

La Bataille de Hagelberg Proves Prussian Landwehr Can More Than Match The French On The Battlefield

To save the revolution and defend the French homeland from foreign invasion, the French initiated the *Levée en masse* in 1793. This allowed a mass national conscription and put huge, enthusiastic armies into the field to defend the Frontiers of France.

The resultant sprawling armies took the French republic and subsequent empire, over the course of the next two decades, from Egypt to Moscow; and firmly ensconced French power throughout Europe. But what did the enemies of the revolution do to address the large armies put in the field by the French, and how would those moves affect the history of the period.



Von Hirschfeld, Hero Of Hagelberg

What happened at the Battle of Hagelberg was a demonstration of how the Prussians turned the tables on the French and then, in their own way, dominated the European scene militarily for the next 130 years. It had to do with the German response to *Levée en masse*: the development of the *Landwehr*.

The German Response To *Levée en Masse: The Landwehr*

The Austrians, under the leadership of Archduke Charles, and developed in the various Austrian realms by Archduke John, were able to raise national militias based upon the different Hapsburg territories in 1808 and 1809. The Archduke Charles was able to increase substantially the size of the Hapsburg armies, which were able to challenge Napoleon in the War of the Fifth Coalition till the Austrian debacle at Wagram.

The Prussians noted the partial Austrian success, and as part of a general social and military overhaul following the Jena-Auerstadt disasters of 1806, the Prussian military reforms by Generals Yorck and Scharnhorst included the development of a multi-tiered militia, called the *landwehr*, which dramatically and secretly increased the size of the Prussian army.

By the time, General Yorck switched sides in late 1812, the Prussian army had become the largest functional army in Central Europe. Frederick William III formally instituted the Landwehr by decree on March 17, 1813 but in reality, the Landwehr had started flowing to the Prussian field armies, and Prussian armies continued to grow and spread throughout Germany during the 1813 spring campaign and especially during the armistice between early June and late August.

When the armistice ended, Napoleon had wanted his northern army, under the command of Marshal Oudinot, to take Berlin. The Prussians were growing in size, in large part due to the major expansion of the Landwehr throughout Prussia. The French had hoped that the Magdeburg garrison, commanded by General Jean-Baptiste Gerard, could join Oudinot's army. Gerard's command was made up primarily of third battalions. On paper, it looked more impressive than it was, as the forces in the command were recent conscripts and he had only five squadrons of poor cavalry.

Landwehr From Kurmark

The Prussians, on the other hand, were comprised of *landwehr* from Kurmark in Brandenburg. These highly motivated soldiers from the heartland of Prussia near Berlin fought tenaciously. There was also the premier reserve formation, the 1st Reserve regiment, as part of the overall command of General Karl Friedrich von Hirschfeld. In addition, the Russian Cossack General Alexandr Chernyshev provided five cavalry regiments and several guns.

On August 27, von Hirschfeld ordered the Prussians and Russians to stop the Girard's French from uniting with Oudinot's larger force. At 1 am, he ordered the Prussian cavalry; Cossacks; and guns to bypass Lubnitz and attack Hagelberg.

The small French cavalry force could not keep all the Prussian and Russian and horses away from the main French force that was now outside Hagelberg on a hill with a windmill. Prussian infantry had now come out of the woods north of Hagelberg and were able to capture the town. Cossack attacks further disrupted the overextended French lines. Individual French battalions were forced to surrender. The French were pushed back to Klein Glien and then forced to retreat the field, losing more than half their force.



General Jean-Baptiste Girard, French Commander at Hagelberg

While the overall quality of the Coalition forces was not strong, their persistence insured the French would be overwhelmed. Girard retreated his remaining forces into the Magdeburg fortress for the remainder of the war and the fall of Napoleon in 1814.

The key to the Coalition victory was steadfastness of the *landwehr*, who remained disciplined and focused on their task. The *landwehr*'s performance at

Hagelberg was a preview of how Prussia could use its military. Ironically, its democrat background was the source of its success. Both Coalition commanders were above average and would have respected careers after Hagelberg. Girard fought well at Ligny in 1815. Napoleon created Girard as a Duke, but he passed away from his battle wounds shortly after Ligny.