuszko, but his forces were suppressed by overwhelming strength after an eight months long struggle. The third partition of 1795 wiped Lithuania and Poland off the map of Europe as a sovereign nation.

Hopes for the liberation of Lithuania and Poland now were tied to the emergence of



1812 Napoleonic Vytis Lancer Helmet — Vytautas the Great War Museum collection.



Helmet Badge with Vytis of the 1812 Napoleonic Lithuanian 17<sup>th</sup> Lancer Regiment — Vytautas the Great War Museum collection.



Cartridge Box of 1812 Napoleonic 17<sup>th</sup> Lithuanian Lancer Regiment Uhlan — Vytautas the Great War Museum collection.

France as a military power under Napoleon Bonaparte. Thousands of Lithuanians and Poles fled to France which had been almost the only nation to object to the partition and destruction of the Commonwealth. This ready supply of trained military exiles was a welcome source of manpower to the French army. Napoleon quickly realized the potential they offered and in 1797 assisted in the formation of Poles and Lithuanians into the Polish Legion Auxiliary to the Republic of Lombardy during the Italian Campaign. The Polish Legion commanded by General Jan Dombrowski gradually expanded and was eventually assimilated into the regular French army as the Vistula Legion and the Vistula Lancers.

Though no figures exist of the number of Lithuanians that served Napoleon during his eighteen year reign the figure was quite large. It is documented that twelve thousand Lithuanians and Wolhynians alone answered Napoleon's September, 1806, call for volunteers. The major reason why Lithuania's contribution to Napoleon can only be estimated is the fact that Lithuanians and Poles were assigned to the same units without designation.

## BIG HOPES: A REVOLT AGAINST RUSSIA

Napoleon's victories against the Prussians, Austrians, and Russians, during the 1806 German Campaign found him occupying several former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth palatinates annexed by Prussia. While preparing for peace negotiations at Tilsit, a Lithuanian delegation composed of Count Louis Pac, Count Joseph Sierakowski, and Count Thaddeus Tyszkiewicz, proposed to organize a revolt against Russia if France would assist. The Emperor was not favorable and the envoys re-



At first Lithuanians saw Napoleon as a savior from the Russian tsar's occupation.  
Painting of Andrea Appiani.



turned home very depressed. Apathy gripped Lithuania, but hope was rekindled with Napoleon's creation of the Duchy of Warsaw from the captured palatinates. Frederick Augustus I, King of Saxony, was proclaimed the ruler of the new duchy and Prince Joseph Poniatowski, the nephew of the last King and Grand Duke of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, appointed the Minister of War. As established the Duchy of Warsaw included the former Lithuanian district of Suwalkija (Užnemunė).

Though the failure of Napoleon to liberate all of Lithuania disillusioned many, thousands of Lithuanians rushed to enlist in the ranks of the armed forces of the Duchy of Warsaw. Senior Lithuanian noblemen joining the ranks of the

armed forces of the Duchy of Warsaw included General Joseph Niemojewski, Commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Polish Cavalry Brigade; General Michael Grabowski, 1<sup>st</sup> Polish Infantry Regiment; General Thaddeus Tyszkiewicz, 2<sup>nd</sup> Polish Lancer Regiment; General Prince Michael Radzwill 5<sup>th</sup> Polish Infantry Regiment; General Prince Dominik Karol Radzwill, 8<sup>th</sup> Polish Lancer Regiment, and Colonel Constantine Czartoryski, 16<sup>th</sup> Polish Infantry Regiment. These officers and thousands of enlisted men served with great distinction during the 1809 Austrian Campaign against Russian and Austrian forces.

With increased hostilities between Napoleon and Czar Alexander over the Russian failure to comply with the Continental Economic



**Tsar Alexander I of Russia by F. Kruger (1837, Hermitage).**

System imposed on them by the Treaty of Tilsit agreement, Lithuania's hope for liberation again rose during the early months of 1812. This year would bring to a crest the years of sacrifice rendered by Lithuanians on Napoleon's battlefields.

The following history of Lithuanian military participation in the Russian 1812 Campaign is compiled largely from the Polish historical work of Bronislaw Gembarzewski, *Wojsko Polskie 1807–1814*, Warsaw, 1905, and the French work of Lithuanian Professor Bronius Dundulis, *Napoleon et la Lituanie en 1812*, Paris, 1940. Both authors utilized original French and Polish military documents preserved in official government archives as the

source of their information. *The names of individuals and geographic locations as a result appear in their original French or Polish forms.*

## THE RUSSIAN CAMPAIGN

Alexander's disastrous 1806 German Campaign against Napoleon had led to the establishment of the Duchy of Warsaw on his border and he greatly feared further French incursion. Hoping to avert another Kosciuszko insurrection, Alexander actively encouraged liberal projects of Lithuanian Princes Adam Czartoryski and Michael Cleophas Oginski concerning the return of freedom and self-administration to Lithuania. Though his words offered hope of improvement, he

made no definite commitments. The Russian military levies imposed as a result of Alexander's campaigns have caused a great shortage of manpower, horses, supplies, and cash in Lithuania as in other parts of his empire. The Russian army traditionally lived off the land and had continually marched criss-cross Lithuania on the way to foreign battlefields spreading panic and epidemics. Thousands of Lithuanians were forced into Russian military service, while others volunteered believing in Alexander's promise of self-administration. Notable Lithuanian military units in the Russian army included the Lithuanian Uhlans, The Vilna Mousquetaries, the Samogitia Grenadier Regiment, and the Lithuanian Imperial Guard Infantry Regiment. Lithuanian manpower was badly depleted by such military service as well as the flight of freedom fighters joining Napoleon's forces. Thousands of patriotic Lithuanians died in the ranks of both Alexander's and Napoleon's armies believing that they were fighting in the best interest of their home land.

While Alexander relaxed in Vilnius, Napoleon gradually moved his Grand Army of 600,000 men across Europe in preparation for the invasion of Russia. Though generally referred to as a French army it was composed of units from twenty different nations. On the eve of the invasion the Grand Army advanced on four major fronts from the shores of the Baltic Sea to the banks of the Vistula River. Prince Karl Phillip Schwarzenberg marched from Galicia in southeastern Poland with 30,000 Austrians. Duke Andoche Junot of Westphalia proceeded from Warsaw with 79,000 Westphalians, Saxons, and Poles. Viceroy Eugene de Beauharnais of Italy approached from Konigsberg with 79,500 Bavarians, Italians, and French. The Center of the Grand Army consisting of 200,000 men under Napoleon's personal command gathered near the village of Żagariškės about one league above Kaunas.

Napoleon's strategy was to form his attack forces into three lines. The main force under his own command, containing the greatest number of native-born French, was to march directly to Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. His flanks and rear were to be covered by two auxiliary armies and two semi-autonomous corps predominately made up of allied soldiers. The first auxiliary army under the command of his stepson, Eugene de Beauharnais, marched parallel to the right of Napoleon and the second army commanded by his brother King Jerome marched still farther to the east towards Grodno. The extreme flanks of the Grand Army were



Napoleon's forces by Jean Louis Ernest.

to be guarded by the two semi-autonomous formations. General MacDonald commanded the so called Prussian X Corps marching to Napoleon's left along the Baltic Sea, while General Schwarzenberg with his Austrian Corps proceeded into the western Ukraine. Napoleon also established a second line of defense in his captured areas to act as replacements and as a communication channel. A third line consisting of forces left in various garrisons extended from Gdansk across the Vistula.

## NAPOLEON IN LITHUANIA

On June 23, 1812, Napoleon ordered his forces across the Nemunas River into Lithuania to start the Russian Campaign. The army quickly moved towards Kaunas, with the intention of liberating Lithuania and forcing Alexander to sue for peace. At the outset of the campaign, Napoleon had planned to establish himself in

Lithuania going no farther than Smolensk for the purpose of consolidating his rule in the former Polish-Lithuanian palatinates before attempting to conquer Russia proper.

Thus the Russian Campaign began without any formal declaration of war. Napoleon entered Vilnius unopposed on June 27, 1812, and was warmly greeted by the Lithuanians as a liberating hero. Farther to the east, King Jerome Napoleon of Westphalia entered Grodno on June 30, 1812, and General Louis Henri Davout, Prince of Eckmuhl, captured Minsk on July 11, 1812, with only light resistance.

The Grand Army did not engage in any major battle, however, the extreme heat, drought, and rough terrain of Lithuania took a terrible toll. Marshal Joachim Murat, King of Naples, who commanded Napoleon's Cavalry, estimated that over 15,000 horses died and 50,000 troops deserted during the short forced march from Kaunas to Vilnius.

On June 29, 1812, a violent thunderstorm struck Lithuania and continued for the next five days producing continuous rain. The re-

sults were most disastrous to the French forces. Movement of troops was impeded or absolutely checked and the vast troop and supply trains on the Vilnius-Kaunas Road became disorganized. The existing roads became little better than quagmires causing the horses to break down under the additional strain. The delay and frequent loss of these supply trains caused both troops and horses to suffer. Napoleon's forces traditionally were well supplied by his transportation corps, but they proved inadequate during the invasion.

As the French army pushed deeper into Russia, the natural consequences were of shortage of food supplies resulting in a breakdown of discipline and marauding in quest of food. The Lithuanians, whom the French forces were supposed to be liberating from Russian occupation, were maltreated and plundered everywhere by their deliverers. The water available in Lithuania was scanty in quantity and often contaminated. The combination of food and water problems caused a frightful amount of diarrhea, dysentery, and typhus for which little could be done. The sick were left behind in temporary hospital camps and thousands died due to filth, starvation, and general destitution. It is estimated that only one in ten survived when stricken with such sickness. The necessity of foraging for food and water caused large detachments of Napoleon's forces to straggle behind the main body and discipline deteriorated with each mile.

Czar Alexander learned of the French invasion during the evening of June 24, 1812, while hosting a ball at Russian General Bennigsen's Zakret estate a few miles from Vilnius and immediately fled.

## FORMATION OF THE LITHUANIAN PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT

Napoleon's entry into Vilnius was greeted



Memorial plaque for Napoleon in Kaunas.



The battle of Deltuva (Ukmergė) between the French and the Russian forces, June 28, 1812.



**The emperor Napoleon I appoints the Temporary Lithuanian Government. Painting of Petras Kalpokas.**

with great pomp and ceremony. An honor guard was formed in imitation of the Poznan Honor Guard formed by the Poles in 1806 with the creation of the Duchy of Warsaw. The Poznan Honor Guard was recruited into Napoleon's personal body guard and subsequently won great fame as the 1<sup>st</sup> Polish Lancers of the Imperial Guard. The citizens of Vilnius, not to be outdone by their Polish counterparts, went to great trouble and expense to organize and uniform an elite guard whose members consisted of young men from the most noble families of Lithuania. The commander of the Vilnius Honor Guard was Prince Gabriel Oginski and its members included such noble Lithuanian families as Broel-Plater, Romer, Chlewinski, Lenkiewicz, Czarnowski, Nosarzewski, Jelenski, Pomarnacki, Strawinski, Wollowicz, Puzyrna, Laskowicz, Zabiello. Many of the guard members had formerly been students at the

University of Vilnius and eagerly abandoned their studies to help liberate their country. This elite guard subsequently accompanied Napoleon to and from Moscow providing escort and acting as interpreters.

After securing his military position to the north and east of Vilnius, Napoleon immediately moved to establish a provisional government for Lithuania from among the senior nobles. On July 1, 1812, Napoleon decreed the establishment of the Provisional Government for the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The new government was formed with four departments consisting of Vilnius, Grodno, Minsk, and Bialystok, which had all been part of the old Grand Duchy of Lithuania within the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Though officially responsible for governing thirty-three palatinates, in reality it only exercised control over seventeen liberated by the French army.

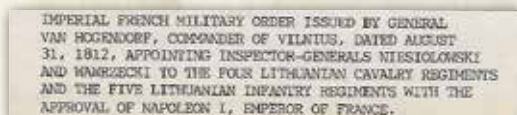
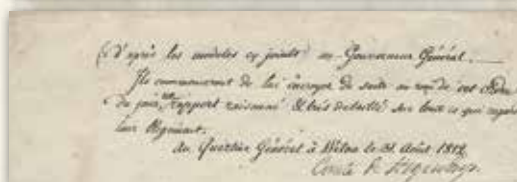
President of the Provisional Government was Count Stanislas Soltan and its members were Prince Alexander Sapieha, Joseph Sierakowski, Count Francis Jelski, Count Alexander Potocki, Charles Prozor, General Joseph Ignace Kossakowski, and Professor John Sniadecki of the University of Vilnius. Later with the untimely death of Prince Sapieha, Count Ignace Tyzenhauz was appointed to the Council as his replacement.

In principle the Provisional Government was autonomous, however, Napoleon also imposed his own shadow military government. Vilnius became the French Imperial Headquarters for all diplomacy and in effect a provisional capital of France. Dutch General Dirk Van Hogendorp was appointed the Lithuanian military-governor and General Maret Duc de Bassano Bigon the civilian commissioner representing Napoleon. The military government actually controlled the routine operations of the nation and it was thereafter extended into each department and palatinate. The French military governors appointed for the Departments were General Jomini in Vilnius, General Brun in Grodno, General Ferriere in Bialystok, and General Broniowski in Minsk. In addition, the French army established local military commanders and quarter-masters commanding their own units in each department and palatinate. Only the sub-prefects in the palatinates were native Lithuanians. This dual government system hamstringing the Lithuanian administration and proved slow, unwieldy, and unable to satisfy the later demands of the military. The Grand Army was thus depleted of manpower by the establishment of his own occupation units which were greatly needed during the invasion of Russia proper.

The following Department Commissioners and Subprefects of the Provisional Government of Lithuania were appointed by Napoleon on July 1, 1812, for Vilnius, Grodno, and Minsk, and on July 5, 1812, for Bialystok.



**A reconstruction of Napoleon's march to Kaunas wearing Russian and French uniforms, June 2002.**



Beside the formation of the Provisional Government for the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Napoleon took personal interest in the administration of the city of Vilnius. On July 1, 1812, Napoleon appointed the following officers for the city of Vilnius.

## FORMATION OF THE LITHUANIAN MILITARY UNITS

On July 1, 1812, Napoleon decreed the creation of a National Guard for Vilnius to be composed of two battalions of infantry consisting of six companies each. The staff of the Vilnius National Guard was to consist of twenty-two officers and soldiers and each Guard Company to be composed of 119 officers and soldiers totaling 1450 men. Colonel Kosielski of the old Lithuanian Artillery Corps was named Commander of the unit and his Battalion Chiefs, former Captain of Infantry Zakrzewski and former Captain of Artillery Franceson. Thereafter, the provisional government extended the national guard system into all the principle cities and towns in each department.

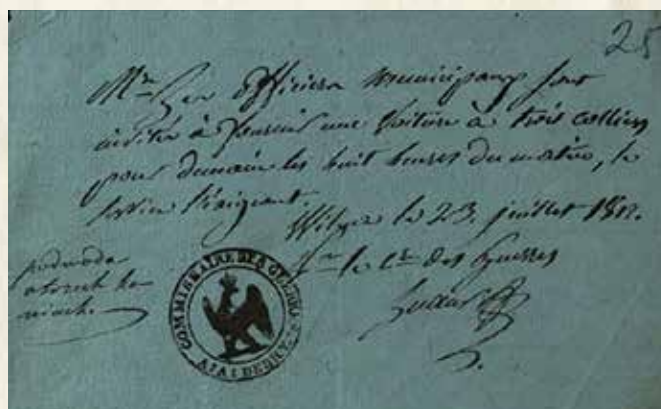
This force was conscripted at a rate of one soldier per each two hundred households.

The responsibility entrusted to the National Guard was to protect private and public property in the cities and districts assigned. The conscription of soldiers was the obligation of the property owners and the only exception was for those engaged in important commerce and trade. Members of the unit were to be between eighteen and fifty years old and in good health. Notable local militia units were established by Count Mirbach at Telšiai and Count Vitkevičius at Šiauliai which functioned efficiently in protecting the inhabitants from both Russian and French marauders.

In order to secure his rear, Napoleon also decreed on July 1, 1812, the formation of one Gendarmerie (Police) Regiment in each department from among the nobles themselves. Each department and district was to have one police company composed of 107 volunteer officers and soldiers. The responsibility of the Gendarmerie was to promote public order and to assist the French forces in the suppression of deserters and marauders. These units were to be either foot or mounted depending on the territory covered. The governments of Vilnius and Minsk were assigned two Chiefs of Squadrons and Grodno and Bialystok one each. The uniforms worn by the Gendarmerie units were to be the same as worn by the Polish Gendarmerie.

Antoine Chrapowicki was appointed Colonel of the Vilnius Gendarmerie Regiment, Prince Michael Radzwill commander of the Grodno Gendarmerie Regiment, Leon Osztorp commander of the Minsk Gendarmerie Regiment, and Francois Oretti commander of the Bialystok Gendarmerie Regiment. On July 9, 1812, Prince Sapieha recommended Mr. Michalowski to be the major of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vilnius Gendarmerie Regiment due to his past sixteen years military service. The commanders of the larger units and the Gendarmerie a Cheval (Mounted) were to be gentlemen of property and to reside in the territory where assigned.

The service of the Gendarmerie was prescribed



Instruction of the French military administration to the municipality of Vilnius to deliver horses and carriages for transportation.

## LITHUANIAN DEPARTMENTAL COMMISSIONERS

### DEPARTMENT OF VILNIUS

Colonel Tyzenhauz  
Count Adam Chreptowicz  
Count Ferdinand Plater

### DEPARTMENT OF GRODNO

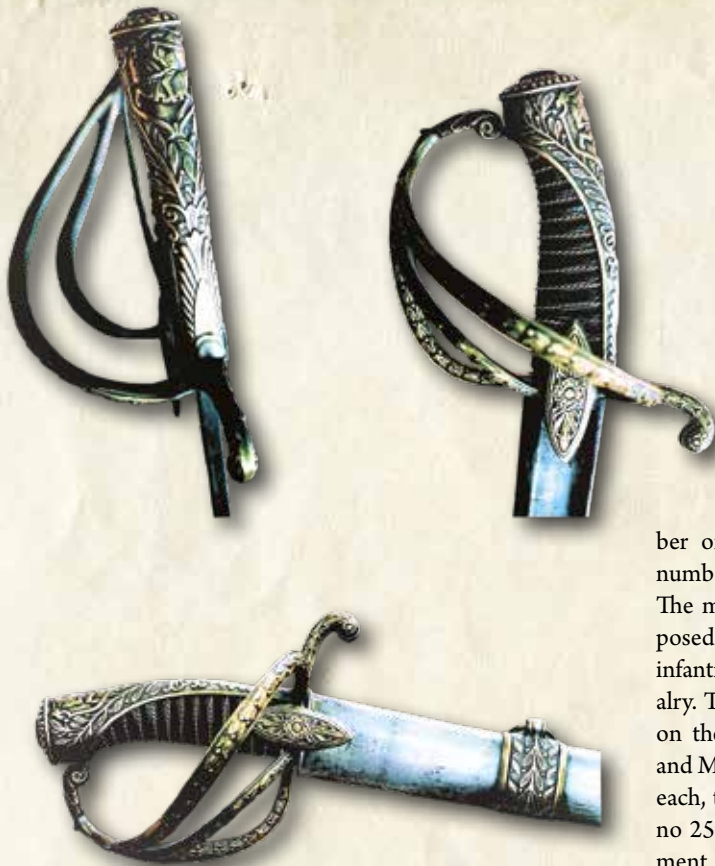
Colonel Lachnicki  
Niemcewicz of Brzesc  
Pancerzynski

### DEPARTMENT OF MINSK

Marshal Joseph Wolodkowicz  
Judge Xavier Obuchowicz, Appeal Court  
Judge Ginter, Appeal Court

### DEPARTMENT OF BIALYSTOK

Victor Gradzki  
Michael Daszkiewicz  
Michale Dziekonski  
Lithuanian Subprefects by towns  
Vilnius — Prince Gedroyc  
Trakai — Joseph Petrykowski  
Ošmena — Zaba  
Ukmergė — Przewdziecki  
Zawiley — Chamberlan  
Wawrzecki  
Kaunas — Zabiello  
Upytė — Brunof  
Raseiniai — Micewicz  
Šiauliai — Witkiewicz  
Telšiai — Pilsudski  
Mayor of Vilnius — Michael Romer  
Mayor Staff — Professor Malewski of the University of Vilnius  
Danilowicz — Prosecutor  
Woynicz — Surgeon  
Sledzinski — Controller  
Vilnius City Council — Antoine Chrapowicki — Chairman  
Francois Czir — Assessor  
Malczewski — Notary  
Froland — Member  
Szynkiewicz — Prosecutor  
Neiman — Doctor  
Mauzer — Purchaser of metals  
Statkowski and Borkowski — Former Mayors



## LITHUANIAN NAPOLEONIC GENERAL'S SABER

French made Cavalry Officer's Saber believed carried by GENERAL MICHAEL TYSZKIEWICZ, 17th Lithuanian Lancer Regiment (1812-1814). Cast into the pommel is a shield bearing the Vytis Coat-of-Arms of Lithuania. Such swords were made on special order by Generals in the French service. This sword was obtained with an Officer's Helmet Plate of the 17th Lancer Regiment and its quality would indicate use by a General Officer. The Vytis design is only known to have been used by Lithuanians Tyszkiewicz was the only General Officer of this regiment.

by Napoleon himself upon the Lithuanian nobles, but they felt it beneath their dignity to perform police functions and did not rush to join these units. Napoleon further decreed that each county take immediate steps to form a skeleton company of fifty men while awaiting the mustering of their full complement. By the middle of November, 1812, the Vilnius Department composed of the counties of Vilnius, Trakai, Ašmena, Ukmergė, Zawiley, Braslaw, Kaunas, Raseiniai, Šiauliai, and Telšiai, reported their Gendarmerie Regiment as mustering six hundred and eight officers and men. The other three departments did not progress as quickly and remained under strength.

## LITHUANIAN INFANTRY AND CAVALRY REGIMENTS

The principle emphasis of Napoleon's Lithuanian formed units was placed in infantry. It was decreed that five infantry regiments and four cavalry regiments be raised with their regimental numbers to be a continuation of the numbers utilized by the units of the Duchy of Warsaw. As a result the Lithuanian Infantry bore regimental numbers 18 through 22 and the Lithuanian Cavalry bore numbers 17 through 20. In order to obtain the necessary troops, the Provisional Government established a recruiting system similar to that utilized by the Russians in Lithuania. Each nobleman who owned property was required to deliver a certain num-

ber of men according to the number of serfs on his property. The manpower quota thus imposed called for 10,000 men for infantry and 4,000 men for cavalry. The infantry levy imposed on the Department of Vilnius and Minsk called for 3,000 men each, the Department of Grodno 2500 men, and the Department of Bialystok 1500 men.

The recruits were to be between 18 and 34 years old and in good health. The levy for the Department of Vilnius was based on one recruit for each 119 male inhabitants. The cavalry formation was to be on a system similar to that of the infantry recruitment, but it followed the ancient custom of conscription in which each trooper be furnished complete with mount. The manpower requirement thus imposed was 1327 troopers from the Department of Vilnius, 1307 troopers from the Department of Minsk, 996 troopers from the Department of Grodno, and 370 troopers from the Department of Bialystok.

On July 13, 1812, Napoleon appointed the

following individuals as Colonels in their respective infantry and cavalry regiments: 18<sup>th</sup> Infantry — Alexander Chodkiewicz, 19<sup>th</sup> Infantry — Constantine Tyzenhauz, 20<sup>th</sup> Infantry — Adam Biszing, 21<sup>st</sup> Infantry — Charles Pierzchala Przeddziecki, 22<sup>nd</sup> Infantry — Stanislas Czapski, 17<sup>th</sup> Cavalry — Michael Tyszkiewicz, 18<sup>th</sup> Cavalry — Joseph Wawrzecki, 19<sup>th</sup> Cavalry — Constantine Rajewski, and the 20<sup>th</sup> Cavalry — Xavier Obuchowicz.

The newly formed Lithuanian units were to be patterned on the French style. The basic infantry unit of the French army was the regiment which was commanded by a colonel and assisted by a regimental staff which provided the necessary logistics. The infantry regiment consisted of three battalions, each commanded by a lieutenant-colonel, with each battalion having six line companies. The battalion line companies were each commanded by a captain and consisted of one Grenadier company, one Voltigeur company, and four Fusilier companies. The Grenadier company was the elite company chosen for their courage, resoluteness, strength, and experience. They were to form the head of the column on the march and stood at the flank or rear of the line as a reserve force in battle. The Voltigeurs functioned as the unit skirmishers and preceded-



Napoleonic Helmet Plate and the Vytis Belt Buckle from the 17<sup>th</sup> Lithuanian Lancer Regiment — Gaidis collection.



#### NAPOLEONIC PERIOD OFFICER'S PISTOL

French flint lock officer's pistol used during the Napoleonic Wars (1807-1814). Pistols of this type were carried in pairs mounted in holsters to the front of a horse's saddle. The primary weapons carried by the Lithuanian Lancer serving in Napoleon's Army included pistols of this type, a saber, and lance. This pistol was normally only used for self defense when engaging the enemy at close quarters.

ed the regiment in open order in combat providing a harassing fire. The Fusiliers were the basic foot soldier of the Napoleonic period.

Following the tradition of the old Polish-Lithuanian cavalry regiments the newly formed Napoleonic Lithuanian cavalry regiments were armed with a lance as one of their basic weapons. As a result of the use of this weapon the Lithuanian cavalry regiments were designated as Lancers. The Napoleonic lancer regiment consisted of four squadrons of men with each squadron composed of two companies. One of the squadrons was designated the elite squadron and carried the regimental standard or guidon flag. The lancer regiment was designed to be a mobile force employed to protect the flanks and rear of the main line in battle and to threaten the flanks and rear of the enemy lines. It was sent forward similar to the infantry Voltiguers to discover the size, position, deployment and movement of the enemy. The lance gave the regiment an advantage in approaching and advancing because of its great psychological effect on infantry units.

On August 31, 1812, General Van Hogen-dorp, Military-Governor of Lithuania, appointed Colonel Antoine Gielgud to replace Charles Przewdzicki as the commander of the 21<sup>st</sup> Lithuanian Infantry Regiment. Colonel Przewdzicki in turn was appointed commander of the 18<sup>th</sup> Lithuanian Cavalry Regiment replacing Colonel Joseph Wawrzecki. General Prince Romuald Giedroyc was appointed overall commander of forming the Lithuanian units, Colonel Joseph Wawrzecki Inspector-General of Cavalry, and Colonel Count Joseph Niesiolowski Inspector-General of Infantry. The Lithuanian units though under the command of Lithuanian officers were formed as a part of the French military and subject to its orders. Thus the Lithuanian units were formed at the expense of Lithuania, but to be utilized by Napoleon at his discretion.

The military requirements imposed on Lithuania by Napoleon were very difficult to comply with due to the extreme shortage of men, supplies, and horses which were badly

depleted by the previous Russian levies. Under these burdens Prince Sapieha worked as the Military Commissioner-in-Charge of unit formation. Recruitment was to commence on August 5, 1812, and be completed on August 30 for infantry regiments and commencing on August 15 for cavalry and completed by September 25. Each regiment was assigned to a specific territorial headquarters and depots for recruitment and training. The following unit depots were utilized by Lithuanian units.

#### **ADDITIONAL MILITARY UNITS**

With the unexpected death of Commissioner Sapieha, former Lithuanian General Etienne Grabowski was appointed to supervise the formation of the Lithuanian forces. Attempts to establish a political union between Poland and Lithuania failed due to what the Lithuanians considered to be Polish proposals subjecting them to a less than equal partnership. Napoleon finally authorized advancement of 500 million francs for the purchase of necessary military armament for the Lithuanian forces. In addition, Lithuanians were authorized to establish cadets for training within the Polish Army. Supplies were subsequently obtained from the French army depots at Koenigsberg and Danzig with the hopes that the Lithuanian units would be able to enter the line by mid-November, 1812.

The Provisional Government of Lithuania hoping to incur the favor of Napoleon also decreed the formation of additional auxiliary military units. In August, 1812, the govern-

ment sought to create six battalions of Chasseurs a Pied (Foot Rifleman) with each battalion being composed of six companies of 130 men. The following officers were designated commanders of their respective battalions; 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion — Colonel Joseph Kossakowski, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion — Major Ignacy Rokicki, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion — Major Kazimierz Plater, 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion — Lieutenant-Colonel Andrzej Kurczewski, 5<sup>th</sup> Battalion — Major Franciszek Obuchowicz, and the 6<sup>th</sup> Battalion — Major Pawel Loskowski. The battalions were to be formed from the gamekeepers and forest rangers within the particular property or area from which recruited and assigned. The mission of the Chasseurs a Pied was to act as scouts for the region, to abridge Cossack raids, apprehend vagabonds and deserters, and maintain general order. The units were to be composed of volunteers, but if the recruitment was slow the government authorized the enrollment of commoners with the foresters to be armed and dressed at the expense of the local landowners. These battalions were expected to be formed by September, 1812, with the rest of the regular units.

In November, 1812, the Provisional Government further resolved to create two regiments of Light Infantry composed of three battalions each in the French pattern, but their formation was only partially successful. One formed company was consolidated into Kossakowski's Foot Rifleman Regiment. The principle source of recruitment for the Foot Rifleman Regiments were from the great Radziwill estates in the Department of Minsk. The Plater 3<sup>rd</sup> Foot Rifleman Regiment was recruited from the large estates in the Department of Vilnius. All soldiers enlisting in the Foot Rifleman Regiments agreed to serve for the duration of the war. Unfortunately due to the lack of manpower and equipment the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion was only partially formed as were the other two remaining battalions.

Individual nobleman were also authorized to form military units for service to Napoleon at their own expense. On September 14, 1812, with the capture of Moscow by the French for-

Regiment	Deport City
18 <sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment	Vilnius
19 <sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment	Raseiniai
20 <sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment	Slonim
21 <sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment	Bialystok
17 <sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment	Minsk
18 <sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment	Kupiškis
18 <sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment	Panevėžys
18 <sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment	Nowogrodek
18 <sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment	Pinsk
18 <sup>th</sup> Mounted Rifles	Vilnius



**Lithuanian Napoleonic Reenactors wearing Lithuanian Artillery uniforms — Members of Kaunas Military History Club under Vytautas the Great War museum.**

ces, Count Ignace Moniuszko was authorized to raise one Regiment of Chasseurs a Cheval (Mounted Riflemen) which was designated the 21<sup>st</sup> Lithuanian Cavalry Regiment. Likewise, Count Rudolph Tyzenhauz formed a Battery of Artillery a Cheval (Horse Artillery) at his own expense. These two privately funded units were only partially formed by the time of Napoleon's disastrous retreat.

Beside the Provisional Government levied and nobleman financed Lithuanian units several other regiments were formed through indi-

vidual Lithuanian recruitment. With the demonstrated willingness of the Lithuanian youth to serve in the Vilnius Honor Guard, Napoleon on July 5, 1812, decreed the creation of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment de Chevaux-Leger Lanciers de la Garde (3<sup>rd</sup> Lithuanian Lancer Regiment of the Imperial Guard). This regiment was assigned as part of Napoleon's personal guard in the same manner as was the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment Polish lancers of the Guard created in 1806. This new elite regiment was to be composed of five squadrons formed with two companies each recruited from among

volunteer noblemen of the first families of Lithuania-Poland between 18 and 40 years old. These volunteers were expected to provide at their own expense a horse, uniform, accoutrements, and harness set, when reporting for duty, but would thereafter be in the service of France. Major Jan Konopka, a Lithuanian serving as a Squadron Commander with the 1<sup>st</sup> Polish Lancers of the Imperial Guard was appointed as General of the new regiment. His staff was to be composed of twenty-two officers and eighteen troopers, and each regiment squadron formed of four officers and one hundred and twenty troopers. A large number of troopers in this unit were recruited from the student body of the University of Vilnius. This regiment was said to have been the best equipped and mounted regiment formed and its uniforms were the richest and most elegant in the army.

Napoleon also authorized the recruitment of a Lithuanian Tartar Regiment. Its members were the descendants of the Tartar families resettled in Lithuania during the middle ages by Grand Duke Vytautas-the-Great. They continued to exercise their Moslem religion and privileges as noblemen and wished to show their devotion to their adopted land by forming their own cavalry regiment in its defense. On August 24, 1812, Napoleon accepted their offer and authorized Mustafa Musa Achmatowicz to organize the unit. The actual Lithuanian Tartar Regiment thus recruited formed only a company size unit and was attached to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Lithuanian Lancer Regiment of the Guard to act as scouts.

In addition to the Lithuanian name-bearing



**French infantry attack in Russia, 1812.**



**Napoleon's forces crossing the Nemunas in Lithuania, 1812, painted by Clark.**



An interesting engraving on the blade of the sword from the 17<sup>th</sup> Lithuanian Lancer Regiment in Gaidis collection: It features an "Horse Shoe with the 17<sup>th</sup> designation over a "Vytis" on one side and a "Napoleonic 17<sup>th</sup> Lancer in Vytis like pose" and a "Vivat Litewskie Ulany" inscription on the other side. This engraving had to have been done after the war since the Honor Ribbon below the Vytis bears the dates "1812-1813" commemorating the Regiment's dates of service.

units, numerous Lithuanians also joined existing French and Polish regiments. Notable units having large contingents of Lithuanians were the 1<sup>st</sup> Polish Lancer Regiment of the Imperial Guard, the Vistula Lancer Regiment, and the Vistula Legion. Napoleon further authorized the 129<sup>th</sup> French Line Regiment of Infantry and the Illyrien Infantry Regiment to each recruit 500 Lithuanians to replace their losses sustained during the Russian invasion.

## LITHUANIANS START TO DISAPPOINT

Unfortunately Napoleon's preoccupation with Lithuania was not in establishing liberty and equality. He took great efforts to avoid the re-establishment of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the emancipation of the serfs. It is obvious that his major purpose for the formation of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was to organize auxiliary troops at Lithuania's expense for his further military operations and to secure his rear against the Russians. His failure to proclaim the emancipation of the serfs precluded a mass embracing of his cause. Though many noblemen gave freely of their wealth, many began to see in Napoleon only another foreign sovereign exploiting his military occupation.

The political leaders in both Lithuania and Poland sought to re-establish the old Polish-

Lithuanian Commonwealth which had existed prior to the 1795 partition. Unfortunately, this project failed with the rise of the traditional argument over equality between the two nations. Poland, though desiring to regain power over the territory of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, was not willing to make concessions to the Lithuanians, and Lithuania was riot willing to bend to Poland without them. In the end it was Napoleon himself who vetoed the reunion on political grounds. He feared the repercussions that would occur among his Austrian and Prussian allies as well as the damage that would be caused with Polish-Lithuanian infighting over the selection of their new monarch.

Napoleon had been well received in Vilnius by the Lithuanian delegations from all strata, but this feeling immediately worsened due to the poor treatment of the populace by the French army. Some 50,000 deserters marauded the countryside. They seized the scant food supplies and gave no consideration to the needs of the inhabitants. The regular French troops behaved no better than the Russians, carousing, robbing, flogging, and seizing living quarters. Many Lithuanian peasants believing the French slogan of "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity" fled their estates and frequently joined the marauders. Many noblemen and serfs alike resisted recruit levies imposed on them by the Provisional

Government due to the treatment afforded to them by the occupying French forces.

Still Lithuanian volunteers answered Napoleon's call for troops. On August 1, 1812, Colonel Chodkiewicz reported that his 18<sup>th</sup> Lithuanian Infantry Regiment being formed at Vilnius already had 600 men. These soldiers were described as virtuous citizens of high quality who were joining the colors at a rate of 15 men per day. Colonel Tyzenhaus at Raseiniai reported on August 16, 1812, that his 19<sup>th</sup> Lithuanian Infantry Regiment had been successfully formed and were already bearing arms. Unfortunately recruitment in the ranks of the other regiments did not progress as rapidly. Colonel Czapki reported as late as October, 1812, that his 22<sup>nd</sup> Lithuanian Infantry Regiment lacked 600 men to reach full strength and his 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was not armed. But in spite of all the difficulties involved in forming these Lithuanian units, over 20,000 Lithuanians joined Napoleon during the short period between July and December, 1812. ■

## To be continued

By Henry L. Gaidis / Lituanus

Photo credits: H. Gaidis Collection, Office of the Chief Archivist of Lithuania, Tyszkiewicz Collection, Vytautas the Great War Museum collection, Tadas Dambrauskas.

# Napoleon's Lithuanian forces

## Part II



The Grande Armée of Napoleon crossing the Nemunas in Kaunas, June 24, 1812.



The 17<sup>th</sup> Lithuanian Lancer Regiment on march.

### THE MARCH TO MOSCOW

After eighteen days in Vilnius, Napoleon rejoined his Grand Army vainly trying to engage the retreating Russian Army in combat. The French moved on three fronts pushing north along the Baltic Sea and northwest towards Moscow. The Prussian X Corps under the Command of General Alexander MacDonald advanced slowly into northern Lithuania and Latvia to attack Riga and possibly St. Petersburg. MacDonald's Corps consisted of approximately 32,000 men formed into two distinct bodies. General Grandjean commanded the Polish-German Division and General Grawert the Prussian Division. Grandjean's advanced-guard consisted of four Polish Battalions commanded by Lithuanian Prince Radzwill. The Prussian X Corps met little resistance and marched steadily towards Riga. The Austrian army under the command of Prince Schwarzenberg occupied southern Lithuania and the Ukraine. The

Austrian units showed little inclination to fight and took little part in combat during the campaign. The Austrians and Prussians would eventually desert Napoleon and join the Russians against him. Many ethnic Lithuanians from Eastern Prussia served with General Grawert's forces including the Prussian 3<sup>rd</sup> Lithuanian Dragoon Regiment that would later be highly decorated for service against Napoleon during the 1813 Paris Campaign.

The heart of the French Grand Army under the personal command of Napoleon pushed northeast towards Smolensk and Moscow. Joining Napoleon's personal staff were Lithuanian noblemen, Count Joseph Antoine Kosakowski, Count Charles Morawski, and Prince Eustache Sanguszko, acting as advisors and interpreters. Lithuanian General Count Ludwik Pac who had served Napoleon for many years joined the Imperial Staff as a military advisor for logistics and supplies. Numerous Lithuanian officers also served

with General Prince Poniatowski's 5<sup>th</sup> Corps including General Weyssenhoff, Chief of Staff to General Zajonczek, 16<sup>th</sup> Division, Commander General Tyzkiewicz, 19<sup>th</sup> Light Cavalry Brigade, Commander General Grabowski, 18<sup>th</sup> Division Brigade, and General Niemojewski, Commander 18<sup>th</sup> Light Cavalry Division. These officers along with hundreds of junior officers would serve bravely in heavy fighting in the Battles of Smolensk and Borodino. In addition Napoleon throughout the campaign would be attended by his trusted aide-de-camp Lithuanian Captain Count Dunin Wonsowicz of the 1st Polish Lancers. Later Wonsowicz would be one of the only three officers to accompany Napoleon when he abandoned the Grand Army and fled to Paris.

The three retreating Russian armies finally unified for battle in the vicinity of Smolensk under the command of Field Marshal Michail Kutuzov. The Russian forces were easily defeated and as a result continued their retreat towards Moscow. Lithuanian General Thaddeus Tyzkiewicz, Commanding the 19<sup>th</sup> Polish Cavalry Brigade, was personally decorated by Napoleon with the Legion of Honor decoration on the battlefield of Smolensk for outstanding bravery in combat.

Kutuzov upon reaching the gates of Moscow, was forced by political pressure to again risk his forces in combat with the French. He selected a field in the vicinity of a small village named Borodino which would lend its name to the bloodiest battle of the Russian Campaign. The Battle of Borodino was fought on September 5-7, 1812, resulting in the loss of over 30,000 Frenchmen and 43,000 Russians. Both sides claimed victory, but the Russian army again was forced to retreat and to abandon Moscow.

Napoleon continued to pursue the Russians and entered the deserted city of Moscow seven days later with little satisfaction. The imperial capital was largely deserted and burned as the Russian populace retreated and gave little protection to the French forces. The prolonged occupation of Moscow was the beginning of the end for the Napoleonic Empire.

## THE MOSCOW RETREAT

Napoleon waited for five weeks in Moscow for a peace overture from Czar Alexander convinced that Moscow was such a prize that he would have to negotiate for its return. Alexander in turn swore that he would never negotiate as long as a single invader remained on Russian

soil. With the approach of winter, Napoleon could not continue his occupation so far from his supplies. Finally on October 19, 1812, retreat was ordered and the Grand Army set out southeast towards Tula.

The orderly withdrawal soon turned into a rout and the most tragic march in history. Through the November snow and freezing temperatures the French troops marched without adequate food and clothing falling prey to the Russian soldiers and Cossacks that were now following the flanks of the retreating column. Discipline broke down and the Grand Army slowly disintegrated. Of the estimated 130,000 men that followed Napoleon into Moscow only about 50,000 men were with him when he crossed the Berezina River back into Lithuania.

Napoleon's Lithuanian troops would also share his tragic fate during the retreat. As the evacuation period from Moscow neared, the Lithuanian soldier was scattered across western Russia. The Vilnius Honor Guard was present with Napoleon inside the gates of Moscow along with the Lithuanians serving with the 1<sup>st</sup> Polish Lancers of the Imperial Guard. The thousand Lithuanian volunteers recruited into the 129<sup>th</sup> French Line Infantry Regiment and the Illyrian Infantry Regiment formed part of



Napoleon and his staff at Borodino in Russia, by Vasily Vereshchagin.

General Ney's Corps along with numerous other fellow countrymen serving with the Vistula Legion in the vicinity of Smolensk. The bulk of the Lithuanian infantry and cavalry regiments were still assigned to their recruitment depot near Vilnius, Raseiniai, Bialystok, and Minsk. General Konopka's 3<sup>rd</sup> Lithuanian Lancer Regiment of the Guard was being formed at Grodno, while the 21<sup>st</sup> Lithuanian Chasseurs a Cheval, Tyzenhauz's Artillery Battery, and the Lithuanian Tartar Regiment in the vicinity of Vilnius. Between Minsk and Kaunas were various units of the Lithuanian National Guard, Gendarmes, and the Foot Riflemen Regiment. In all, over 20,000 Lithuanian soldiers awaited Napoleon's destiny.

Upon Napoleon's withdrawal from Moscow he found the Russian Army under the command of General Kutuzov on his heels with additional Russian forces under the command of General Wittgenstein advancing from the north and Admiral Pavel Tchitchagov from the southwest threatening to surround the Grand Army. The Russian forces maneuvered rather than attacking Napoleon in mass and hoped to converge on the Berezina river cutting off the French rout of flight.

The Russian Moldavian Army under the command of Admiral Tchitchagov had been at war with the Turks since 1806, but became available when the Treaty of Bucharest was signed on May 28, 1812, just a few weeks prior to the French invasion. Tchitchagov immediately began marching northwest through Brest-Litovsk and Minsk by-passing Schwarzenberg's



**Prince Mikhail Illarionovich Golenishchev-Kutuzov was a Field Marshal of the Russian Empire.**

Austrian Corps which showed little desire to fight. This force would be the most devastating to the Lithuanian units. Tchitchagov's force of approximately 40,000 men was composed of cavalry, infantry, and artillery units and were seasoned veterans. A Cossack brigade under the command of General Chaplitz preceeding in front of the main body surprised two squadrons of 600 troopers of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Lithuanian Lancer Regiment travelling on the Minsk road near Slonim. The regiment defended itself valiantly before finally being overwhelmed with all but a few troopers being killed or captured. The only surviving members of this elite unit remained

in their regimental depot at Grodno.

Guarding against the approaching menace of Admiral Tschitchagov's army stood General Dombrowski's 17<sup>th</sup> Polish Division and isolated garrison detachments along the way. Dombrowski hastened to gather his scattered forces between Minsk and Borisov and march to the defense of Minsk. General Bronikowski the Polish military-governor of the Minsk supply depot garrison formed a field force under the command of General Kossecki and sent him south on the Slonim road to determine the strength of the approaching enemy. This small force consisted of three battalions of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Lithuanian Infantry Regiment and one battalion of Kossakowski's Chasseurs a Pied supported by a single cannon. Kossecki marched south and established a defensive position attempting to hold the vital approach bridge over the Nemunas River.

On November 12, 1812, Kossecki's column came under attack by Tchitchagov's main force. For six hours the units were subjected to intense artillery fire. Historic battlefield documents indicate that the Lithuanian units were only held in place by the resolution of their officers so great was the enemy fire. After vainly seeking permission from General Bronikowski to withdraw the Lithuanians were overrun by the superior Russian forces. About a thousand men were killed or captured in this engagement. The surviving forces still under the command of Kossecki fell back towards Minsk and were reinforced on the way by small units of French infantry and cavalry. On November 15, 1812, Kossecki's retreating column was overtaken by Russian forces under the command of General Lambert about 18 miles from Minsk. This entire force was all but destroyed in a running fight near Koidanow. The consequences were fatal to the Minsk garrison. Dombrowski's relief column was still 20 miles away with Lambert's Russians closing in for the kill. General Bronikowski was forced to abandon Minsk and retreated towards Borisov with about a thousand men from the garrison regiments. Dombrowski turned his forces back towards Berzino hoping to hold that location with its vital bridge for the retreating Grand Army. Tchitchagov's army occupied Minsk on November 18, 1812, and the following day dispatched units towards Borisov and Zembin.

## CRITICAL MOMENT

On November 25, 1812, Napoleon's situation was critical as he approached Borisov. The Russian forces were at his heels and Admiral Tschitchagov had succeeded in occupying the opposite bank of the Berezina River cutting



**Napoleon and Prince Poniatowski before the burning city of Smolensk in Russia, 1812, by Jean-Charles Langlois.**



**Napoleon in burning Moscow in 1812.**

off his escape route. Choosing a position near the village of Studzianka, Napoleon ordered Dombrowski's forces which had joined his retreating army to hold the hills overlooking the river while his engineers began building a new bridge. Throughout the day and night of November 25, 1812, the French engineers labored to build an escape bridge under the waiting cannons of the Russian army. Only an elaborate and exaggerated movement of troops caused the Russians to believe that this bridge was a ruse and that the real crossing was to be made several miles to the north.

On the morning of November 26, 1812, Napoleon awoke expecting a great battle to occupy the opposite bank, but only found the abandoned campfires of the enemy. Impatient to take possession of the opposite bank, Napoleon pointed to a mounted group of his bravest officers. Jacqueminot, an aide-de-camp to the Duke of Reggio, and Colonel Count Przdziezki of the 18<sup>th</sup> Lithuanian Lancers, immediately plunged into the river and despite the sharp cakes of ice which tore into the flanks and chests of their horses, succeeded in reaching the opposite shore.

With the successful passage of the Berezina river, Napoleon divided his forces so as not to have the entire army continue on the previously devastated invasion route. The surviving Polish and Lithuanian units were ordered to separate from the Grand Army at Molodechno and fall back towards Warsaw by way of Alytus and Grodno. Dismounted cavalry units were ordered to retreat via Merkinė and the Nemunas river. The main French column continued to withdraw towards Vilnius. With continued freezing temperatures and the breakdown of

discipline, Napoleon finally abandoned his army on December 5, 1812, at Smorgonie and set out for Paris. He would be escorted the first few miles by light cavalry, but then continued his journey with only his trusted Lithuanian aide-de-camp Count Dunin Wonsowicz and a Mameluke bodyguard. Napoleon is reported to have handed Count Wonsowicz a pair of loaded pistols at the beginning of the journey with orders that he should never allow the Emperor to be captured alive. During the final stages of the retreat from Russia the life of Emperor Napoleon was in the hands of this lone Lithuanian officer.

With Napoleon's flight, the Grand Army ceased to resist the pursuing Russian forces as a military unit. The proud army was transformed into a merciless band of marauders and every man acted for himself. Of the 50,000 soldiers that crossed the Berezina river and the 20,000



**Retreat of the Grande Armée of Napoleon from Russia, by Vasily Vereshchagin.**



(Clockwise from top left): The Battle of Borodino by Louis-François Lejeune; Napoleon watching the fire of Moscow by Albrecht Adam; Marshal Ney at the Battle of Kaunas by Auguste Raffet; French retreat by Illarion Pryanishnikov.

men that joined the column from local garrisons, half perished in the four day freezing march to Vilnius. Only the heroic rear guard action of General Ney allowed the retreating army to outdistance the Cossacks. The tragic retreat of Napoleon's army had been kept secret from the populace of Vilnius and as a result both the military and civilians were taken by complete surprise when the first scattered units began to arrive.

The Vilnius defense forces could only offer token resistance to the advancing Russians. What little defense of Vilnius that was provided was by Prince Karol De Wrede's Bavarians towards Rukainiai, General Louis Loison's just arrived French XI Corps, and the 6,000–7,000 men belonging to regiments on the march and the Lithuanian depot units. General Loison's Division of 15,000 men was ordered to march to Smorgony to cover the main body of the retreating French column. Loison's Division was reduced to 3,000 men by cold and enemy action before it joined the retreating column.

Lithuanian units left at Vilnius included the Tartars, Gendarmes, Chasseurs and National Guard. Platov's Cossacks drove Wrede's Bavarian remnants into Vilnius upon the just arrived retreating column. The Cossacks were all around the town skirmishing with the garrison units. The Lithuanian Tartars fought valiantly and were almost totally annihilated.

The Imperial Grand Army that passed through Vilnius a few months before now returned on December 9, 1812, in total defeat. Many were worn out by sickness and fatigue and once laying down could not rise again. The wounded soon spread sickness to the townspeople and thousands died. The fugitives poured into the streets seeking food and shelter. The town gates were choked by the mob of helpless wretches making order impossible. Arson and looting were commonplace with cold and famine. Hundreds gorged themselves into helplessness on brandy and then died of exposure on the frozen streets. Many more were frostbitten and the sudden warmth helped

produce gangrene. The unexpected sight of the army alarmed the populace and the horrified inhabitants barricaded their doors in fear.

Assistance for the defeated army was only obtained through the efforts of some senior officers by appealing to the pity of the Lithuanians. Unfortunately, the French army rested for only one day before the cry of Cossacks forced them to continue their flight through Kaunas until they reached Koenigsberg. The shouts of officers, rolls of drums, and the clamor of the crowd of fugitives only caused new confusion. The Grand Army was destitute in its will to resist and again fled in terror. Only General Ney's rear guard and the Vilnius garrison regiments resembled a military force. Nearly 20,000 helpless creatures were left behind and most perished in the city due to the cold and Cossacks.

## THE RUSSIANS' RETURN TO VILNIUS

Russian Marshal Kutuzov reached Vilnius on December 12, 1812, with the bulk of his

forces. He immediately dispatched Tchitchagov to support Platov's Cossacks on the hills of the retreating French abandoning Kaunas. Wittgenstein was ordered to intercept MacDonald's X Corps in Latvia which had not been advised of Napoleon's tragic retreat. MacDonald's forces were attacking Riga on December 18, 1812, when orders were received to retreat. He immediately divided his forces into two retreat columns and began his withdrawal the following day. Grandjean's Polish units under the command of MacDonald took the advance supported by Massenback's Prussian cavalry and the Prussian Infantry Brigade. General Yorck's Prussian Corps was to cover the retreat at one day's march. The Russian forces under Wittgenstein met MacDonald's retreating column, but were unsuccessful in stopping the withdrawal. While falling back into Samogitia, MacDonald was joined by various Lithuanian units including the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Lancer Regiments in the vicinity of Tauragė. These units would help defend the retreating column against Russian cavalry and were most helpful to MacDonald in his hour of need.

Czar Alexander arrived in Vilnius on December 22, 1812, and devoted himself to helping the sick and wounded left behind by the retreating French. Though the Czar expressed his desire to be compassionate to the Lithuanians, his subordinates did not comply with his wishes. General Levitsky who was appointed commandant of Vilnius took a terrible vengeance upon Napoleon's supporters. The following letter written to Czar Alexander by his long time personal friend, Prince



**Retreat from Russia: the Grande Armée of Napoleon in Vilnius again. Assistance for the defeated army was only obtained through the efforts of some senior officers by appealing to the pity of the Lithuanians.**

Czartoryski indicates the scope of Lithuania's suffering.

Warsaw, 27<sup>th</sup> April 1813

*"...Those who know your Imperial Majesty cannot admit the slightest suspicion of the loyalty of your sentiments or fear that you do not intend to fulfill the hopes you are holding out to the Poles; ...yet those who have to carry out your policy are doing their utmost to defeat it.*

*The five Governments of Lithuania, instead of enjoying the benefits you wish to grant them, are suffering under an administration more unjust and arbitrary than any of those that have preceded it. No one's property, life, or honour is safe. Any official prompted by a desire of revenge or greed of gain may ruin the most innocent citizen and the whole of his family... in a word, the Government and the authorities, instead of protecting the inhabitants placed under their care, seem to think it their duty to persecute and plunder them. You have no idea, Sire, of the evil that is being done in your name, for if you had you would put a stop to it ... The inhabitants are in despair, and though hitherto they have been quiet, they may be driven to insurrection, not by a hope of success, but because they think it better to perish than to remain in their present condition."* 46

**Source: Adam Gielgud, *Memoirs of Prince Adam Czartoryski, and his Correspondence with Alexander I*, London, 1888, pp. 239-240.**



**Big losses: Of the approximately 20,000 Lithuanians that joined Napoleon in 1812, only about 8,000 survived the tragic retreat.**

Such was the state of Lithuania at the end of the 1812 Russian Campaign. The countryside along the Moscow-Vilnius road was a deserted and scorched wasteland. Material damage to the country as a result of the French liberation and the subsequent Russian occupation was estimated by Lithuanian Count Oginski at 87 million silver rubles. The 1811 and 1817 Russian Census of Lithuania shows that the nation lost one-third of its inhabitants during that period.



**1814 campaign in North-East France: Napoleon and his staff are returning from Soissons after the battle of Laon, by Ernest Meissonier.**

The newly formed Lithuanian regiments retreated with Napoleon vainly hoping that he would still lead them to victory. The scattered units continued to follow their officers and regrouped within the Duchy of Warsaw. Of the approximately 20,000 Lithuanians that joined Napoleon in 1812, only about 8,000 survived the tragic retreat. The loyalty of these untrained Lithuanian volunteers is very commendable in light of the desertion of the professional Austrian and Prussian armies who refused to fight.

## THE 1813–1814 CAMPAIGNS

Lithuanian units arriving at Warsaw nearly intact were Colonel Chodkiewicz's 18<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, Colonel Biszing's 20<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, Colonel Gielgud's 21<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, Colonel Przedziecki's 18<sup>th</sup> Lancers, and Colonel Obuchowicz's 20<sup>th</sup> Lancers. Partially surviving units included the embryo Tyzenhauz Horse Artillery Battery, one squadron of Moniuszko's Mounted Rifles, the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion of Kurczewski's Foot Chasseurs, the Vilnius National Guard, and various Gendarme detachments.

With the Prussian desertion of MacDonald's Corps, he was joined in Samogitia by Colonel Tyszkiewicz's 17<sup>th</sup> Lancers, Colonel Rajecki's 19<sup>th</sup> Lancers, and surviving members of Kossakowski's and Plater's Battalions of Chasseurs. Upon arriving at Koenigsberg the Lithuanian infantry units were ordered to join the rest of the Polish-Lithuanian infantry units regrouping in Warsaw. The Lithuanian Lancer regiments were retained in East Prussia to support MacDonald who had been depleted of cavalry. These lancer units took an active part in

engagements at Tilžė, Labguva, Koenigsberg, and Brandenburg.

Thus, the Lithuanian forces found themselves in a difficult situation being cut off from their homeland on which they depended for financial and military support. The Provisional Government of Lithuania had retreated along with the French Diplomatic Corps on December 8, 1812, bringing with it all of their records to justify to posterity their honor concerning the treasury entrusted to them.

The Lithuanian Provisional Government would meet on December 21, 1812, in Warsaw and again on January 29, 1813, at Krakow. On February 7, 1813, units of the Vilnius Gendarmerie Regiment brought in the treasury from Šiauliai, Raseiniai, and Telšiai, totaling 61,675 gulden, which was a marked contrast from the pillage of the French military treasury by its forces. The exile government continued to retreat and held its last executive meeting on July 24, 1813, at Dresden, Saxony. Here, another unit of the Vilnius Gendarmerie would deliver the treasury from Upytė and Ukmergė counties. The funds delivered to the Provisional Government were used to pay the

rear wages of the surviving Lithuanian military units. These commissioners remained loyal to Napoleon and refused to avail themselves of Czar Alexander's amnesty proclamations until Napoleon himself released them with his abdication in 1814. Like their honor, the oath of these Lithuanian aristocrats given to Napoleon was held supreme to their lives and fortunes.

In January, 1813, Napoleon ordered the surviving Lithuanian infantry regiments consisting of the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup>, and 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of Chasseurs to join with the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Polish Infantry Regiments in garrisoning the Vistula River fortress of Modlin. Due to the extreme depletion of men during the Russian Campaign, the 19<sup>th</sup> Infantry, 22<sup>nd</sup> Infantry, and Kossakowski's Battalion were consolidated into the other Lithuanian units. Fortress Modlin had been originally established by Napoleon in 1807 to defend the northern approach to Warsaw and was a seven fronted walled complex, capable of holding 10,000 men, and armed with 200 guns. Here over 2200 Lithuanian officers and soldiers withstood a prolonged Russian siege even after Warsaw itself had been abandoned. This fortress did not surrender until December 25, 1813, and was the last



**In December of 1813, the 17<sup>th</sup> Lithuanian Lancer Regiment separated from French service and assigned as an auxiliary unit to the Danish Corps under the command Marshal Prince Eckmuhl. As a result of this transfer, the 17<sup>th</sup> Lithuanian Lancers took part in Prince Frederick of Hesse campaigns in Holstein and Denmark.**  
Photo credit: Flickr.com

fortress complex left in Poland after the total withdrawal of the French and Duchy of Warsaw forces. Their surrender was with honor as the fortress defenders only accepted their fate after months of starvation and constant siege.

The remaining Lithuanian infantry formations were assimilated into various Polish formations during the 1813 reorganization and became part of the French VIII Corps. These units were designated as the 17<sup>th</sup> Polish Infantry Division under the command of General Krasinski. Lithuanian General Grabowski was assigned as the commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade of this new unit consisting of the 12<sup>th</sup> Polish Infantry Regiment. The former units of Dombrowski's 17<sup>th</sup> Division formed the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade under command of General Loczynski consisting of the new 2<sup>nd</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Polish Infantry Regiments. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Lithuanian Lancer Guard Regiment and the Lithuanian Tartar Squadron were consolidated into the 1<sup>st</sup> Polish Lancers of the Imperial Guard as its 7<sup>th</sup> Squadron and continued to serve Napoleon until the fall of Paris in 1814.

The 18<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, and 21<sup>st</sup> Lithuanian Lancer Regiments were assigned to the reorganized 4<sup>th</sup> Reserve Cavalry under the command of General Kellermann as part of the 7<sup>th</sup> Light Cavalry Division. This division was formed into two cavalry brigades under the command of Generals Tolinski and Kwasniewski and consisted of the new 8<sup>th</sup> Polish Lancer Regiment, the 13<sup>th</sup> Polish Hussar Regiment, and the 16<sup>th</sup> Polish Lancer Regiment. Lithuanian General Weyssenhoff commanded a Brigade assigned to the 8<sup>th</sup> Light Cavalry Division.

With the regrouping of the French army its Lithuanian units were again engaged in combat with the Russians. Colonel Przedziecki's 18<sup>th</sup> Lancers took part in the January 15, 1813, Battle at Koidanow where it was cited for bravery and combat ability. Lieutenant Grabowski was awarded the Virtuti Military decoration and Colonel Przedziecki the Legion of Honor for charges against advancing Cossack cavalry.

The 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Lithuanian Lancer Regiments continued to serve in East Prussia where they frequently engaged the Russian Cavalry. On February 11-12, 1813, the 17<sup>th</sup> Lancers were surprised at Zirke and General Ronald Giedroyc and a great many troopers taken prisoner. A great honor was paid the 19<sup>th</sup> Lancers on March 31, 1813, when they were selected to act as scouts and bodyguards for Napoleon while visiting Pattensen. On April 20, 1813, the two lancer regiments were combined due to losses into the 17<sup>th</sup> Lithuanian Lancer Regiment. This unit served with great distinction under Marshall Davout and as an auxilliary



**The remaining Lithuanian infantry formations were assimilated into various Polish formations during the 1813 reorganization and became part of the French VIII Corps.**

unit attached to the Danish Corps during the 1813 German and Denmark Campaigns.

In June, 1813, with the arrival of new troops from France, Napoleon recaptured Dresden. The surviving Polish and Lithuanian forces were assigned to this area in the hopes of holding the invading forces in check. On August 10, 1813, Napoleon recognized the service of Lithuania with the awarding of France's highest decoration for valor, the Legion of Honor, to the Provisional Government officials Soltan, Prozor, Sierakowski, Jelski, and Potocki and military officers Kos-

sakowski, Czapski, Przedziecki, Tyzenhauz, and Abramowicz.

On August 26, 1813, the Lithuanian units took part in the engagement at Katzback and September 6, 1813, in the engagement at Dennewitz. During October 16-19, 1813, Napoleon's Lithuanian forces took part in the battle at Leipzig subsequently known to history as the "Battle of Nations." Here while fighting to hold the vital escape bridge at Dölitz, the Russians broke into the city causing the French to prematurely blow-up the bridge leaving 20,000 men trapped. Marshall Joseph Poniatowski drowned trying to swim to safety across the Elster River and the remnants of his trapped forces fell into enemy hands.

One-by-one, the isolated fortresses capitulated and the fleeing French forces retreated towards Paris. The remaining Polish and Lithuanian soldiers were incorporated into the regular French army. Inspired by personal loyalties the Polish Battalion of the Imperial Guard and the Vistula Infantry and Lancers continued to serve Napoleon during the 1814 Campaign. Five Polish Cavalry and one Polish Infantry Regiment containing Lithuanian soldiers took part in the final fighting for Paris. The Vistula Infantry which had been formed by Napoleon in 1797 took a conspicuous part in the defense of Soissons. The Krakus Cavalry Regiment under the personal command of Lithuanian General Louis Pac made the last cavalry charge in the defense of Paris.

The fall of Paris marked an end to the eighteen year reign of Napoleon and his tide of greatness. Still in defeat he did not forget the years of sacrifice made by his Polish and Lithuanian allies. Napoleon's abdication treaty, article 19, which was signed on April 14, 1814, obtained a guarantee from Czar Alexander that these soldiers could return to their homes with arms and baggage maintaining the orders and pensions won in honorable service to France.

## CONCLUSION

A squadron of the old 1st Polish Lancers of the Imperial Guard, which included several Lithuanians, accompanied Napoleon as part of his miniature army in exile on the Isle of Elba. This unit would again follow Napoleon during his one hundred days 1815 Campaign making its final charge in the famous Battle of Waterloo. Other units containing Lithuanians that fought in this last great battle of the Napoleonic Wars were the Vistula Lancers and remnants of the Vistula Infantry serving in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Foreign Regiment of Infantry. ■

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