

A Brief Guide to the BLACK BRUNSWICKERS of the Napoleonic Wars



By Dr Gavin Hughes, Photographs by Alan Perry

“An immense moving hearse...”

- Lady de Lancey referring to the Brunswick Corps, June 1815

In 1815, Duke Friedrich Wilhelm's Brunswick Corps was 6,700 men strong. Although one of the smallest Allied contingents of the wars, it had fought on relentlessly against the odds and had refused to be destroyed. The Corps consisted of infantry, jagers, cavalry and artillery - all famed for their sinister black uniforms and the burning and unrelenting hatred their Duke held for Napoleon. The following article hopes to briefly illustrate the background and history of Brunswick forces, including a brief scenario for the 1809 battle of Halberstadt, which could be used as a basis for *Shako, General de Brigade* or whatever Napoleonic rules system suits you best.

DUKE KARL AND JENA-AUERSTADT, 1792 - 1806,

The Duchy of Brunswick (Braunschweig) had a long history of pro-Prussian loyalty, stemming from its commitment to the Seven Years War and continuing with the Revolutionary Wars.

In 1792, Duke Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand continued his Duchy's anti-French tradition when he was appointed Allied Commander-in-Chief for the invasion of France. However, following the

decisive French victory at Valmy on 20 September and Frosehwiller the following year, Duke Karl relinquished command of the Austro-Prussian Army. He remained in enforced retirement for some thirteen years before being called back into Prussian service in 1806 to lead them against Napoleon. It was to be a fateful decision. On 8 October, 1806, Napoleon invaded Prussia in a lightning campaign and, within four days, was threatening Berlin; on the 10th, Prince Louis of Prussia was killed at the Battle of Saalfeld. Without hesitation, Napoleon sent Marshals Bernadotte and Davout on a mission to sever the Prussian's line of supply. On 14 October, Napoleon (with 96,000 men) launched an attack on what he erroneously believed to be the Duke of Brunswick's main Prussian Army. Instead, he mistakenly caught Brunswick's rearguard, a much smaller force of 38,000 troops under Prince Friedrich Hohenlohe, at Jena and completely shattered it. To the north, however, Duke Karl's 60,000 strong army was actually engaged by Marshal Davout in a brilliant defensive battle at Auerstadt. With a French army of only 27,000, Davout succeeded in holding Brunswick at bay until Bernadotte's delayed counter-attack which effectively cut the Prussian



Left: Officer of the Brunswick Light Infantry, Avantgarde.

army to pieces. By the end of 14 October, Jena-Auerstadt had seen Prussia removed as a military threat. Duke Karl Wilhelm of Brunswick was fatally wounded during the battle (by a musket ball which passed through both his eyes) and subsequently died nearly a month later. Ten days after the battle, Berlin fell to Napoleon.

THE BLACK LEGION'S SERVICE WITH AUSTRIA, 1809

With the death of Duke Karl and the collapse of Prussia following the Battle of Jena-Auerstadt in 1806, the fate of the Duchy of Brunswick seemed almost certain. Following their defeat, Napoleon reputedly sent a stark declaration to Duke Karl's successor, Duke Friedrich Wilhelm (his son), that he would wipe out the household of Brunswick. The new 'hardfighting' Duke (as Sir Charles Oman called him) was deposed by Napoleon and his former Duchy swiftly annexed into the new Kingdom of Westphalia, now ruled by Napoleon's brother, Jerome. By doing this, Napoleon created a most determined enemy and thus began a chain of events that would eventually end on

the associated battlefields of Waterloo. Duke Friedrich became determined to avenge his father's death, reclaim the Duchy and personally take part in Napoleon's downfall at any opportunity.

In 1809, the Duke went to Austria (with 2,000 men) where he raised a force of

exiles from the defunct Duchy, dressing them in black as a sign of mourning, revenge and, ominously, hatred for the French. As a symbol of their avowed enmity, the famous 'Black Legion' wore Death's Head badges on their shakos, shoulder belts and pouches. In June 1809, the Brunswickers were part of the Austrian Division, sent into Saxony under General Am Ende, which captured Dresden as the Saxon defenders fell back on Leipzig. At the bloody Battle of Wagram (5 - 6 July 1809) and its subsequent pursuit, Napoleon defeated Archduke Charles and brought him to the negotiating table.

The Brunswickers were at Schleiz when they discovered that an uneasy armistice had been secured. Despite the devastating loss of Austria to the Allied cause, Duke Friedrich resolved to keep Brunswick in the war and fought on with his Black Legion. Instead of remaining with the Austrian army and withdrawing with them back to Bohemia, the Duke of Brunswick obstinately refused to surrender. Duke Friedrich's aim was far more audacious - to invade Westphalia and oust the French. He assembled his Corps at Zwickau on 21 July and prepared to fight on, reforming Brunswick's 2,110 strong 'Army of Vengeance' into three smaller battalions, a four-gun battery and one large cavalry regiment. (See also, Otto Von Pivka, John Gill, et al).

This began one of the most amazing series of events in an already remarkable period of warfare; the Black Legion's march through Germany and its



Above (left to right): Hussar musician, Ulan, Hussar charging

subsequent escape to Britain. On this heroic trek north, Duke Friedrich's Corps had a particularly unfortunate early run-in with a detachment of Saxon cavalry outside Leipzig. Under the cover of darkness, the Duke sent his 'scharfschützen' skirmisher company on ahead to deal with the Saxon cavalry which were defending the outskirts of the city. As they were relatively raw troops, this forward party advanced too far and were suddenly charged by 170 veteran Saxon hussars and chevaux-legers. The scharfschützen were caught in the open

(with no bayonets or hangers to defend themselves) and sustained twenty casualties before the Saxon cavalry swiftly retired back to their main force. Despite this inauspicious start, Duke Friedrich's army managed to slip through Saxony and into his former Duchy by the end of July. It was here, in Westphalia, that the Brunswickers fought a substantial engagement at Halberstadt on 29 July, 1809. This battle, though very minor in comparison to others during the wars, was important to the Brunswick cause as it was a notable victory. The Duke captured the town and totally swept away an entire

Westphalian regiment. Following the battle, the Black Legion received a further 300 recruits from Westphalian deserters and the 'rebel' force marched northwards once more. Finally, on 31 July, Duke Friedrich entered his capital of Brunswick, but found the situation not as he had expected. The hoped-for popular revolt against French rule had not taken hold and, instead, he found his Legion in danger of being surrounded. The following day, at Oelper, the Brunswickers fought an inconclusive battle against General Jean-Jaques Reubell's Berg and Westphalian contingents. Although Reubell successfully stopped Brunswick from continuing north (and held possession of the field), he had suffered 200 casualties to the Duke's 100. Additionally, Reubell failed to exploit his victory and, bizarrely, actually withdrew - allowing the Brunswickers to continue again unhindered. With little option left, Duke Friedrich resolved to march to the coast and succeeded in constantly outwitting and evading Reubell's ponderous pursuit. On 7 August the Black Legion was evacuated by the British Fleet from Brake, on the Frisian coast.



Above: A battallion of Black Brunswickers marches on through Westphalia.



Above: An artillery limber and team advance alongside their compatriots.

THE DUCHY OF BRUNSWICK-LÜNEBURG



Above: The green-shaded area depicts the Duchy of Brunswick-Lüneburg prior to the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806. It is overlaid on a modern map of Germany, the pale lines delineate the current states.

THE BRUNSWICK CORPS, 1810-1815

As the Brunswickers were considered to be an active British ally, their absorption en bloc into British service seemed a natural progression. However, their bitter march through Germany had taken a toll on their numbers. By the Peninsular campaign, their ranks were dependent on a tragically small cadre of excellent troops from Brunswick and North Germany but, for the most part, enlistment was swollen by prisoners of war in British camps. Whilst the King's German Legion arguably recruited the finest of the men available, the Brunswickers ended up with many of the dregs, for whom the corps was a slightly preferable alternative to incarceration. The Black Legion was thus bolstered to become a twelve company regiment called the 'Brunswick-Oels Jager', in

addition to the existing auxiliary forces. Although larger than before, the calibre of serving troops deteriorated greatly. An influx of deserters, mercenaries and adventurers joined the corps as the Brunswickers became a useful 'depositing ground' for an odd assortment of recruits. They included Polish and Germans, Croatian, Swiss, Danish and Dutch soldiers, but the general standard of the whole varied immensely. Their active service record in the Peninsular campaign (they fought in many battles including Fuentes de Onoro and Vittoria) was an example of this occasional inconsistency.

Whilst the majority of Brunswickers fought in the Fifth and Seventh Divisions, the Jager elements fought with Crauford's famous Light Division (which so expertly extracted the 7th Division at Fuentes de Onoro). A sizeable number of the

non-Brunswick (or Northern German/Prussian) recruits soon deserted once on campaign and, to British observers, little difference was made between those from the Duchy and outside it. Indeed, numerous British soldiers complained about the lack of commitment amongst the Brunswickers, with even the occasional 'Black Legion' officer seemingly intent on desertion. Such was their reputation, that General Crauford claimed that if any Brunswicker chose to desert to the enemy they should not be hampered from doing so as '...we are better without such'. (E. Costello, *Adventures of a Soldier*; written by himself, p.47, Reprint, London, 1967). In fact, in 1811, a 'great court martial' deliberated on the fate of ten Brunswick deserters in one single hearing; six men were flogged and the remainder were shot. (Sir Charles Oman, *Wellington's Army 1809 - 1814*, Reprint, Greenhill 1986).

Despite this apparent dilution, there was a hardened core of Brunswick veterans who held true to their original aims and got on well with their British counterparts. It was recorded by one Brunswicker that it was their mutual disgust and common contempt for Napoleon that brought the two nations together.

A triumphant repatriation for the Black Legion came in 1814, when the Duke retook possession of the Duchy. In the period leading up to the Waterloo campaign, Friedrich Wilhelm set about creating a new national army. The infantry formed around the Leib-Bataillon (from the old veterans of the Black Legion) and consisted of three Light and three Line battalions, supported by the Jager battalion (the famous Avantgarde) and five Landwehr Reserve battalions. During the Waterloo campaign, like most of the Allied contingents, the Duke of Brunswick agreed that his forces should be under

Wellington's overall command. However, the Duke insisted that his Corps remained independent and would not be tampered with by British - or any other Allied - officers. In this, Brunswick's situation was essentially the same as that of the Netherlands but, militarily, they were classed with the Hanoverian Landwehr and Nassau troops. Just like the Peninsular campaign, however, the Brunswickers were a seriously watered down force to the one that had begun the long fight against Napoleon in 1809. This time, it was hampered by a serious lack of experience due to the attritional wastage on their forces over the previous nine years of warfare. The Leib-Bataillon remained a unit of mostly veteran troops, but the majority of the other Brunswick battalions lacked battle experience. It was known, for example, that the Nassau and Brunswick battalions could not be expected to manoeuvre under fire, a significant tactical drawback. By Waterloo, the role of the Duke's renowned Black Legion had relegated to largely one of simply being placed in position and told to hold their ground. Having said that, it was of deep concern to some observers of 'non-British' troops whether the Brunswickers could be relied upon to even do this. That worry became especially pressing at Quatre Bras and it was here that Duke Friedrich Wilhelm's day of reckoning eventually came.

During the battle, the Brunswickers had initially met with favourable success. Whilst advancing his men onto Gemioncourt, east of the Charleroi road, the Duke had been able to calmly ride amongst his raw troops, smoking a pipe and urging them forward. However, they soon came under fire from French light infantry concealed at the edge of the Bois de Bossu and this was quickly supported by artillery. As the French began to range their guns against them, the Brunswickers struggled forward falteringly as their casualties mounted; Major Prostler of the

Leib-Battalion desperately attempted to rally them but they began to fall back, raked by canister and shot. It was around this time, whilst trying to encourage his inexperienced troops, that the Duke was fatally struck in the chest by a ball. Following this disaster, the steadiness of the green Brunswick troops was, almost immediately, thrown into question. One battalion notably threw away its weapons and packs and attempted to flee (apparently panicked by the sound of the Royal Horse Artillery approach) but, once calmed, held their position. Yet, this was mirrored with great professionalism too. When the French cavalry assaulted the Allied position east of the crossroads, Colonel Olfermann was obliged to form his 4,000 Brunswick infantry into squares. As they did so, with agonising slowness, the 3rd Battalion was almost caught mid-manoeuvre by the enemy horsemen. It was only saved from destruction by the swift intervention of the Brunswick lancers, acting as a human buffer, which bought the infantry time to reform. It was this spirit which was to show itself admirably two days later.

Considering the terrible news of the Duke's death at Quatre Bras, the Brunswick Corps at Waterloo reacted very well. Indeed, far from running away, the Brunswickers held their ground despite terrible carnage all around them. For example, during an horrific bombardment, followed by Marshal Ney's massed cavalry charge against their positions - and seeing a Royal Artillery battery flee - the Brunswick infantry stood firm. Their steadiness here is often attributed to Captain Mercer's battery ('G' Troop, Royal Horse Artillery) swiftly taking up a position between the two Brunswick squares, but their own qualities must surely be taken into consideration too. As Captain Mercer noted, the Brunswick infantry, which had been so jittery at Quatre Bras, now stood solidly during the heavy shelling as



Above: Hussar Officer

gaps were hewn in their ranks. Officers and sergeants pushed and pulled men into the spaces of those who had fallen, as the smoke around them increased and 'G' Troop unlimbered just in time to see the massed leading squadron of Marshal Ney's attack bearing down upon them. As Mercer's guns opened up with canister, the Brunswickers too opened fire, raking the French cavalry mercilessly. Although Mercer's account heavily focused on the role of his battery bolstering (indeed 'saving' is the term most regularly used) the Brunswickers, equally Mercer's gunners were protected by these squares. Certainly, Lord Hill's report on 20 June commented on the 'firm manner' in which the Brunswick infantry behaved at Waterloo; in contrast to the reputation they seemed to have gained for 'nerviness' (Quoted in D Hamilton-Williams, *Waterloo: New Perspectives*).

During the battle for Hougomont, veteran Brunswickers, who had become detached from their parent units, recognised the 51st Regiment from their Peninsular service and fought alongside their former comrades in arms for the remainder of the day.



Above: A squadron of Brunswick Ulans prepares to deploy on the flanks.



Above: An artillery crew man-handles their gun into position.



Above: Until 1814 the Duchy of Brunswick's flag was a yellow stripe over blue. From 1814 - 1830, it was a blue stripe over white.

The Battle of HALBERSTADT

29 July, 1809

The following scenario intends to recapture this spirit and hopefully provides an entertaining idea on recreating an event from when the Brunswick forces fought alone against Napoleon.

In late July, the Duke of Brunswick was marching through Westphalia with his Black Legion; but he found his way blocked at the town of Halberstadt by the 5th Westphalian Infantry Regiment (under Colonel P.S. Meyronnet). The regiment was part of the Magdeburg garrison and had left the town on 28 July with some 1,980 men, to meet up with General Reubell's division and

tackle Brunswick in one vast sweeping onslaught. However, this went awry, as military plans often do, when Meyronnet's regiment reached the town of Halberstadt on the morning of the 29th, with Reubell's army still some 150 kilometres away. Initial reports estimated the Duke of Brunswick's Legion at the town of Quedlinburg (14 km south) but, by late afternoon, frantic messengers confirmed they were almost upon Meyronnet's garrison. The colonel sent out his voltigeurs to harass the Brunswick advance whilst the rest of his inexperienced regiment was deployed along the walls and

entrance to the town. The battle proper began at about 7pm, and was all but over a gruelling five hours later. The 5th Infantry, having lost Meyronnet and most of its officers, fought on for as long as it could before finally surrendering the town. Only the 5th Westphalian's two grenadier companies held out, until 5am, by fortifying a series of townhouses; although they too were eventually forced to submit when the Brunswick howitzers were brought up. In total, the Black Legion had captured some 1,500 of the 5th Westphalian Infantry, killed 200 and dispersed the remainder. The suggested forces and scenario guidelines



ORDERS OF BATTLE

Brunswick - The Black Legion

Commander: Duke Friedrich Wilhelm

1st Battalion	500 men
2nd Battalion	500 men
Jager Battalion	150 men
Scharfschützen Company	150 men
Hussar Regiment	550 men
Uhlans Squadron, attached to above	80 men
Light Battery	80 men
	2 6pdrs, 2 howitzers

Westphalia - 5th Westphalian Infantry Regiment

Commander: Colonel P.S. Meyronnet

Voltigeur Company	100 men
Line Companies	4 of 400 each
Grenadier Companies	2 of 140 each

Incidentally, the Westphalian infantry of the period wore white French style uniforms, with the 5th's facing colour being yellow.



to re-fight Halberstadt are given below, based on their historical equivalents and objectives. Taken from J.H. Gill, *With Eagles to Glory*.

Regarding initial set-up, the town of Halberstadt should be in the middle of the tabletop, garrisoned by the 5th Westphalians. The Brunswickers begin at the southern edge of the table. Victory conditions are simple, with the Westphalians needing to hold the town and the Brunswickers aim to capture it or drive the enemy from it. Brunswick was one of the smallest, yet most tenacious, of Napoleon's enemies, renowned throughout Europe for its unwavering and vehement opposition to his regime. Traditionally, some criticism has been

levelled at the unreliability of Brunswick, and other non-British troops in general, within the Allied forces during the Napoleonic Wars. Despite this, recent scholars have readjusted this imbalance and provided an altogether fairer portrayal. For example, David Hamilton-Williams gives a highly persuasive and interesting alternative to the traditional narrative on the role of Dutch, Belgian and German troops, in many articles and notably *Waterloo: New Perspectives - the Great Battle Reappraised*.

I hope that the above may help in giving an alternative and fun Napoleonic game (or indeed army!) to experiment with and enjoy on the tabletop.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING & THANKS

Some of the most accessible works on the subject are those by Otto von Pivka, and his excellent study of the Brunswick Corps still remains the most useful book in the field. John Gill's *With Eagles to Glory* is an excellent account on the 1809 campaign.

E. Costello, *Adventures of a Soldier; written by himself*, Reprint, London 1967

J.H. Gill, *With Eagles to Glory*, London 1992

D. Hamilton-Williams, *Waterloo: New Perspectives - the Great Battle Reappraised*, London 1994

F. Loraine Petre, *Napoleon's Conquest of Prussia 1806*, Reprint, London 1993

U. Pericoli, *1815: The Armies at Waterloo*, London 1979

Oman, C.W.C., *Wellington's Army 1809-1814*, Reprint, London 1986

O. von Pivka, *Armies of the Napoleonic Era*, Newton Abbott, 1978

O. von Pivka, *Brunswick Troops 1809 - 1815*, Osprey Publishing, 1991

All figures featured are Perry Miniatures from their Brunswick range, painted by JohnWatkins, Jim Bowen and El Mercenario.

This article was originally published in WI221 (March 2006). With it's focus on the Brunswickers and the scenario against the Westphalians, we felt it dove-tailed well with our content for WI272 (June 2010).



Above: The Duke of Brunswick receives an update from an officer of his Light Infantry.



Above: With their blood up, these Brunswicker Hussars begin their charge.