

CAPITULATION OF FRENCH TROOPS AT ATELLA (23 JULY 1496)

Summary. In this paper, I'll present the first phase of the Italian Wars, specifically the period between 1494 and 1498. The study focuses on the French troops' capitulation at Atella, which was a very important event as the war tide started to turn against the French following their victorious campaign through the Italian peninsula. The main source for the study was Mario Sanuto's work called *I diarii* ('Diaries') – a detailed record of the aforementioned events that allow us to analyse the situation and gain clarity about the military, political, and economic aspects of the French army's capitulation.

Keywords: Renaissance, Italian Wars, diplomacy, capitulation, 15th century, warfare, French history, Spanish history, history of Naples, Italian history

The purpose of this study is to present the process that led to the disarmament of French troops at Atella. The opening moment of this series of events was the crossing of the Alps by the French army led by Charles VIII in September 1494. The French set out from Grenoble on 29 August 1494. Charles VIII's goal was to conquer the Kingdom of Naples. This ambition was supported by the House of Anjou's historical claim to the throne of the Kingdom of Naples and Sicily, which was a useful pretext for the invasion, as upon the demise of the House of Anjou in 1481 the claim to the Kingdom of Naples passed to the French crown along with the Angevin estates. Another target for the French conquest may have been the Republic of Genoa, since the Italian city-state was under direct French influence on several occasions during the 15th century and capturing that territory was important to ensure a maritime connection between France and Naples. On the other hand, Charles VIII probably did not want to conquer the Duchy of Milan and it only became the subject of his interest because of its potential as a gathering ground for the French troops.¹

¹ On the other hand, conquering the Duchy of Milan became an important goal for Charles VIII's successor, Louis XII, who laid claim to the Duchy of Milan as his own inheritance, stating that it should have come to him by right of his paternal grandmother Valentina Visconti.

Charles VIII's campaign was preceded by lengthy military and diplomatic preparations that included reconciliation with France's neighbours. Charles VIII made peace with Henry VII by signing the Treaty of Étapes (2 November 1492), which ended the English invasion of France. It was agreed that Henry VII would accept French rights to the Duchy of Brittany and return territories previously occupied by the English, while Charles VIII would end support for Perkin Warbeck (the Yorkist pretender to Henry's throne) and settle his debts to the English monarch. Next, Charles signed the Treaty of Barcelona (19 January 1493) with the Crown of Aragon, in which he promised to return the Aragon counties of Cerdagne (Cerdaña) and Roussillon (Rosellón) – territories located in the foothills of the Pyrenees invaded by Louis XI in 1463. Although in the Treaty of Barcelona Charles did not quite renounce his claim to these territories, later that year Ferdinand of Aragon promised to maintain neutrality during Charles VIII's forthcoming invasion of Naples. By signing the Treaty of Senlis (23 May 1493) with Maximilian I of Habsburg and his son Philip the Handsome, Archduke of Austria, Charles VIII ended hostilities between France and the House of Habsburg, having agreed to cede the counties of Franche-Comté and Artois to Philip. These diplomatic manoeuvres clearly show that the French monarch did not shy away from making territorial concessions to his opponents in so far as he could deter them from interfering with his political and military plans. At the same time, the above-mentioned concessions show us how important the conquest of the Kingdom of Naples was to Charles.

As I mentioned above, the French army departed from Grenoble on 29 August 1494 to conquer the Kingdom of Naples. The troops continued their march south throughout the autumn and winter of that year, advancing along the western part of the Apennine Peninsula. In February 1495, virtually unopposed, Charles VIII and his army finally arrived in the territory of the Kingdom of Naples. Of course, the king of Naples, Alfonso II, was not merely a passive spectator of the imminent French invasion. He renewed his treaties with some of his earlier *condottieri*, such as Fabrizio Colonna and Giangiacomo Trivulzio, and made pacts with new ones, including, among others, Niccolò Orsini di Pitigliano, to strengthen the defence of the Kingdom. Alfonso's goal was to prevent the French army from reaching the territory of the Kingdom of Naples. He expected the French to attack from the eastern side of the Apennine Peninsula. For this reason, he commanded the defence at the border at the head of a unit

consisting of 30 cavalry squadrons, while sending his son and heir to the throne, Ferdinand (sometimes called by his contemporaries 'Ferrandino' do distinguish him from his grandfather), with an army to attack the French. Ferdinand's army were aided by Florentine and Papal troops. At the same time, Virginio Orsini, one of the leaders of the Neapolitan army, waited near Rome with 200 heavy cavalrymen.

The troops led by Ferdinand were supposed to meet with the French in the north, preferably even in the territory of the Duchy of Milan, so they have arrived in Romagna by mid-July.² However, Ferdinand's troops proved too weak to threaten the Duchy of Milan and French units led by Bernard Stuart (Lord of Aubigny) and Gianfrancesco da Sansevino. The French opened their way south by laying siege on Mordano and capturing it on 19 October 1494, where they massacred the defenders and civilians seeking refuge in the castle. Following Ferdinand's defeat and the sacking of Mordano, the Florentine and Papal troops abandoned his army. Ferdinand himself retreated at the end of October with his remaining troops to Cesena. Only then (i.e., at the end of October) did Charles VIII decide to cross the Apennine Mountains and move south along the western side of the Apennine Peninsula. Having failed to reach an agreement with the Florentines to provide free passage and supplies for their army, the French looted the first Florentine fortress located in their path, Fivizzano (26–29 October 1494). Subsequently, horrified by the French attack on Florence, Piero di Lorenzo de' Medici agreed to negotiate with Charles VIII and agreed, among other things, to surrender to the French the fortresses in Sarzana, Pietrasanta, Pisa, and Livorno and let the French pass through the Florentine territories.

As the French troops gradually pushed towards Naples (at the end of November, they left Florence and headed for Rome via Siena), so did Ferrandino with his troops. Finally, in December 1494, he managed to meet with the units of the Neapolitan army stationed around Rome. One of the Neapolitan units joined to the Condotta led by Fabrizio Colonna in Ostia, another marched east to secure the way to Abruzzo, while the main army marched towards Rome. Ferrandino wanted to retreat before his road to the Kingdom of Naples was cut off, so he concluded a truce with the French to be able to retreat. On 29 December, the

² F. GUICCIARDINI, *Storia d'Italia*, ed. S. SEIDEL MENCHI, I millenni, Turin 1971, Libro I, Capitolo 3 – Libro III, Capitolo 5, pp. 10–258; P. PIERI, *Il Rinascimento e la Crisi Militare Italiana*, Einaudi 1952, pp. 324–366.

French advance army, led by Montpensier, marched into Rome, and Charles arrived two days later with Pope Alexander VI's permission, while the Pope locked himself in the Castel Sant'Angelo. The French king did not want to act against Alexander VI, so it was agreed that the pope would provide a free route and supplies for the French troops, and the key forts of Terracina, Ostia, and Civitavecchia were placed under temporary French occupation.

The French army commanded by Charles VIII departed from Rome on 28 January 1495. Alfonso II abdicated in favour of his son (from now on known as Ferdinand II) and left for Sicily. On 9 February the French captured and destroyed Castello di Monte San Giovanni Campano, orchestrating yet another massacre. The violent actions of the French troops paired with King Alfonso II's failure to ensure the safety of the Kingdom, his abdication and subsequent escape to Sicily did not strengthen the Neapolitan population's spirit and further undermined Ferdinand II's position and possibilities of waging war against the advancing French troops. The young king's last chance remained to wait on the border for the French army to arrive and fight the enemy there. However, the French troops were divided into several groups moving along different routes and managed to quickly encircle the Neapolitan Army. Thus, Charles VIII outsmarted Ferdinand II and his commanders and forced Ferdinand to withdraw his troops to Capua.³

Because of the advance of French troops and the turmoil it caused in Naples, Ferdinand II had to leave Capua and return to the capital. However, he failed to win the support of the city's population, so he hid with his troops in the Castel Nuovo and the Castel dell'Ovo and ordered them to set fire to the ships and render the cannons unusable. On 22 February, French troops entered Naples. The Neapolitan nobles welcomed Charles VIII and crowned him king of Naples, while Ferdinand fled to Ischia. Although Castel Nuovo and Castel dell'Ovo were still held by the Napolitans, the French army managed to eliminate the resistance of the garrison of the forts in three weeks. Ferdinand II sailed from Ischia to Sicily, where he sought the help of Ferdinand II of Aragon to retake his kingdom.

In the summer of 1494, that is, before the French troops set out to conquer Naples, the King of Aragon attempted to form an anti-French alliance with the Venetians and Maximilian I of Habsburg. This coalition was finally formed after

³ *The Cambridge Modern History*, vol. I: *The Renaissance*, eds. A.W. WARD, G.W. PROTHERO, S. LEATHES, New York–London 1902, pp. 112–118.

the successful French attack – the agreement on it was signed on 31 March 1495 by the Imperial, Spanish, Venetian, and Milanese envoys in Venice, and the alliance itself became known as the Holy League (ostensibly it was established against the Ottoman Empire and the threat it posed for the allies, but its real purpose was to drive the French army out of Italy).

During his brief stay in Naples, Charles VIII attempted to consolidate his power over the Kingdom of Naples. For instance, the most important offices were shared by Neapolitans and Frenchmen and the King distributed estates and property to his Neapolitan supporters and the French nobles, striving to maintain balance without upsetting the existing institutional structure and the balance of powers. However, the emerging anti-French alliance (the Holy League) made the French monarch's return home more urgent. Thus, on 20 May 1495, Charles VII left Naples for France taking most of his troops with him and leaving Gilbert de Bourbon (Count of Montpensier) to defend the kingdom with an army of about 4,000 men.⁴

Following the establishment of the Holy League, Duke Ludovico Sforza of Milan sent Galeazzo da Sanseverino with a small army to take Asti from the French. Louis of Orléans, who was stationed in the city, did not surrender and managed to defend Asti. Moreover, on 10 June he captured the town of Novara. Louis's primary task was to defend Asti, as the city was the key of the road to France. By attacking Novara, Louis with his troops became trapped there, leaving Asti unprotected. At the same time, however, he tied up the Holy League's forces (mainly those of Milan) and gave Charles VIII time to retreat northwards.

In the meantime, the Venetian Signoria sent troops and a smaller fleet to Apulia under the command of Antonio Grimani and Girolamo Contarini to fight the French troops. At the same time, the Signoria ordered an army to be formed on the Terraferma, commanded by Francesco Gonzaga (Marquis of Mantua). The first action of the Venetian expeditionary army was the capture of Brindisi, followed by the siege of Monopoli, where the cannons of the ships of the fleet were deployed to shoot at the city walls.⁵

⁴ M.E. MALLETT, Ch. SHAW, *The Italian Wars, 1494–1559: War, State and Society in Early Modern Europe*, Harlow–New York 2012, pp. 6–38.

⁵ P. BEMBO, *Della historia Vinitiana*, vol. 12, book 3, Venegia 1552, pp. 91–93. Based on Bembo's description, the Venetian fleet consisted of 20 galleys and 1 or 2 larger ships equipped with cannons.

Charles VIII with the core of the French army kept marching north to return to France, while Gonzaga with the main army of the Holy League was already waiting for his arrival in Parma. It was here, in Fornovo near the city of Parma, on 6 July 1495, that the first major battle between the French and the Holy League took place, involving 10,000–11,000 French soldiers, and around 20,000–21,000 soldiers of the Holy League. The outcome of the Battle of Fornovo is ambiguous, with each side seeing it as their own victory. What we can certainly say is that strategically, the outnumbered French army managed to win, as it was able to continue the retreat to France, while the League's army followed them from a distance. The French army reached Asti on 15 July, while Gonzaga, with the Holy League's troops, joined the Milanese forces besieging Novara.

On 26 August 1495, Charles VIII signed a treaty with the Florentine envoys, in which Florence undertook to provide a loan of 70,000 ducats to the French monarch and send 250 horsemen paid by the Florentines to aid the French forces stationed in Naples in exchange for the return of the forts previously occupied by the French. On 9 October, Charles VIII and Ludovico Sforza concluded the Peace of Vercelli between France and Milan, under which Ludovico Sforza allowed the French to use the port of Genoa to reinforce their Neapolitan troops.

While Charles VIII was fighting in the north, the Spaniards and Venetians came to the aid of Ferdinand II of Naples, so that he could regain his kingdom. The Spanish expeditionary army was led by Gonzalo Fernández de Córdoba, who landed at Calabria on 24 May 1495. However, Spanish help came at a price: the young king had to cede many Calabrian cities to Ferdinand II of Aragon, including Reggio di Calabria. A battle took place between the parties at Seminara (21 June 1495), where the Neapolitan-Spanish army suffered a heavy defeat by a much smaller French force led by d'Aubigny. After that, for months the Spaniards did not engage in open battles with the French, although Fernández De Córdoba, using guerrilla-like tactics, slowly retook the rest of Calabria.

Following the lost Battle of Seminara, Ferdinand II went to Messina, where he gathered a smaller fleet and sailed to Naples. In early July, with the help of his fleet and the support of the city's inhabitants, accompanied by Prospero and Fabrizio Colonna, he finally managed to retake Naples, following the uprising

that broke out on the night of 6–7 July and which paved the way for Ferdinand's arrival. Gilbert de Bourbon-Montpensier withdrew his French troops to the Neapolitan fortresses.⁶ A relief army arrived under the command of Francois de Tourzel (Baron of Précý) and was joined by pro-French Neapolitan barons. The French defeated the Neapolitan army sent against them by Ferdinand II at Eboli. However, soon Montpensier and some of his troops left Naples and fled to Salerno across the sea to join d'Aubigny and his army. Ferdinand II interpreted this as a breach of peace and laid siege to Castel Nuovo, which he occupied on 8 December. On 17 February 1496, the French garrisons of Castel Nuovo and Castel dell'Ovo finally surrendered to Ferdinand II.

In Apulia, the Venetians fought against the French, as Ferdinand II promised them the ports of Trani, Brindisi, and Otranto in return for their assistance (22 January 1496). In Marino Sanuto's work there is a letter summarising the state of the war in April 1496, according to which the opposing armies could be described as having even forces – according to Sanuto's letter (which also cites Virginio Orsini), Montpensier may have had a total of 8,000–9,000 men, including 800 heavy cavalrymen and 5,000 infantrymen (Swiss, German, and Italian mercenaries). In contrast, the army led by Ferdinand II consisted of 8,000 infantrymen, 1,200 heavy cavalrymen and 800 *stratioti* units, or roughly 10,000 men.

By mid-1495, Calabria, Puglia and most of the Terra di Lavoro had fallen into Ferdinand's hands – with the exception of a few strategically important places – but almost the entire Abruzzo was still occupied by the French. Venetian troops arrived in Abruzzo under the command of Francesco Gonzaga and Filippo de Rossi (700 *stratioti* and 3,000 infantrymen) and were joined by Spanish troops. On 1 July 1496, the Venetians occupied Monopoli.

By the end of 1495, the fighting between the parties had reached a standstill and was not resumed until April 1496. Since both sides needed money to continue the war, toll posts with significant revenues became the targets for attacks. One of the most important locations was the customs office in Foggia, with the revenue of tens of thousands of ducats. For this reason, the Orsini family aided by Ferdinand II launched an attack on Abruzzo with an army of about 4,000 horsemen. On another occasion, Camillo Vitelli with his horsemen carried out

⁶ D. POTTER, *Renaissance France at War: Armies, Culture and Society, c.1480–1560*, New York 2008, pp. 27–30.

a successful raid on the German infantrymen in Ferdinand II's service. Thus, for a time, the war against the French was reduced to cavalry raids like those mentioned above. During this time, Ferdinand II and his troops united with the Venetian troops led by Gonzaga. The French military leadership lacked a sense of purpose – Montpensier wanted to march against Naples, but this did not happen as the mercenaries who had not received their pay refused to fight – so the French army headed for Apulia and camped at Atella.⁷

By June 1496, the French troops led by Montpensier had become effectively trapped in Atella. This fact was first mentioned in a letter from Paolo Capello to the Venetian envoy to the Kingdom of Naples dated 20 June. Due to its central location within the Kingdom of Naples, the fortress of Atella had strategic importance and was convenient for French troops to obstruct the connection between the territories controlled by the Holy League. In his subsequent letters, Capello stated that the castle had not yet been surrounded by the League's troops, so that French troops from Abruzzo and other areas could still arrive there freely for some time.⁸ In Atella, French troops were besieged by Spanish troops led by Gonzalo Fernández de Córdoba and Ferdinand II. The scale of the war is well illustrated by Capello's description of the size of the Spanish army: '*don Consalvo Ferante con homeni d'arme 100, fanti 2000, cavali zanetari 400, et 200 schiopetieri.*'⁹ On 23 July 1496, following negotiations, the parties signed a treaty leading to the capitulation of the French troops. As can be seen from the following quote, the treaty was accepted and signed by all opposing parties or their representatives:

The clauses, conditions, and agreements begin here and they are signed by His Majesty Ferdinand II, who by the grace of God is the king of Sicily and Jerusalem, etc., and on the other hand, the renowned Ms. Gilbert, Count of Montpensier, vicar and deputy of France's most Christian royal highness in the Kingdom of Sicily, and by the renowned Virginio Orsini, the captain of the aforementioned great lord, who signs in the name of all the other masters and captains and soldiers, whether footman or horsemen, who are in Atella.

First article, they agreed to the venerable Ms. Cardinal Juan Borgia, legatus of Holiness on behalf of the Pope, and the distinguished Gonzalo Fernández [de

⁷ P. PIERI, *op. cit.*, pp. 359–363.

⁸ M. SANUTO, *I diarii di Marino Sanuto*, vol. 1, ed. F. STEFANI, Venezia 1879, pp. 224–228, col.

⁹ "...*don Gonzalo Donandez with 100 men-at-arms, 2.000 foot soldiers, 400 jinetes (a kind of Spanish light cavalry), and 200 arquebusier...*", M. SANUTO, *op. cit.*, p. 228, col.

Córdoba], chief of the most merciful king and queen of Spain, and the most prominent Ms. Francesco de Gonzaga the Marquis of Mantua, the Chief of the Venetian Signoria, and the dignified Paolo Capello, the ambassador of the most prominent Signoria said, and the dignified Francesco Casato, the envoy of the most eminent Duke of Milan, on behalf of their masters and the most merciful league, will guard what has been described above, and at the same time, together with them, it will be received in his own name by the most eminent Ms. Don Federico, Duke of Altamura.

Furthermore, he was sworn to the present articles and signed with his own hands by the king of [Naples] and the said Ms. Montpensier, and the others whose names are described above, sealed it with their seals and made two copies of it: one remains with the king of [Naples], the other with Ms. Montpensier.¹⁰

The treaty signed at Atella gave the French army 30 days to notify Charles VIII and organise the arrival of the French relief forces. According to the treaty, however, the relief troops could only come from outside the territory of the Kingdom of Naples. Furthermore, according to the provisions of the treaty, the French troops were to acquire food at their own expense.¹¹ The agreement was guaranteed by guarantees and exchange of hostages.

¹⁰ 'I capitoli, pacti et convention initi et firmati tra la maestà del signor don Ferando secundo, per la divina gratia re de Sicilia et Hierusalem etc. ex una parte, et lo illustre monsignore Giliberto conte de Monpensero, vicario et locotenente generale de la cristianissima maestà del re de Franza nel regno de Sicilia, et lo illustre signor Virginio Ursino capitaneo de dicta maestà, e per tutti li altri signori et capitanei et soldati, tanto da pede come da cavalo, che sono dentro d' Atella de l'altra parte. (...)

Item, è convenuto che il reverendissimo monsignor Joanne Borgia cardinale et legato da latere in nome di la santità del papa, et lo illustre Consalvo Ferandes gran capitano generale de li serenissimi signori re et regina de Spagna, et lo illustrissimo signor Francesco de Gonzaga marchese de Mantua capitaneo generale de la illustrissima Signoria de Venetia, et lo magnifico messier Paulo Capello ambasciatore de la dicta illustrissima Signoria, et lo magnifico messier Francesco Casato ambasciatore de lo illustrissimo signor ducha de Milano, in nome dei loro signori et de la serenissima lega, li farà osservare lo suprascripto, et pariter con loro promete nomine proprio lo illustrissimo signor don Federico principe d'Altamura.

Item, li presenti capituli se habiano ad jurare, subscrivere de manu propria del signor re et del preffato signor de Monpensero et de li altri in nome de chi sono facti, et sigilar de loro sigillo, et se ne habiano ad fare due para: l'uno reste in potere del signor re, et l'altro in potere de Monpensero.' M. SANUTO, *op. cit.*, pp. 253, 258–259 col.

¹¹ To this end, Gilbert de Bourbon borrowed 10,000 ducats from Ferdinand (half of it in food) after the contract had been signed. Ferdinand II got his 10,000 ducats back, as the French commander received 12,000 ducats from the Florentines, M. SANUTO, *op. cit.*, pp. 253–259.

Despite the 30-day deadline, the French troops left Atella for Castellammare within a week following the capitulation and most of the French soldiers had arrived there by 16 August. According to the treaty, the retreating French troops were accompanied by Venetian and Neapolitan troops in order to ensure their own safety and that of the population. The French marched in the middle, the Venetians in the front and the Neapolitans in the back. The French army was disarmed: they left all the cannons and ammunition in Atella, and their weapons were taken away from them.¹²

By the end of August 1496, the allies had also achieved the capitulation of the dukes of Salerno and Bisignano, who laid down their arms and left the Kingdom of Naples together with the French soldiers. The French troops were decimated by disease and climate – while their numbers were 4,500 when they arrived in Castellammare, only 3,340 remained just a month later. On 19 September, Marino Sanuto was informed that duke of Montpensier was at that time in Naples, but not as a prisoner – the Venetian envoy reported that Montpensier was treated more as a kind of guest at the Neapolitan court, since his safety was guaranteed by treaty.¹³

Overall, the treaty of Atella helped the anti-French alliance to achieve its goals, as it neutralised the French troops stationed in the territory of the Kingdom of Naples – most of them laid down their arms at Atella; the troops that continued fighting following the conclusion of the treaty were scattered across the Neapolitan territories and had no opportunity to unite or escape. The naval advantage provided by the Venetian and Spanish fleets guaranteed that the French could neither bring reinforcements nor leave the Kingdom of Naples. Thus, the French units were forced to surrender one by one. Although the French resistance in the Kingdom of Naples finally ceased only with the fall of Taranto in 1498, in practical terms the French troops had no possibility of launching another attack. Therefore, the treaty of Atella postponed the French force's renewed attack on Naples and created for the Neapolitans the opportunity of another intervention and allowed them to concentrate their forces and finally drive the French out of the Kingdom of Naples.

¹² The issue of cannons was discussed separately in the treaty of Atella, since Ferdinand II wanted to compensate for the artillery lost in the French attack at the expense of the French troops. M. SANUTO, *op. cit.*, pp. 253–259, col.

¹³ M. SANUTO, *op. cit.*, pp. 259, 263–265, 275, col.

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KAPITULACJA WOJSK FRANCUSKICH POD ATELLĄ (23 LIPCA 1496)

Streszczenie. W tym artykule przedstawię pierwszą fazę tzw. wojen włoskich, a konkretnie okres między rokiem 1494 a 1498. Artykuł koncentruje się na kapitulacji wojsk francuskich pod Atellą – istotnym wydarzeniu, które wpłynęło na zmianę układu sił w przebiegu wojny. Od tego momentu, po zwycięskiej kampanii na Półwyspie Apenińskim, Francuzi zaczęli tracić przewagę militarną. Głównym źródłem do badania było dzieło Mario Sanuto zatytułowane *I diarii (Dzienniki)* zawierające szczegółowy zapis wspomnianych wydarzeń, które pozwala nam przeanalizować sytuację i uzyskać jasność w sprawie wojskowych, politycznych i ekonomicznych aspektów kapitulacji armii francuskiej.

Słowa kluczowe: Renesans, wojny włoskie, dyplomacja, kapitulacja, XV wiek, działania wojenne, historia Francji, historia Hiszpanii, historia Neapolu, historia Włoch