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Book Review: Allied Swiss Troops in French Service 1785-1815

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Book Reviews

Davin, Didier and Jouineau. *Allied Swiss Troops in French Service 1785-1815* (History & Collections, 2012), 80pp. \$24.95.

For over four hundred years, Swiss mercenaries served with distinction in various European Armies. By the time of the French Revolution, several of France's most effective regiments were Swiss. The infamous and unnecessary slaughter of the Royal Swiss Guard in August 1792, and subsequent disbanding of the Swiss Regiments ended the long standing relationship of the Swiss in French Royal service. However, the French revolutionary government quickly saw the advantage of enlisting these highly professional soldiers, and Swiss regiments were enlisted to fight for the new Republic. Beginning in 1793, the Swiss, individually at first, then in regiments re-entered French service.

Davin and Jouineau create a lavishly illustrated and concise monograph of the Swiss troops that served France from 1785 until 1815. The Swiss, the elite troops of the day, once formed the bodyguard for Louis XVI. Their discipline was well renowned, and on one occasion they permitted themselves to be slaughtered rather than disobey orders and fire on the Paris mob. Another unit, the famous Swiss "Red Division," frequently assisted Napoleon's forces during the First Empire, often taking heavy casualties in the process as they emerged victorious.

The authors use a generous amount of artwork to depict the changes in uniform that the Swiss regiments underwent in the time period covered by this slim volume. The entire has 49 illustrated plates, each which contain multiple examples of uniforms, flags and appropriate accoutrements. Representations for the four Swiss regiments who fought with the French are presented as well as the Valais battalion, the Neuchâtel battalion, and pre-revolutionary Swiss regiments.

The text is well presented, although there are a few errors (and no accompanying errata) between some of the illustrations and the text. The most notable errors seem to be regarding the uniform colors during the transition from the Helvetian Half-Brigades between 1801 and 1803. This time period seems somewhat confused as the text lists one

color for one year and the plates show a different color for the same year. It is most likely an editing issue.

The authors do a credible job presenting a brief history of the Swiss regiments. The short summaries of the four line regiments and two battalions recruited from Switzerland include short battle histories, the names and ranks of various notables and the fate of these regiments, on several occasions there are passages such as “. . . it then shared the fate of the other regiments” (page 19). Unit organization and strengths are included as well the names of commanding officers. The synopsis provided by the authors is very useful for placing units with armies and campaigns; however, it is, by necessity, a brief synopsis. The book also provides a short reference to the end of the Swiss regiments. There are many other sources regarding the Swiss regiments, some of which are referenced in the books’ bibliography. The authors leave it to the reader to fill in the blanks regarding the detailed history of the Swiss service in the French army.

Ultimately, this book is about uniforms. The uniforms of the various Swiss units are presented in all their glittering glory. By and large the true value of this book is the detailed plates of uniforms, with descriptions, including the minutia that makes the Napoleonic era so colorful. The authors go to great lengths to provide details of buttons, piping, pompoms, lapels, etc. The beauty of this book is that it goes beyond the simple statement that the 1st Regiment wore red coats with yellow facings. The book also describes the years when major changes took place and the fact that not all soldiers within the regiments wore that same uniform. The authors gratefully noted places where discrepancies emerged between sources. A reference to the Neuchâtel Battalion wearing of “lapels and turnbacks with chamois (white in certain Alsatian Collections) piping” implies a certain level of confusion among historians on this issue. (page 53) One of the strongest aspects of the book is the authors’ work to clarify inconsistencies wherever possible. The book is a very useful guide. Any researcher and/or Napoleonic aficionado will want to add this book to his collection.

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