

Paul-Werner von der Schulenburg

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Hinterstrasse 6
Tel. 0172-2961780

Count Matthias Johann von der Schulenburg (1661 - 1747)

Field Marshal in the service of the Venetian Republic

A narrative of the life of a European-ranking "condottiere" in the 18th century

1. Preliminary remarks

In 1992 the art museum in Düsseldorf opened its doors to an exhibition entitled "The Glorious of Venice in the North" which it had prepared for meticulously with the Lower Saxony State Museum in Hanover. To the amazement of many people, the introduction to the exhibition talked about a soldier who during his lifetime had put together one of the most significant collections of 18th century paintings within a relatively short time span of around 20 years: Count Matthias Johann von der Schulenburg, Lord of Emden and Delitz, Field Marshal of the Venetian Republic.

The following is a collection of short stories about the life of this man, who is not only a famous and illustrious ancestor of the Schulenburg family but also one of the most prestigious "condottieres" of the 18th century - though he was still a loyal patriot.

2. 1661 - 1685, upbringing and education

The Thirty Years' War had been over for 13 years. The secularised archbishopric of Magdeburg had been severely devastated by several Swedish invasions and the plague. It is here, in the year 1661, that Matthias Johann was born at the small and relatively impoverished Emden Manor as the eldest son of an old-established family. One of his younger sisters was to become the mistress of the Electoral Prince of Hanover, who was later crowned King of England, whom we will hear about later.

His father was a man with limited assets, although he later held significant positions in the service of the Great Electors of Brandenburg, such as President of Chamber of Magdeburg and Halle, and Privy Councillor to the Court of Brandenburg with the same status as a Secretary of State. Thus, despite the hard times, Matthias Johann's father was able to provide his children with a relatively good education.

Schulenburg initially received private tutoring with his younger brother. The two of them went on to attend “public” school in Magdeburg, followed by three years at Helmstedt University. Then they travelled together to Saumur, where they spent three years studying mathematics, French and Latin at the university there.

During this time, Louis XIV annexed the territories to the left of the Upper Rhine, including Strasbourg. Yet the brothers didn’t see any cause to break off their studies. They also remained at university during the besieging of Vienna by the Ottoman Turks, which didn’t end until the united relief army, headed by the King of Poland and subsequent national hero Johann Sobjetzki, intervened, enabling Charles V, Duke of Lorraine to win the Battle of Vienna. Instead, the brothers travelled to Paris in 1683 to “complete their formal and cultural education.” Their Paris trip must have encompassed somewhat more than that, and also been very expensive, because Schulenburg was interned in Paris for three months until his younger brother had paid off their schooling debts.

When he returned from Saumur to Emden in 1684, Schulenburg had the opportunity, at Marshal Schönborn’s recommendation, to see the siege of Luxembourg, a country which belonged to the Spanish Netherlands, from the French side and to look around the fortress complex after it had been stormed. Perhaps this is what first awakened his interest in warfare.

3. 1685 – 1697, in the service of the Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel court

Life took a more serious turn for Schulenburg in 1685 when he became valet de chambre at the Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel court. This was the same year that Louis XIV attacked the west without any declaration of war, forcing the Germans into their first battle on two fronts because, despite their defeat in Vienna, the Ottoman Turks were certainly not interested in peace. From this time on, the war between the French and the Turks was to be an important factor in Schulenburg’s life. Against his father’s express wishes and without his permission, Schulenburg joined the Duke of Brunswick’s army in 1686 and went on to fight for the Imperial Army in Hungary and Siebenbürgen under Charles Duke of Lorraine and Electoral Prince Max Emanuel of Bavaria against the Turks. He was also involved in the storming of Belgrade in 1688.

On the other front the Germans were forced to deal with France, because Louis XIV had incited the Palatine War as a means of asserting dubious Palatine succession claims for “madame”, his sister-in-law the famous Princess Palatine Elisabeth Charlotte, who was also known as Liselotte. Although Louis XIV was up against an alliance between the Emperor, England, the Netherlands and Spain, he was not deterred from ravaging Palatine in 1688 and destroying almost all of the fortresses on the Rhine, including Heidelberg Castle and, in the following year, the royal tombs in Speyer.

The combative French persuaded Schulenburg to return from the Balkans. Now dedicated to a military career because he enjoyed and was elated by the victories, he took his own infantry, which was part of the Imperial Army’s Brunswick contingent, to the Rhine region and Flanders. On the way there, in 1689, he and his troops helped to reconquer Mainz and they were also involved in the besieging and storming of Bonn. Today we know that two other family members, who were later to

become very successful, took part in the storming of what would one day be the country's capital city.

In 1690 Schulenburg was promoted to the rank of major and assigned to diplomatic missions by the Duke of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel. One such mission was to prevent the ninth Electorship of the Holy Roman Empire being granted to the rival Duchy of Brunswick-Lüneburg, which was ruled by the House of Hanover. As we all know, he failed in this mission and electorship was granted in 1692.

In all likelihood he didn't try very hard to accomplish the mission because his sister, Ehrengard-Melusine, lady-in-waiting to the princess, was "on very good terms" with Prince George Louis of Hanover, i.e. the Brunswick-Lüneburgs. She was very dedicated to her career as mistress; after all, the hereditary prince was about to become an electoral prince, an elector, and later on King George I of England. She bore him three daughters. (Until the 20th century these women were kept in the family as their sisters' children, i.e. their nieces!) Her life's work was rewarded by the title of Imperial Princess of Eberstein. Indeed, it was probably far more pleasant to be subject to an electoral prince than a mere hereditary prince.

This failed diplomatic mission did no harm to Schulenburg because in 1693, as Colonel and Commander of the Brunswick Dragoons, he paraded the Brunswick contingent - his dragoon regiment and two infantry regiments - before King William III of England.

In 1697 - after repeated victories with his dragoons against the French - he attended the Rejswijk Peace Congress just south of Den Haag, which ended the war of Palatine succession and marked the start of peace following Louis IX's first defeat. At this congress he was persuaded by Count Tarin-Imperiali, the envoy of the Duke of Savoy, to enter into Savoy's service because peace now finally prevailed in the west and he seemed to still have an appetite for military action.

4. 1697 - 1701, service in the Duke of Savoy's army, Turin

36-year-old General Major Schulenburg was given command of a German infantry regiment to take to Piedmont and fight the Waldensian rebels, a religious movement founded in the 12th century by the merchant Petrus Waldus in Lyon. It ended in a bloody victory in 1699. In Schulenburg's defence, the battle didn't occur due to a religious dispute, but due to the Waldesian rebel's refusal to pay salt tax, which the Duke of Savoy in Turin could not afford to ignore.

Now we have to take a brief look at a man who played a very important role in Schulenburg's life. Prince Eugene of Savoy.

Mazarin's nephew, the highest-ranking minister at the French court, was denied the chance to serve in the French army by Louis XIV because of his small stature. So he entered into imperial service where, in 1697 at the age of 34, he was appointed to the position of Commander-in-Chief of the Imperial Army, a position that continued to hold until his death in 1736.

The first meeting between the two men wasn't exactly cordial. Victor Amadeus, Duke of Savoy, had switched allegiance from the Emperor to France, which is why Schulenburg found himself at the Battle of Chiari in northern Italy in 1701, serving in Savoy's army with his German infantry and fighting for the French King Louis **XIV** in the war of Spanish succession against the Austrian, i.e. the German army under Prince Eugene. Defeated and severely wounded, he left Savoy's services and went off to lick his wounds. However, he did ensure before his departure that his cousin Levin Friedrich replaced him as Commander-in-Chief of the Schulenburg regiment in Savoy's army in 1702.

Schulenburg sought a position in the Imperial Army. He was unsuccessful, however, because it already had Prince Eugene.

5. Electoral Saxonian and Royal Polish service

So Schulenburg served as a Lieutenant-General in the Saxonian-Polish army and fought for August the Strong against 20-year-old Charles XII of Sweden, who had unleashed the Great Northern War in north-eastern Europe. Initially, under Commander Steinau, he led the Saxonian Army into battle on Polish territory on several occasions. But he was not happy about his commander's strategy and, in the Battle of Klissow, the Saxons were defeated.

The King of Poland wasn't especially angry with Schulenburg. Instead, he appointed him as Commander-in-Chief of the Saxonian-Polish relief army fighting the French and Bavarians for the Emperor in 1702. In 1703 he and 8,000 soldiers again fought for the Imperial Army under Austrian Count Styrum on southern German battlefields and in Höchststadt they were defeated by the united French and Bavarian armies - we're still in the war of Spanish succession - which were under the command of Electoral Prince Max Emanuel of Bavaria. (Schulenburg had served under Max Emanuel 16 years previously in the Balkans, including the storming of Belgrade!). Here, again, he was unhappy with his Commander-in-Chief's strategy and wrote to inform King August the Strong and Prince Eugene, who had defeated him three years previously in northern Italy, of his concerns. It seems this was a good idea because he suffered no negative consequences as a result of this further defeat. August the Strong ordered the relief army to return from southern Germany in 1704 for a different reason - he wanted to send it to fight against the Swedes in Poland. As a result of that, Schulenburg missed the second Battle of Höchststadt where Prince Eugene and the Duke of Marlborough gave an impressive demonstration of how to defeat the French and the Bavarians. However, he wouldn't have had much time to be despondent about missing the battle because he was busy with his war efforts in Poland. When he arrived there he encountered the victory-drunk Swedes and a completely demoralised and demotivated Saxonian-Polish army. After an unsuccessful advance against the city of Posen, he managed to orchestrate a retreat across the river Oder to the west with relatively few casualties, receiving numerous letters of congratulations, one of them from Prince Eugene, for his efforts. At the end of 1704 there was another battle with Charles XII's far inferior army, yet Schulenburg was almost defeated again when Charles XII suddenly surrendered! August the Strong appointed 43-year-old Schulenburg as General of the Infantry and put him in command of the Saxonian infantry, since his predecessor Steinau had gone into service with the Venetian Republic. He wasn't the only Saxonian commander to leave for Venice during that time.

Schulenburg also had a combative nature. He and his comrade, Commander-in-Chief of the Saxonian Cavalry, Count Flemming, got into a dispute that led to a duel between them, as was customary at that time, though they never resolved their differences. But we cannot hold it against them because the cavalry and infantry have always had their differences, and they wouldn't have been resolved by this duel.

The Swedes refused to give up. They wanted to drive August the Strong, the despised convert, out of Poland, which they managed to do at the Battle of Fraustadt under their Commander Rhenskjöld. Despite being twice as strong as the Swedish army, the Saxonians suffered a devastating defeat.

Wounded, Schulenburg left the battlefield and initiated an inquiry into himself, stating: "The army has not done its work". He was fully rehabilitated and appointed as Commander-in-Chief of all the troops remaining in Saxony. He retreated from the Swedes to Thuringia and handed his soldiers over to the Imperial Army and Prince Eugene. The Treaty of Altranstedt led to the collapse of the electoral system in Saxony. August the Strong had to renounce the Polish crown in 1706, though he regained it with Russia's help three years later. The Swedish army occupied Saxony and the Swedish king took up residence in Meißen. Schulenburg regularly dined with the King of Sweden, though it did not stop him from hatching out a detailed plan which he presented to his rulers, setting out how he could kidnap the King of Sweden at night with a few dragoons and force the Swedish army to retreat from Saxony under threat of their king being handed to the Czars in Moscow. But August the Strong wouldn't agree to his cousin being disposed of in that way (the two monarchs' mothers were both the king of Denmark's daughters).

Schulenburg went travelling, first visiting the Electoral Prince of Hanover to thank him for his offer of sanctuary in the case the rumours that he was to be court martialled in Saxony because of the defeat in Fraustadt were true. The offer was probably made for family reasons. I'm assuming that Schulenburg's sister Ehrengard-Melusine had whispered the idea to the prince at an appropriate moment. And she wouldn't have had much trouble persuading him because the Hanoverian prince was keen to acquire a higher social status, so he probably wasn't particularly unhappy about the bankruptcy of the Baroque womanisers in Dresden.

Schulenburg spent the next years in Flanders with Prince Eugene and the Duke of Marlborough. There were a number of decisive battles during that period in which he initially merely acted as advisor. But the people in charge didn't want to entirely dispense with his talent, so he was appointed as Commander-in-Chief of the Saxonian troops in the Imperial Army, and he led 40 of Prince Eugene's infantry battalions into battle at the famous Battle of Malplaquet - where, finally, he won a victory!

Although Louis XIV was weary of war, the war of Spanish succession continued with the occupation of Flanders and troop movements there, without any decision being made.

This must have been a very unsatisfactory period for Schulenburg, particularly when the reinstated King of Saxony appointed Count Flemming as the Commander-in-Chief of the Saxon troops. Schulenburg decided he couldn't possibly serve under this unpopular cavalryman and his duelling opponent. So he left the service of the Saxonian-Polish army and was given 12,000 Reichstalers as a gift of favour from August the Strong.

6. 1711 - 1715, a jobless period

Schulenburg began his search for a new job in various European capitals. He negotiated with the Imperial Court - but without success. He attended the crowning of the emperor in Frankfurt in 1712, then travelled back to Vienna, Flanders and the French border posts where the French welcomed him as a respected commander and willingly showed them their border fortifications. Then he travelled on to Den Haag and London. There, too, his negotiations were unsuccessful. On the contrary, his presence there was misconstrued because he joined the Tory party and Marlborough had to bail him out! Although Händel was in London and Hanoverian King George I and his mistress Ehrengard-Melusine von der Schulenburg had not yet arrived, Schulenburg moved back to his estates. He was visited there on many occasions by Gottfried Leibniz (1646 - 1716), who is considered to be the last universal scholar. However, Leibniz had contacts with 1,000 contemporaries, so his friendship with Matthias Johann cannot exactly be called exclusive! Schulenburg regularly visited Vienna. On one of these trips, the now 52-year-old count requested Prince Eugene to arrange for him to enter the imperial service. The prince politely refused, probably because he didn't want a rival working under his own flag, which is understandable when you consider the present-day political scene.

With an entire curriculum vitae indicating his objective of serving under the Emperor, he welcomed the offer that came from the Venetian envoy in Vienna in November 1714 for him to step in as the successor to his former Saxonian-Polish Commander-in-Chief, Steinau, in the Venetian service. The Venetian Republic was at war with the Ottoman Turks and had suffered a several defeats on land and, especially, at sea. The negotiations with Schulenburg were lengthy because the Venetian Republic was reluctant to accept his terms. However, it must have recognised Schulenburg's market value as being high, a poker move that proved later to be extremely insightful. Where else would an elderly strategist have found a position in Europe? Although wars were smouldering everywhere, there were very few positions for a strategist such as Schulenburg at that time. It was not until Venice had been repeatedly defeated by the Turks and Prince Eugene intervened that an agreement was reached. Schulenburg entered into the Venetian Republic's service on 15 October 1715 for an annual salary of 10,000 Venetian zecchinis as Marshal of the Venetian Land Forces, initially for three years.

On the previous day he himself with his sisters and brothers, were made counts and countesses of the Holy Roman Empire by the Emperor Charles VI. That must have been a happy time for the Emperor, because his major adversary Louis XIV had died six weeks previously.

7. 1715 - 1747, in the service of the Venetian Republic

Schulenburg went to Venice, where he was ceremoniously presented to the Senate and the Doges, but quickly ended his ceremonial lifestyle to focus on war as a result of a new threat from the Turks. He demanded that the Venetian land forces should be increased in number from 18,000 to 40,000 and that defence efforts should initially centre around the island of Corfu, which belonged to Venice at that time, to protect the Adriatic from a Turkish invasion. He got into his first disagreements with the political leaders - and there was the usual conflict between politics and the military. He travelled

to Corfu, where he encountered disillusioned troops and barely defensible fortifications. During the following six months he managed to boost troop morale and improve the fortifications, though it was a difficult task in light of the lack of skilled workers.

The battle with the far superior Ottoman Turks began in mid-July and ended on 21 August 1716. The fortunes of that war were shaky and threatening to turn against the Venetians. Despite enormous efforts on the part of Schulenburg, the losses were relatively high. On 14 August, eight English cargo vessels with 1,500 men arrived as reinforcements. Evidently Schulenburg's sister Ehrengard-Melusine, had again used "pillow talk" to persuade the English king to help out her brother. Their defences stabilised over the next few days, the English made a sally and Schulenburg personally joined his troops in six counter attacks. As a result, the Turks lost 5,000 of their 16,000 troops and a miracle happened! The artillery fire fell silent on the night of 21 August. Everyone believed that the Turks were going to launch their decisive attack. Venetian reconnaissance patrols cautiously inspected the deserted Turkish outposts. On 22 August, Schulenburg realised that the Turks had made a hasty retreat from the island. After a 45-day siege, the Turks had lost 8,000 men and the Venetians had lost 1,500. From then on, Schulenburg was known as the Victor of Corfu.

Naturally, we have to ask ourselves why the Turks suddenly fled from Corfu. It cannot have only been for the reason that the Venetians under Schulenburg's command had fought bravely, or that most of the Turkish fleet had been destroyed in a storm. The fact that the English king had provided assistance wasn't the main reason either. The real reason was probably that two weeks previously, Prince Eugene had won a decisive battle against the main Turkish army in the Balkans at Peterwardein. Europe celebrated. So Schulenburg's success was overshadowed by Prince Eugene's.

He nevertheless received numerous congratulations and his annual salary was increased by 50% to 15,000 Venetian zecchini, plus an honorary sword worth 8,000 ducats. The Senate decided to have a statue made in his honour by a Venetian artist and it was erected on Corfu during Schulenburg's lifetime.

He spent the next two years on the Dalmatian coast smoking out pirate nests. He also dedicated himself to improving defences in Dalmatia and Albania, which belonged to Venice at the time, and to the organisation of the Venetian army. And he spent 15 years building the Corfu fortress into one of Europe's strongest fortresses.

However, his active career was over. In the following 31 years of his life, all spent in Venetian service, he pursued a very modern objective: the use of military strength as a deterrent to ensure the safety of the Venetian Republic. He travelled to Berlin and England, where he met his sister Ehrengard-Melusine in 1726 and probably also Voltaire, who had arrived in England in the same year after two terms of imprisonment. Honours were lavished upon him everywhere he went. The Prussian king gave him the Order of the Black Eagle.

72-year-old Schulenburg had intended to retire in October 1733, when the war between the Kingdom of Sardinia and Austria broke out. He set up headquarters in Verona. Although he kept Venice out of the war, he was unable to prevent some Venetian territories being destroyed by French-Sardinian troops.

In 1734 the Austrian emperor tried to persuade Schulenburg to serve with him during the campaign in the war of Polish succession (between Austria and Russia). However, Schulenburg declined because he felt that his loyalties should lie with the Venetian Republic. In 1736 the King of Prussia tried to appoint him as the Commander-in-Chief of all Prussian troops - also without success. In that same year Prince Eugene died.

When the King of Prussia and Emperor Charles VI died four years later in 1740, the war of Austrian succession broke out. Schulenburg set up his headquarters in Verona as Field Marshal. Venice also came out of this war unscathed, because the King of Sardinia and former Duke of Savoy was on the side of the Austrians and because Schulenburg wasn't representing the interests of his compatriot, King Friedrich II, but the Venetian Republic.

Without actively interfering in the military operations, Schulenburg lived out the rest of his days in Verona, where he died at the age of 85. He was given a ceremonial funeral at the San Georgio Maggiore monastery in Venice. The Venetian Senate decided to build a tomb in his honour in the Venetian arsenal. So his body was moved there, and it has remained there up to the present day.

Schulenburg was an impressive man who enjoyed good health, which he attributed to "moderation in all pleasures". He had decided at a young age - for logical reasons - that he would not marry. He fathered a son who was born in 1710 with a lady who lived at the Saxon court, Countess von Bockum, but the child was mentally disabled and died in Germany in 1768. His biography by Werner von der Schulenburg, a novel called "Der König von Korfu" (The King of Corfu) published in the 1950s, somewhat romanticises him rather than portraying him as a leader and role model.

He had a noteworthy appreciation of art. At the time of his death there were 957 works in his collection at the Palace of Venice.

Schulenburg was one of the most significant European condottieres in the 18th century. But he was also a condottiere with a patriotic streak. Throughout his life he always wanted to serve the emperor, but was prevented from doing so by Prince Eugene.