

Peter Hagendorf's Diary from the Thirty Years War (17th Century)

Abstract

This diary of a “regular soldier” from the Thirty Years War was truly a lucky archival find. To this day, it is the only German-language mercenary diary that has been discovered from this time, i.e. 1618-1648. It was first published in 1993. The armies of the Thirty Years War were armies of mercenaries. Men fought for money and sometimes changed sides several times in the process; obviously confession was of less importance. Over the course of the war, the mercenary armies moved from one theater of war to another; usually their wives and children moved along with them. A wide variety of diseases traveled with them, as well, for example, syphilis, which spread with the mercenary armies. Here, mercenary Peter Hagendorf reports in extremely terse terms – for today’s readers – about wartime atrocities during a campaign by Imperial troops in the Champagne region.

Source

[...]

When we were through the forest, we came to the Champagne region. The main town in Champagne extends along the border up to Bouillon. In this country, rosemary grows in the fields like heather in Germany, so people cook with this perennial herb and prepare their food with it. On July 4, we came to the French border and passed a castle. Seven peasants were in it; they fought against the entire army. We therefore set fire to the castle and burned it, together with the peasants. At that point, 1,000 men on foot and 1,500 on horseback were deployed to a village. I was also there. The peasants put up such a fight in the churchyard there that we could not accomplish anything without cannons. We had to fall back again, because there were 1,000 peasants in the churchyard. So we set fire to the village and let it burn. On July 7, we encountered the Spanish army, which was camped in front of a fortress, La Capelle. We pitched our camp there, too, on the other side. On July 8 they reached an agreement. There were 600 Frenchmen there; we let them leave with bag and baggage and with three cannons. On July 17, we moved to the fortress La Câtelet and made our camp next to the mill. With redoubts and communication trenches blocked and under fire day and night, they surrendered. Here, the fields were beautifully planted, mostly with winter wheat. On July 25, my wife lost a double skirt made of taffeta, which she had under her arm, even though I was there. On the 26th they left with bag and baggage and with a flying flag. There were 500 men. From here, we moved to Péronne. It is a beautiful city, but we left it alone. Here the French came to the pass with 40,000 men. We were on this side of the pass. We shot at each other with cannons there. On August 2, we overcame two of the enemy's redoubts with a raging hot hand; I helped take them. From here we left again at night for another place. The enemy had also left and gone into the woods. We made a reconnaissance of it. We aimed the cannons at the woods and shot into it so that many of them must have died in there. There was only a body of water, three pikes wide but very deep, between us. The French moved away, and we went to Corbie, a massive fortress next to the water. As we skirmished in front of this fortress, many died there, men and women. There was a cannon there; we called it “The Hound.” With the cannon early in the morning, they suddenly shot off all four feet, right at the butt, of the man and woman in a hut next to my tent. They were able to shoot all the shots with this cannon into our camp and did great damage. On August 16, they surrendered, because we stormed them massively and threw in fire. Then they withdrew with bag and baggage, 2,000 men.

Source: Jan Peters, ed., *Peter Hagendorf-Tagebuch eines Söldners aus dem Dreißigjährigen Krieg*. Herrschaft und soziale Systeme in der Frühen Neuzeit, vol. 14. Göttingen: V & R Unipress, 2012, p. 114f.

Translation: Kathleen Dell'Orto

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