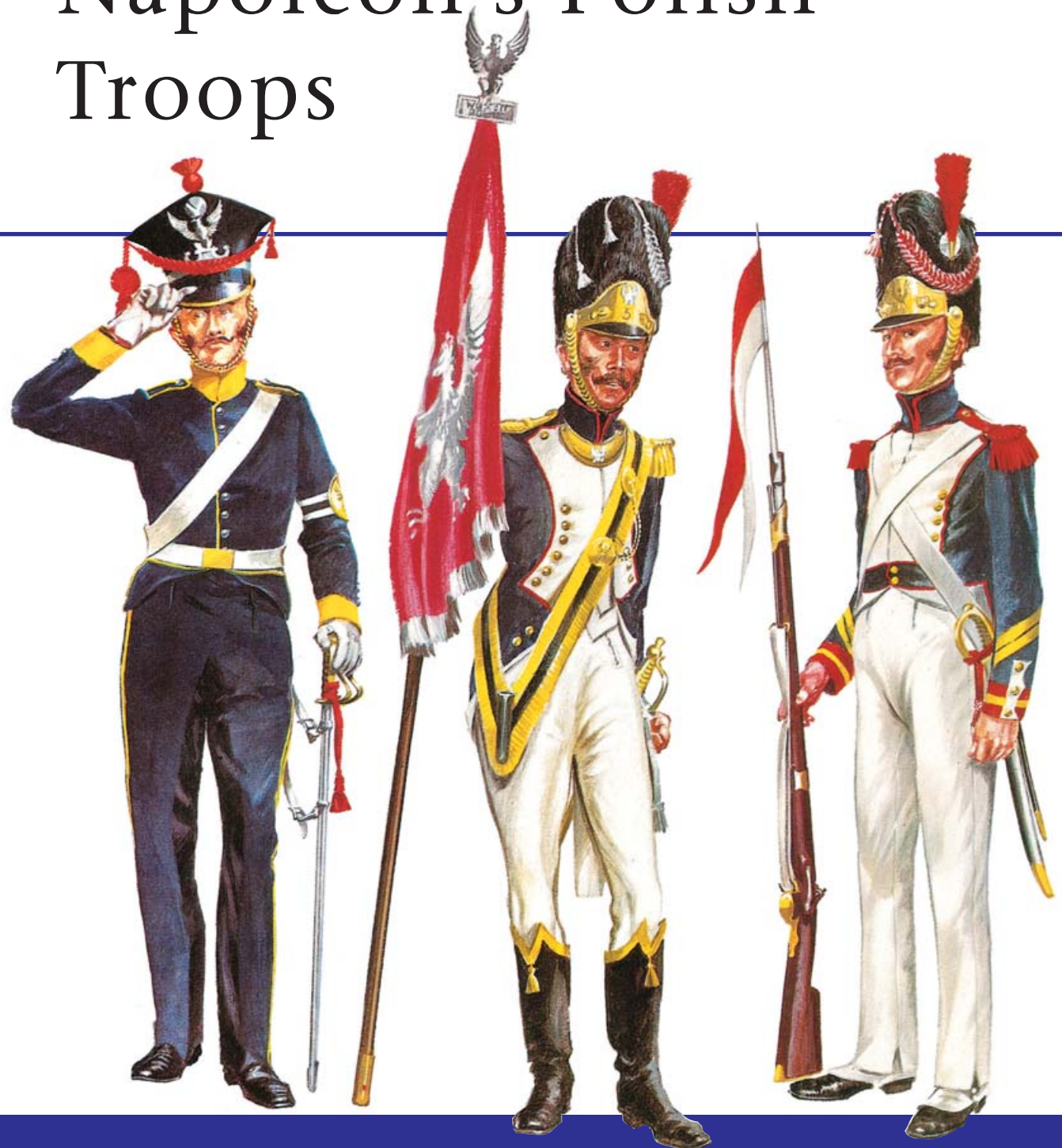
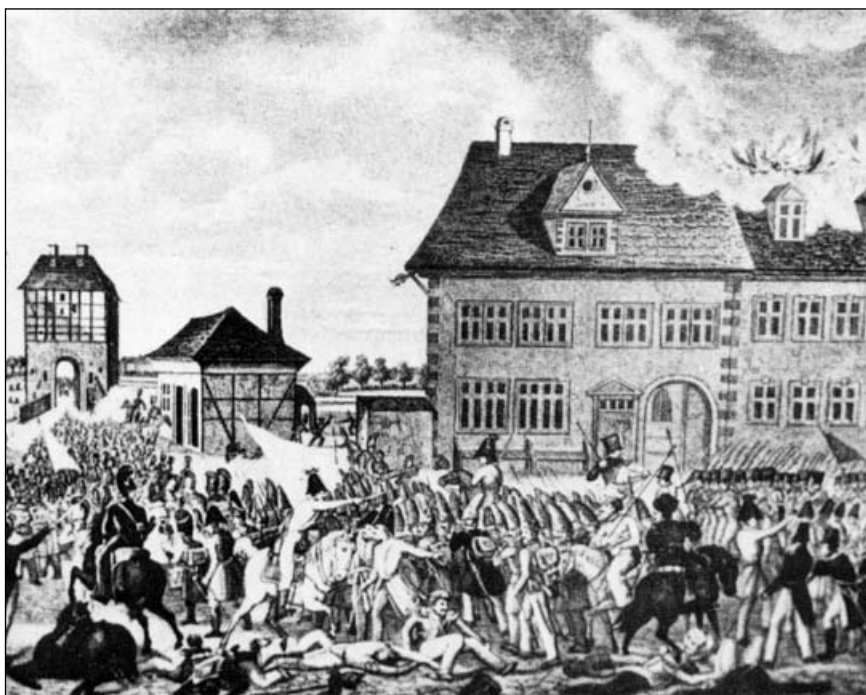


# Napoleon's Polish Troops



Otto von Pivka • Illustrated by Michael Roffe

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*Series editor* Martin Windrow

## *Introduction*

On 25 November 1795 the kingdom of Poland fell prey to her stronger neighbours, Russia, Prussia and Austria, and the third partition of that unhappy, turbulent state took place.

The elected King of Poland, Stanislas Augustus, was forced to abdicate and retired to Russia with a pension of 200,000 ducats a year. He died at St Petersburg (now Leningrad) on 12 February 1798.

His old kingdom was redistributed as follows:

Austria took the larger part of the palatinate of Krakow, the palatinates of Sandomir and Lublin and part of the district of Chelm and those parts of the palatinates of Brzezcz, Podlachie and Mazowie which lay on the left bank of the River Bug.

Prussia took those parts of Podlachie and Mazowie which lay on the right bank of the Bug; part of the palatinates of Troki and Samogitie situated on the left bank of the Niemen and one district of the palatinate of Krakow.

Russia took the rest of Lithuania up to the River Niemen, the rest of the palatinates of Brzezcz and Novogrodek and the greater part of Samogitie and the remains of Wolhynie, Courland and Semigalle.

France alone had opposed Poland's treatment and became the natural refuge of all Polish exiles. Many Polish officers and men were still held as prisoners of war in Tobolsk, Petersburg, Moscow, Olmütz, Magdeburg and other places, but among those in Paris was one General Jean-Henri Dombrowski who on 11 October 1796 formed the 'Polish Legion' with Napoleon's aid.

As Article 287 of the French Constitution did not permit the presence of foreign troops on French soil, Dombrowski was sent to Italy to complete his work in the new republic created as

a result of Napoleon's victories in Italy. After the victory of Lodi, the Cispadane and Transpadane Republics were combined into the Cisalpine Republic, and the government of this new state, being unable to raise its own army, decided to enlist the aid of foreign troops.

Dombrowski arrived in Milan on 2 December 1796 and presented his scheme to Napoleon. On 4 January 1797 Napoleon wrote to the Council of State of Lombardy to say that General Dombrowski was willing to raise a Polish legion to help the people of Lombardy. Napoleon added that he would gladly take all measures necessary for this operation.

This offer was well received and on 9 January 1797 a convention was signed by which Dombrowski guaranteed the services of his compatriots to the republic in exchange for which his men became Lombard citizens and received the same pay and privileges as the other national troops. The Poles retained their own uniforms and commands were given in Polish. They wore the French cockade and contre-epaulettes in Lombardy's national colours with the inscription 'Gli uomini liberi sono fratelli' (Free men are brothers).



**Napoleon at the tomb of Frederick the Great, Potsdam.**





**Crests of the joint kingdom of Poland-Lithuania (left) and Saxony (right) on a Saxon cannon cast in 1707 and now in Coburg Castle.**

On 20 January 1797 Dombrowski published a proclamation in four languages calling on Poles to enter his new legion.

Two weeks later the Legion consisted of 1,200 men in Polish uniform (kurtka, pantaloons and czapka in blue cloth).

Many of his men came from the Austrian Army which included in its ranks officers and soldiers originally from Galicia and many others were Polish ex-prisoners of war and deserters.

In March the Legion was sent to the fortress of Mantua, where it was joined by a new battalion. At the same time its artillery was organized at Milan. It did not receive its baptism of fire until the insurrection at Brescia.

By April, Dombrowski had 5,000 men enrolled.

Dombrowski, anxious for action, wanted his legion augmented by 2,000 infantry, 500 cavalry

and sixty cannon from the Army of Italy in order to undertake a raid through Croatia, Transylvania and Hungary up into Galicia. This was almost approved, and on 18 April the Legion was at the Leoben Pass preparing to march when Napoleon forbade the scheme on the grounds that it would not serve the political good of the Polish cause.

At this time occurred the massacre at Verona and the troubles in Venice; the Legion took an active part in the assault on Verona.

In May the Legion had so increased in size that it was reorganized into two infantry legions, the first commanded by General Kniaziewicz, the second by General Wielhorski.

Each consisted of three battalions of ten companies, each company having 125 men. The corps also had three companies of artillery commanded by Chef de bataillon Axamitowski.

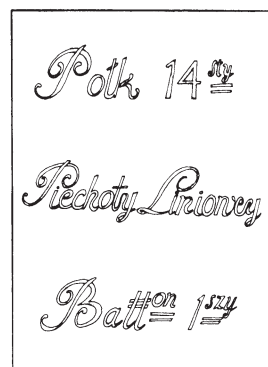
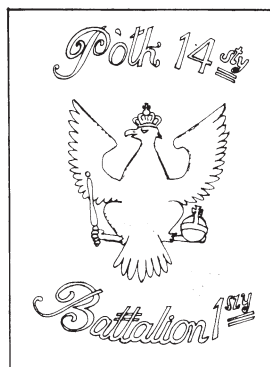
French regulations were used for garrison duties; drill and discipline were according to old Polish regulations but corporal punishment was forbidden, as was the case in the French Army of the day.

In July 1797 Dombrowski and the grenadier battalion went to suppress the insurrection at Reggio during which the Poles much distinguished themselves.

At the end of 1798 the Neapolitan Army invaded the Papal state to expel the Franco-Polish forces under General Championnet. Kniaziewicz commanded the Polish Legion during Dombrowski's absence and on 4 December the Neapolitans were defeated at the Battle of Civita Castellana. From the captured stocks of horses and harness found in Gaete arsenal after this battle, a regiment of cavalry was added to the Polish Legion.

The new regiment was commanded by Colonel Karwowski; Elie Tremo and Biernacki were nominated Chefs d'Escadrons. Organization was not complete, however, before the armistice of 11 January. On 23 January Naples capitulated and as a mark of respect to the Polish services, General Kniaziewicz was sent to Paris by General Championnet to take back all the trophies captured during the campaign.

A new anti-French coalition was quickly formed and considerable Austro-Russian forces under the command of the Russian Feld Marschall Leutnant



Eagle of the 13th Infantry and (right) both sides of the flag of the 1st Battalion, 14th Infantry.

Suvarow soon advanced to threaten the young republics founded in Italy.

Forces available for their defence were few. The élite French troops were in Egypt with Napoleon; the command of the Army of Italy was held by the incompetent Scherer; Championnet had gone and was replaced as commander of the army of Naples by Macdonald.

The Polish Legions, commanded by Wielhorski and Rynkiewicz, were garrisoned in Mantua at the start of the campaign and were employed dispersed amongst the French units. Constantly engaged in different battles, they suffered heavily; from 26 March to 5 April (after the Battle of Magnano where General Rynkiewicz was killed). Of the 4,000 men who had set out, only 2,000 effectives remained. The Second Legion retired into Mantua with their artillery under the command of Wielhorski. Mantua was commanded by General Foissac-Latour and was besieged and capitulated (much against the wishes of the Polish officers) on 28 July. The Austrians demanded the return to their service of all Poles coming from



Napoleon Bonaparte. Engraving after a drawing made from life in Milan.



**Scene from the Revolutionary wars in northern Italy; Austrian infantry about to attack the French.**

Austrian-controlled Galicia and all had to revert to the rank of private regardless of what position they had attained in the Legion. Axamitowski and 150 men of the Legion escaped to Lyons disguised in French uniforms. General Wielhorski, Major Kosinski and the officers were imprisoned in Leoben and did not regain their freedom until after the Battle of Marengo.

This was the end of the Second Legion.

The First Legion, augmented by the battalions of grenadiers and voltigeurs of Malachowski and Jasinski and by Karwowski's cavalry regiment were directly under Dombrowski's command.

Together with two French demi-brigades they were responsible for establishing communications between the Army of Italy and the Army of Naples.

After May the First Legion and a French demi-brigade formed the 1st Division of the joint army. There followed the Battle of Trebbia (17, 18 and 19 June) after which the French army withdrew to Genoa, the Battle of Novi (15 August) and the Battle of Zürich (26 September) which finally broke the forces of the Austro-Russian coalition.

Following the disasters which dogged the French in Italy the Cisalpine Republic disappeared and the homeless debris of the Legion found themselves in France where they promptly set about raising a new legion.

Conditions in France had changed; Bonaparte left Egypt secretly and landed at Frejus on 2 October 1799. On 9 November he changed the form of French government and was proclaimed First Consul. He decreed that foreign troops could be taken into French service and ordered the formation of new legions.

On 10 February 1800 the remnants of the Polish-Italian Legions were reorganized at Marseilles and renamed 'La Légion Italique'. Kniaziewicz meanwhile had received orders to form another Polish legion; this formation, the 'Legion of the Danube', was organized as follows:

- Four battalions of infantry each of ten companies of 123 men
- One regiment of cavalry of four squadrons
- One battery of horse artillery

Its strength was 5,970 men and the commanders were:

Legion commander	General Kniaziewicz
Chief of Staff	Gawrowski
Chef de Brigade	Sokolnicki
Chefs de bataillons	Fischer, Drzewiecki, Kralewski and Wasilewski
Artillery battery	Redel

In March 1800 the infantry of the Danube Legion went to the Rhine and joined the corps of General St Suzanne on the left wing of the 'Armée du Rhin'. They fought at the actions of Berg, Bernheim and Offenbourg and occupied the fortress of Philipsbourg after the armistice of Parsdorf (15 July 1800).

The Danube Legion was also engaged at the Battle of Hohenlinden on 3 December 1800. A lancer of the Legion, Jan Pawlikowski, disarmed and captured fifty-seven Austrians single-handed. Completely illiterate, he refused General Moreau's offer of a commission and a financial reward and was content with the rank of sergeant and the presentation of a carbine of honour from the French Government bearing the inscription: 'La Republique française à son défenseur, le citoyen