

Battle of Ligny: observations.

The Prussians.

In the area where the Prussians had taken up their positions, the Ligne formed a distinct feature. Though not of too much importance to the west, towards the east it slowly got larger and more difficult to pass, in particular beyond Ligny. Actual bridges and other passageways were only in the villages themselves.

Parallel to this, while the fields to the west and south of Wagnelée, Saint-Amand-la-Haye and Saint Amand were relatively flat, the area between this last village and Ligny was dominated by the heights to the north and this, in combination with the low ground in front made it a strong defensive position. Here, the position was well-suited for artillery to fire towards Saint-Amand, as well as Ligny.

On the other hand, the slopes in rear of the villages of Ligny, Saint Amand and Saint-Amand-la-Haye gave the units which stood there a vulnerable position to French gunfire.

To the left of Ligny, towards Potriaux, was the marshy area of the Ligne, which was difficult to cross. Further east, near the road coming from Fleurus and beyond, this became even more difficult as here the Ligne cut its way through a highly broken area where the heights of Sombreffe and Tongrines formed defensive flanks for a position on both sides of this road.

As far as the arrangement of the villages along the Ligne was concerned, those of Wagnelée, Saint-Amand-la-Haye and Saint Amand were in close proximity of each other and thereby forming a line of houses of almost 3000 metres long. Though Wagnelée was on the left bank of the Ligne, both other villages were for the most part on the right bank of it and therefore free for the enemy to take, collect troops there and emerge from them.

At the same time, being in low grounds and formed by buildings covered in and between orchards, trees, gardens, hedges and walls, these villages could be used as defensive bastions. Additionally, the high corn reduced view.

Ligny, flanked on both sides by potentially strong defensive positions, was located on both banks and therefore had two lines of defence, one in the village itself – the Ligne - and the other as the outer boundary to the east and which was open for a French attack and bombardment from the open ground in front.

The village of Tongrenelle formed a scattered group of houses, in itself a weak position as far as defence was concerned. Within the same context, the area around Boignée and Balâtre was a particular strong one with heights dominating the deep ground of the Ligne in front of it. Yet, both these villages were in front of this stream, on its right bank, and as such not very well suited for a Prussian defence as their positions in front made access to the rear difficult.

From a defensive point of view, the general conclusion can be that in the total position the strongest part was between Ligny and Tongrenelle, while it became weaker to the west and east, with its weakest point in its western extremity.¹

As has been stated above, at Ligny, the basic outline of the plan as it had been developed by count Von der Gröben was more or less used.

This plan, based upon a mix of defence on one side (Sombreffe-Tongrenelle) and an offensive on the other (coming from Brye), however, carried several serious disadvantages. First of all, there was the risk that the right wing would get too much isolated from the defensive position and the other way around, the more as the area in between them was a marshy low ground which made communication extremely difficult. In this way, the position fell apart in two parts and this was not only a major drawback for the forces themselves, but also for the high command as the view from Brye towards Tongrenelle and its surroundings was limited.

Besides, offensive actions coming from Brye through Ligny and Saint Amand would be faced with the villages and the Ligne, which formed an obstacle. Other than that, the enemy in front of Fleurus, could see the Prussian movements in the area between Brye, Sombreffe, Ligny, Saint Amand and Saint-Amand-la-Haye.

In this area, a lot of troops, reserves, ammunition-carts etc. were drawn up which made it a particular vulnerable area: as long as the villages would be in Prussian hands it was OK but as soon as one would fall or a French local breakthrough was imminent and there was the risk of confusion and disorder in units even before they would be involved into any action. Additionally, in case the French would move around Brye or Ligny, this could be catastrophic with so little space in this area where troops were cramped together. And last but not least, the position provided insufficient cover and support on the extreme right flank, near Wagnelée. Here it was fully open and not leaning onto anything.

This situation might have triggered Napoleon to draw the action to the west, while moving up from Fleurus toward this flank and there, by wheeling in to the right, forcing the Prussians to take another frontline. This would, in the situation they were in, be extremely difficult: apart from the fact that units were in villages and in cut-up areas, the 3rd corps would be far off.²

For this scenario, however, Von der Gröben had the alternative position near Marbijoux for the right wing, in combination with offensive operations of the left wing. But at the same time he neglected the importance of the Ligne as an obstacle for the Prussian attacks on the French left wing.³

Von Müffling also points out that for an offensive on the right wing, towards Fleurus, the possession of both Saint-Amand and Saint-Amand-la-Haye was vital. If not, and the Prussian offensive would come from Wagnelée, the advance towards Fleurus would be very long with the risk that in the meantime the French could carry out strong offensive operations against the Prussian left wing or centre. Von Müffling here sees two possibilities: or the 3rd Prussian corps could act as a reserve between Sombreffe and Brye, or it could operate against the French in its front, so as to gain time for Blücher to advance on his right wing.⁴

In the light of the Prussian plan as it was *before* the battle, the position of the right wing was intended as one for an offensive action, while the one on the left was so for a defensive one.

Breaking the question down to the actual disposition of the Prussian forces as it was even just before the battle started - and this linked to the plan the Prussians probably had - it becomes clear that the Prussians didn't use the position as a defensive one at all, while at the same time they hadn't taken the precautions to be able to attack the French as they wanted. In that sense, the Prussian position wasn't either a real defensive or a real offensive one. The most puzzling element in this is the almost total absence of forces in the key-villages of Saint-Amand, Saint-Amand-la-Haye and Ligny right till about half an hour before the battle started.

In this context reference should be made to the disposition as issued by Zieten in the early morning for his brigades. This document basically comes down to the establishment in the morning of a defensive position extending from Brye to Ligny, with Saint Amand in front and the entrenched villages occupied in force, while having a strong reserve in their rear.

However, by looking at the positions of the units later that day, just before the battle (2 p.m.) it seems as if practically nothing of this disposition had been carried out.

While Saint-Amand-la-Haye was left out altogether, Saint Amand and Ligny were virtually unoccupied. By the time these villages were filled with smaller or larger garrisons (between 2 and 2.30 p.m.) the French had fully developed their frontline. By this very late hour, the units involved also didn't have the time to get themselves acquainted in the villages and their immediate surroundings, which made the defence even more insecure. Now, they had to do so during the actions.⁵

Let alone the state of defence of the villages themselves and their immediate surroundings: they were barely entrenched, and from at least Ligny it is known that it was only done so between 2 and 3 p.m., parallel to the presence of the initial garrison.

What had to be the main defensive position of Point du Jour, covering the exits towards Gembloux and Namur and as described by Von der Gröben as the counterpart for the offensive position, wasn't occupied in any force either until 2 p.m. It was also due to the change of frontline by the French by 2 p.m. that its natural features of defence decreased in value.

Briefly, the way the units were arranged, the position wasn't used as a defensive one in its full extent. On the other hand, taking it from the intention to fall upon the French through Ligny and Saint Amand, it wasn't as an offensive one in its full extent either. In this, the possession of at least these villages of Ligny and Saint Amand was of prime importance so as to set the conditions to carry out such an offensive action at all.⁶ Now, the Prussians risked losing them in the first stages of the action and thereby forcing themselves into a defensive action as well.

In both these senses, this lack of a proper occupation of at least these villages (plus the one of Saint-Amand-la-Haye) is incomprehensible as this (even before the battle had started), seriously reduced the chance of success for the Prussian army.

In the Waterloo-literature the whole Prussian position is often interpreted as a defensive one, open for extra support of Bülow and / or Wellington in a later stage.⁷

However, as has been demonstrated, before the battle, the Prussian high command wasn't expecting Bülow during the day and as far as Wellington was concerned they may have had some hope – after the meeting at Bussy - he could possibly assist them after all, but this was most uncertain.

In the interpretation referred to, the expectations of the Prussians later in the day on the 16th of June and after that date have been used as the ones they would have had *before* the battle started and it is essential to make a clear distinction between them, as in the second case they were influenced by the events *during* the battle.

This interpretation also neglects the development in the ideas of the Prussian general staff and – herewith - the arrangement of the Prussian forces from the early morning of the 16th of June right up to 2.30 p.m. the moment the battle started.

Whatever may have been their idea of Bülow's progress in his march towards Ardenelle, it didn't change anything to the situation that for the time being the Prussians had to face Napoleon with three army-corps in stead of four.

The day before, the Prussian staff had expected Bülow to be at Sombreffe in the afternoon of the 16th of June, but on the morning of the 16th of June this prospect was not realistic at all. Now, it would not be before midnight that the corps would arrive on the plateau of Ardenelle, five kilometres west of Gembloux and this was not difficult to calculate.

As far as Wellington's conditional promise for support - done at Bussy between twelve and one o'clock- was concerned, this could evidently not alter the Prussian dispositions for the battle as they want to fight it, as first of all Blücher did not expect him to be close to the battlefield on the 16th of June, let alone the fact that the promise for support itself was a conditional one and therefore not one to be relied upon for the full hundred percent. It is necessary to stress here again that the decision of the Prussian army to fight a battle in the position of Sombreffe had *not* been dependent on any promise of direct support of Wellington.

During the battle, however, things probably gradually changed the concept of what the Prussians had in mind. In their idea, the defence of the villages of Ligny, Saint Amand and Saint-Amand-la-Haye would be the introduction for an offensive operation later that day so as to throw Napoleon back into the valley of the Sambre.

However, as these villages were vigorously attacked by the French, Blücher was forced to defend them in order not to lose them, thereby making a later Prussian attack here impossible. Yet, this

mechanism of the way these French attacks were carried out on the one hand and the Prussians drawing in more and more troops on the other (so as to make it possible to emerge offensively later) now became the red thread in the actions here. The result was that what was to be an introduction only to what was to be a Prussian strike against Napoleon's left, now became the main action itself.⁸

And this action was to hold the villages as they played a vital role in order to be able to have an offensive battle, let alone a defensive one. What happened was that the Prussians now directed their actions to the French ones, so as to keep them occupied and to prevent them from concentrating any major forces on any point from where they then could break through. As such, the Prussians were forced into a defensive situation, while they preferred to act offensively.⁹

In this situation, each time the French had gained ground in and around the villages, the Prussians sent in reinforcements which had some local success in their counter-attacks (even by sometimes emerging from the villages), but this success wasn't exploited. They could have done so by consolidating the situation by building up a strong defence-line in the outer boundaries of the villages, for instance by bringing up artillery, the build-up of formations in the front-line and reserves further in its rear, deeper into the villages. Instead, the success diminished, and as a result the ground eventually was lost – and then the whole process started all over again.¹⁰ Apart from the local character of the successes in an in general unclear situation (due to the splintered way of fighting and the obstructed view in the villages), this way of handling the units sucked in more and more reserves which were absorbed in the action.¹¹

Within this context, Saint-Amand-la-Haye had a high priority for the Prussians. While Wagnelée didn't get any attention from the French and as it was far away from Fleurus for the Prussians to use it as a starting point for an attack, Saint-Amand-la-Haye was the point from where the Prussian attack would have to come, sweeping down south along Saint Amand towards Fleurus. The village, once being in French hands, also may have been felt as a threatening point towards Brye and –therewith- to Ligny from the rear. It was also for this reason that the Prussians made two efforts to drive away the French from the front of Saint-Amand-la-Haye by emerging out from Wagnelée, towards both Saint-Amand-le-Hameau and the grounds in front of Saint-Amand-la-Haye.¹²

While Saint-Amand-la-Haye was taken by the French between 3 and 4 p.m., it was retaken by 4.30 p.m. by Pirch II. From then on the French pressure upon the village was considerable which was only relieved by 6 p.m. as the French suffered a strong instability due to the appearance of the 1st corps on their left rear flank and which was exploited by the Prussians.

Yet, soon after, the French pressure was resumed by the Young Guard, as well as the units of the corps of Vandamme and the division of Girard. In this, the Prussians could only hold out thanks to considerable reinforcements.

An offensive action coming from Saint-Amand would make no sense as this would split off the French left wing from the French centre. It was this village which was lost by 3.30 p.m. (and partly retaken by 4 p.m.), but which came back in Prussian hands only by 6 p.m, the same moment as also Saint-Amand-la-Haye was retaken. After that, no more French efforts were carried out to retake it.

Saint-Amand-le-Hameau was a hamlet which was far out of the Prussian front-line but as the fighting developed, a Prussian occupation would help in clearing the grounds in front Saint-Amand-la-Haye, and this – in turn – would help to emerge from it so as to drive the enemy back towards Fleurus.¹³

At Ligny, initially, the Prussians were able to keep the French out of the village, but once they were in they gave up the outer perimeter and fell back upon the Ligne, deep into the village. Using this as a defence line, this is where the action lingered on. The Prussians tried to force it, but failed (except in some degree on the flanks). This kind of stale-mate in the centre of the

front-line here was only broken in favour of the French when the last French offensive took place by 8 p.m.

Defensively, the Prussians had a hard time to keep their front, while an offensive break-out from the village was out of the question. And even if the Prussians would have emerged from the village, they would be isolated and faced with French reserves in the open field. As at the right wing, any offensive success could only be local and coincidental and, as such, had no decisive role in the battle whatsoever.

In the sector between Sombreffe and Tongrenelle (and from there stretching out towards Boignée and Balâtre) the division of Hulot, by skirmishing actions, and the French cavalry of Pajol and Exelmans, by demonstrations, (in all about 10.000 French) were able to pin down a large part of Von Thielmann's corps (about 21.000 Prussians) from 4 p.m. onwards.

Von Thielmann kept this defensive position, except for once – around 7.30 p.m. – when he carried out a charge with part of his cavalry on the road which leads from Point du Jour to Fleurus. This charge, however, was weak and had therefore no impact on the situation in his front.

In the original plan, Thielmann was meant to take up a strong defensive position between Sombreffe and Tongrinnes so as to defend the exits towards Gembloux (Liège) and Namur against a French attack, and this is what he did.

Yet, in the way the action developed, the main thrust of the French was upon the frontline which stretched from Saint-Amand-la-Haye to Ligny and in this way Thielmann wasn't involved where the battle actually was fought. Apart from the cavalry brigade of Von der Marwitz which was taken to the right flank of the army, no serious attempt was done to correct this situation, even with a part of the corps. The movement of the 12th brigade later in the day towards Ligny can only be defined as an half-bred support in the fighting here, as it merely linked the 3rd corps to the front there and cannot be considered as an actual support in the centre of the army.¹⁴

It doesn't become clear what kind of communication there has been between the Prussian general command and Von Thielmann during the battle, and on whose initiative for instance Von Stülpnagel's brigade was drawn towards Ligny.¹⁵ Whatever may have happened, the impression is that the general command on the one hand and Von Thielmann himself on the other were very careful in giving up this position of the 3rd corps as a whole and which was basically in protection of two lines of retreat.¹⁶

In this understanding, it is still a question why Von Thielmann, so it seems, wasn't asked about his situation during the battle. A lack of initiative from Von Thielmann's side can also be criticized. It may very well have been that they couldn't see the situation on either wing, but a regular communication could have been the bottom-line of activity so that Von Thielmann and the Prussian general command could at least know that the decisive actions were taking place not in front of the 3rd corps.¹⁷ In that case, Von Thielmann could for instance have pulled in his 10th and 11th brigade into a much more tight front between Sombreffe and Tongrenelle, supported by cavalry, while at the same time make his other brigades clearly available further to the right.¹⁸ Now, the 9th brigade was placed in some kind of obscure position where it could not actually contribute anywhere in a relevant way and the 12th was brought up to late and too half-bred near Ligny, more – so it seems – as a link between the garrison at Ligny and the 3rd corps and not as an actual support for the garrison there.

Now, it seems as if Von Thielmann was simply left where he was and to do whatever he felt necessary, while Von Thielmann himself doesn't seem to have taken any initiative on even thinking about any support for the 1st and 2nd corps.

It has also been suggested that the corps was kept there to receive Bülow when he would join in.¹⁹ Though in the original plan of Von der Gröben a fourth corps was meant to be in rear of Point du Jour (as a reserve), however, it remains pure speculation where Bülow would go from his position from Ardenelle when he would be heading for the battlefield.

The situation in which the Prussian units fought became more complicated by other circumstances. First of all, the quality of some units which had been recruited of regions recently acquired by Prussia left to be desired. These were mostly units from the Rhine and Westphalia. Apart from that, a lot of Landwehr regiments lacked a proper military training and experience. They were more suited for mass-effects and not so much for actions in which it also came down to individual skills and independence, which was an absolute necessity in the fighting in the villages. This resulted in the fact that these units were “used” in a much shorter time as those of the French army, thereby depleting the Prussian reserves even quicker as those of the enemy.²⁰ In combination with Napoleon’s intention to bind as many units as possible on the frontline between Ligny and Saint-Amand-la-Haye, by the time Napoleon attacked with his reserve by 8 p.m. , Blücher had about 7000 men left of those units of the 1st and 2nd corps which were not used.²¹

Another complicating factor was that units, from all arms of both the 1st and 2nd corps - from the battalion / battery / regimental level up to the corps-level - were mixed. It is not clear how the regimental, brigade and corpscommanders handled this, but by doing so the unity of command was gone.²²

It might have been better to place the 1st corps on the right wing, the 2nd in the centre and the 3rd corps on the left wing (like at Waterloo). This would at least have given a clear command in the front-line and have afforded a more coherent approach.²³

This problem, in turn, was aggravated by the density of the troops and units in the area between the villages of Wagnelée, Saint-Amand-la-Haye, Saint Amand, Ligny, Sombreffe and Brye.²⁴

The position in itself had become even more unclear by the presence of these villages in the frontline.

The ambiguous situation of the army having neither a real defensive, nor a real offensive position, the lack of space and itself being scattered as a weapon, resulted for the Prussian cavalry in a situation in which regiments either were paralyzed and passive, or simply too weak to act decisively due to a lack of support.²⁵

On the right wing, the cavalry of Von Wahlen Jürgass or Von der Marwitz did anything material, while the other brigade of Von Hobe’s division carried out an unsuccessful charge.

Further, the charges of Von Röder’s cavalry in the evening against the Imperial Guard and the French cavalry west of Ligny lacked coherence and therefore success. As the regiments did not maintain a closed front, which may have been caused by the long distance the horsemen had already covered before the actual charge took place, which resulted in the horses and men being out of breath at the critical moment.²⁶

Yet, Gneisenau himself takes it even further by claiming that at the moment the cavalry which he wanted to use in rear of Ligny to stem the French advance was thrown in disorder by the French cavalry and that it didn’t want to charge anymore, leaving the infantry to its fate.²⁷

Gneisenau, in covert terms, criticizes the cavalry here as well; on the one hand he states that it fled here and that it was thanks to the infantry that the retreat was possible at all. He himself would have been unable to collect the cavalry. In other words: the cavalry failed to maintain its position to cover the retreat of the army.²⁸

In his turn, Von Röder, commander of the reserve cavalry of the 1st corps, expresses his complaints about the quality and the role of his cavalry in the battle in his report to headquarters. He writes: “Es ist unläugbar, dass in diesem Moment das Benehmen dieser Cavallerie höchst tadelhaft war, denn sie dachte nur an die Flucht und hörte nicht auf die Stimme ihrer Offiziere und auf kein Signal. Dieser Vorwurf trifft indessen nur lauter neu formierte Regimenter, denen es an Erfahrung, Ausbildung und innere Ordnung fehlt, und die durch das langwierige Artillerie-Feuer schon etwas mürbe geworden waren. Aber auch die alten Cavallerie-Regimenter sind bey weitem nicht mehr, was sie im vorigen Kriege waren, und sind durch die neue Organisation, bey

welcher sie eine gute Escadron verlohren haben, die zum Theil durch die Depot-Escadron sehr schlecht ersetzt worden ist, und durch die Anstellung neuer Officiere, welche die Leuthe nicht kennen und von Ihnen nicht gelehrt sind, bedeutend zurückgekommen. Bey den Landwehr Cavallerie-Regimentern sind einige, die kaum die ersten Bewegungen kennen und im Gebrauch ihrer Waffen völlig unerfahren sind.”²⁹

And Blücher wrote on the 18th of June in a general order: “[...] Einen Teil der Kavallerie kann Ich nicht danken; Sie hat nicht den Muth und die Ausdauer bewiesen, die zu erwarten waren und die Überlegenheit nicht bewährt, die Preussische Kavallerie immer über die Französische gehabt hat. Sie wird und muss die Scharte auswetzen, und Ich hoffe, dass die Herrn Offiziere und Soldaten die nächste Gelegenheit benutzen werden, um Ruhm und Ehre zu erhalten und zu erwerben.[...].”³⁰

The artillery units followed the infantry in its wake and in the actions for the villages the weapon was placed on the flanks or in rear of the villages. Though the arm did a good job, it was inferior to its French counterpart and at least the guns of the 1st corps suffered considerably from French skirmishing fire.³¹ Nowhere it was used in some kind of cooperative way, although later in the battle the frontline between Saint Amand and Ligny was barred by the 24 12-pounders of batteries nr.2, 4 and 8, as well as by the guns of horse battery nr.10 and foot battery nr.1

These guns were meant not only to cover this area of the front-line, but also to fire upon the flanks of any French columns attacking Saint Amand and Ligny . And though they managed to do so, the crews of these batteries suffered from the skirmishers which moved up from Saint Amand once it was in French hands, as well as those coming from the area around the chateau of Ligny.³²

As far as Blücher himself was concerned, it is a fact that at least in two occasions he was involved in the actions himself. The first one was while leading the attack of Pirch II on Saint-Amand-la-Haye and the second one in leading the charge of the cavalry in the evening. And although this had an electrifying effect upon the troops, he took an enormous risk. After all, Blücher was as its commander the beating heart of the Prussian army and the mental motor for its morale. In case he would fall, the Prussians would suffer a serious mental blow. It was that he was protected by dusk and the chaos of the situation, but one should not think of it if he was taken prisoner on the evening of the 16th of June after the fall of Ligny. In fact, he had a very narrow escape.³³

While the Prussians did not correct their situation so as to make a victory possible for the next day, Napoleon did correct his (because of the fact that Ney didn't show up) by moving his reserve through the Prussian centre, although this action wasn't that decisive as it could have been (see above).

The Prussians could probably have done so by limiting their actions to pure a defensive battle earlier in the day and, while doing so, by maintaining some kind of reserve. In this way, they could have held out till the next day with the prospect that Bülow and Wellington could show up to give their assistance in what would then probable be a decisive battle.

The question also remains why Thielmann wasn't used to make a strong attack, coming from the line between Potriaux to the right and the height south of Tongrinnes to the left, in the very late afternoon or the early evening with all his forces upon the rear of Napoleon's forces which were in front of Ligny, thereby wheeling round Hulot's division.³⁴

The moment this could have been done could have been the one the French left wing was in trouble due to the presence of this presumed enemy's force in its left rear.

Though Thielmann then needed to cross the Ligne and its low ground, this advance would then probably have forced Napoleon to move up his Imperial Guard to block it, apart of course from the resistance of the other units present (Hulot, Pajol, Exelmans). In this way it would have forced Napoleon to use his reserves, which he now used for the decisive thrust against Ligny.

These French forces were probably strong enough to withstand the Prussian offensive.

At the same time, a concentrated attack on the Prussian left wing could only be useful if the right wing had the possibility for a massive and bold advance as well and the Prussian defence in the centre was still strong. And this can be seriously questioned, as both were already very much depleted. All in all, this scenario might still have resulted in a stale-mate situation by the end of the day.³⁵

This all, of course, is speculation and reasoning from hindsight. Whether the Prussian leadership at some point *during* the battle might have considered to shift towards a pure defensive action is one thing, but to actually do so was another.

Von Clausewitz makes a strong plea for this switch. He reasons that it would have been far better to use the reserves to build up a strong defense, as to use them for an offensive which could not alter the outcome of the battle in favour of the Prussians. On the one hand he also sees the local, premature and therefore unsuccessful attacks of the different Prussian units. And on the other he sees defensive possibilities: by holding Wagnelée, Brye and Ligny, the French would not be able to emerge from Saint Amand and Saint-Amand-la-Haye.³⁶

Yet, physically and from an organisational point of view a switch was virtually impossible. Units were mixed up so much that this was completely impeded and a pure defence would have demanded a far better integration of units and arms as it happened now.

As a matter of fact, the Prussian leadership didn't consider a pure defensive battle at all (let alone its feasibility), but around 6 p.m. it came to the conclusion that it didn't come so much anymore as to gain a victory, but more to hold the battlefield during the remainder of the day. This situation would allow the army to await further reinforcements during the night and during the 17th of June from both Bülow and Wellington.

As a result, this expectation was communicated to Wellington through lieutenant Von Wussow. It was also Blücher who wrote on the 17th of June to the Prussian king: "So war der Zustand in dem Augenblick wo es begann finster zu werden, und ich glaubte die Sache für uns entschieden, da ich mit drei Armeekorps der ganzen Stärke des Feindes widerstanden hatte, und am folgenden Tage die Ankunft des IV.Armeekorps und der Wellingtonschen Armee durchaus zu unserem Vorteil entscheiden musste, als es mit einbrechender Nacht dem Feinde gelang, zwischen Ligny und Sombreffe durchzubrechen und den Ligny verteidigenden Truppen in die linke Flanke zu gehen."³⁷

The situation Blücher refers to here was thus: by 6 p.m Saint-Amand-la-Haye and Wagnelée were in Prussian hands, while the Prussian units held out on the left bank of the Ligne at Ligny.

And though Saint Amand itself was in French hands, the enemy was not able to emerge from it due to the presence of Prussian units on the heights in rear. Thielmann, in his turn, was still in his position between Sombreffe and Tongrinnes, stretching out his flanks towards Ligny and Balâtre. From that moment on, to hold the frontline as it was then seemed to be the maximum attainable. In a way, this was in fact a choice for a defensive situation, but one which was partly based upon pure defence and a defence through local offensive actions.

Ultimately, this change in the idea of the outcome of the battle and the way it should be handled further may very well have come from Gneisenau.

Until then, Blücher fought the battle in the typical aggressive fighting on his right wing and not in one of a more rational approach which would weigh the pro and cons of the situation and from there to take appropriate measures, even in the midst of a battle.

In itself this was a clear choice, but finally it didn't work as the repartition of the forces along the front wasn't suited for such an approach: the battle was lost in the centre, as here the line was too much weakened in favour of the right wing and this wasn't corrected in time.

Napoleon corrected his situation by attacking the Prussian centre. In reading the reports of the 17th of June of Gneisenau and Blücher about the battle, it becomes clear that this French operation came as a surprise and which caused a sudden change for the Prussians: the moment the Prussian command more or less expected to hold its ground till the next day, Napoleon

struck.³⁸ There are no indications whatsoever that they saw the French Imperial Guard and the other units were approaching Ligny, which is strange, in view of the distance to be covered towards this village, coming from near Fleurus, in full sight of the enemy.

Taking it all together it all comes down to one basic and main question: the apparent lack of clarity in the Prussian plan for the battle, either pure defensively or offensively, and - from this - the total mystery of why they didn't properly occupy at least the villages of Ligny, Saint-Amand and Saint-Amand-la-Haye, so to have these at least either as a strong line of defence, or as a strong base for offensive operations.³⁹ This lack of a real choice is the main cause of the fact that the Prussians gave most of their chances for success out of hand even before the battle had started. Now, in a way, they locked themselves in their own position, and this would not have been a real problem if it was a pure defensive one, but it wasn't. This problem was only enhanced by the other complicating factors which came up as the battle evolved, and which have been mentioned before in this chapter.

The French push against Ligny caused the 1st and 2nd corps to take a direction north-north-west in their retreat. In combination with the fact that this French action wasn't that strong as it perhaps could have been (see above), this part of the army could get away without any serious losses. Obviously, units were in confusion and sometimes mixed, none were actually cut off or completely destroyed by the French.

Though the action of the French reserves may have surprised the Prussians, it slowed down immediately in rear of Ligny. It was such that it even gave the Prussian units which were in and in front of Saint Amand (even the artillery between Ligny and Saint Amand) enough time to pull back to the north and north-west. Further to their right, all other units did the same, by passing Brye to its left. Those units on the extreme Prussian right flank streamed back along the Roman road and from there further north.

On the heights between Ligny, Brye and Sombreffe the French advance was directed towards Brye and to the area north-east of it. However, for the Prussians it was possible to establish rear-guards at and around Brye and Sombreffe. They protected the two diverging lines of retreat, towards Tilly and Gembloux. The fact was that Von Thielmann, operating in a separate sector during the battle and having seen the attack of the French piercing through the centre, pulled his forces together in and around Point du Jour. By this manoeuvre, Napoleon had cut off his corps from the rest of the army and as a result Von Thielmann was forced to take another direction. Thielmann did so towards Gembloux, while having a rear-guard in and around Sombreffe.

However, it didn't prevent about 8000 men from fleeing east towards Liège and Aachen; most of these men were young recruits from the Rhine and Westphalian provinces as well as from the duchy of Berg.⁴⁰ Because of the absence of a French pursuit, the Prussian army was able to continue its retreat towards Tilly and Gembloux unmolested.

Even though the battle of Ligny was a French victory, its historiography is dominated by Prussian accounts. While individual actions of certain Prussian units are sometimes known down to the company-level, problems of what took place on the French side already sometimes arise on divisional level.

The foundations for this approach were laid by Wagner (1825) and Von Damitz (1837) in their very extensive accounts of the battle. Both based their accounts upon papers available in the Kriegsarchiv (Berlin). In the same period of the 19th century the only French accounts of the battle were the one of Gourgaud (1818) and the memoirs of Napoleon (1820), but these were put in such general terms that they didn't contribute a lot to the history of the actual actions in the battle.⁴¹ Not long after, Siborne (1844) published his account of the battle, but he basically copied Von Damitz and therefore did not contribute to its historiography. Charras, in 1857, did in some respects but most of his contributions cannot be checked against any sources.

In 1854, De Mauduit wrote quite extensively on the battle but at the same time he based himself strongly upon Wagner.⁴² Though De Mauduit had access to French sources, it becomes clear that he apparently limited himself to those of his own (for the role of the Imperial Guard) and those of members of the divisions of Girard and Lefol in particular. For some reason, De Mauduit doesn't seem to have done a more thorough research amongst participants of other units then still alive. In 1876, Von Ollech published his study on the Waterloo-campaign. He used contemporary documents, as well as the memoirs of colonel Von Reiche which had been published in the meantime (1857).⁴³ Yet, Von Ollech doesn't give any references to his sources when it comes down to the general structure of his account but this one, in its turn, has strong similarities to those of Wagner and Von Damitz.

The first historian who actually tried to integrate more French eye-witness accounts was Henry Houssaye (1895). Though he obviously used the publications of Wagner and Von Damitz, he also used accounts of other (French) participants like general Lefol, colonel Gourgaud, Napoleon himself, captain Francois (30th regiment of the line), general Hulot (4th corps), colonel Fantin des Odoards (22nd regiment of the line) and colonel Petit (1st regiment of grenadiers). In this sense, his book can be regarded as a major step forward in the historiography of the battle.⁴⁴

In the beginning of the 20th century, even while Von Lettow Vorbeck had access to the documents in the former Kriegsarchiv in Berlin, his technical account of the battle itself remains rather traditional and concise.⁴⁵

It was only by 1998 that the description of the battle would be enriched considerably. By integrally using different eye-witness accounts from Prussian participants which were until then only published in German regimental histories, Peter Hofschröder gave the historiography of the battle an extra dimension. Yet, his sources for the connecting account remain unknown.⁴⁶

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¹ Von Pflugk Harttug In: GSA, VPH-HA, VI nr.III, nr.3 p.43-45

² Von Pflugk Harttug In: GSA, VPH-HA, VI nr.III, nr.3 p.49-52

³ Von Pflugk Harttug In: GSA, VPH-HA, VI nr.III, nr.3 p.35-37, 87

⁴ In: CvW. - Geschichte etc. Annex: Betrachtungen etc. p.72-73
Esquisse etc. p.89,92

⁵ Von Pflugk Harttug In: GSA.VPH-HA,VI nr.III.nr.3 p.65, 96
Pollio also wonders about the lack of entrenchment of the villages. In: Waterloo p.229

⁶ It may have been for this reason that the bridges over the Ligne were not destroyed.

⁷ Cf. Hofschröder. From the way he sees the cooperation with Wellington, he assigns the position of Sombreffe a strong defensive character as if the Prussians were aiming for a defence only and to fight a decisive battle with Wellington later. In: 1815.The Waterloo campaign. Wellington etc. p.249

Wagner, on the other hand, sees the total order of battle as one to await Bülow and then to advance with the right wing. But, again, this is projecting later expectations into a plan which didn't exist before the battle. In: Plane etc. p.24

Charras sees the open right wing of the Prussian position in the Prussian expectation of Wellington. In: Histoire de la campagne etc. Vol.I p.156

Von Damitz makes the Prussian measures fully dependent on Wellington's participation in the battle (the choice of the field, the disposition of the forces, the Prussian plan and the probable outcome of the battle). At the same time he claims that the order of battle of Blücher's forces was dependent on the direction of the French attack. In this way, he tries to explain the (late) changes in the Prussian positions.

Yet, in both these elements he makes Blücher dependent on external factors, of which the first one played no part in the initial Prussian decision to have a battle near Sombreffe. The second one would be a very unwise thing to do, particularly with a pre-chosen position.

In this context, Von Damitz sees the Prussian position as one for holding out through actions in the villages, as long as new forces would arrive. In: Geschichte etc. p.113-116, 187, 192

Canon makes the mistake of interpreting the positions of the 1st and 2nd corps as a protection for Wellington's forces and the position of the 3rd corps for the 4th corps (coming from Gembloux), for both to join in later. In: La guerre Napoléonienne. Précis des campagnes Vol.II p.176-177

He may have taken this last element from Von Clausewitz, who also claims the Prussians expected Wellington from the right, with 40-50.000 men. In: La campagne de 1815 p.66

Von Ollech superficially enters into the basic idea of Von der Gröben's plan in relation to the battle, but doesn't mention it as such and he links it to the required assistance of Wellington. In: Geschichte etc. p.123, 141

Von Lettow Vorbeck mentions the plan of Von der Gröben, but nothing more; he also doesn't link it in anyway to the Prussian plan at Ligny. In: Napoleon's Untergang Vol.III p.273-274

⁸ Wagner - Plane etc. p.25

⁹ Von Pflugk Harttung In: GSA.VPH-HA, VI, nr.III nr.3 p.47

¹⁰ Von Pflugk Harttung, J.von In: GSA.VPH-HA, VI, nr.III nr.3 p.70

Cf. Riese, A. - Der Kampf in und um Dörfer und Wälder. Mainz, Verlag von Victor v.Zabern, 1858

¹¹ Cf. Uffindell, A. - The eagle's last triumph p.191-192, 212

Pollio, A. – Waterloo p.224

Stawitzky puts all weight upon the full defence of the position and therefore blames the Prussian command for not limiting itself to the full defence of Brye and Wagnelée only, as this would be enough to impede the French from emerging from Saint-Amand-la-Haye and Saint-Amand. In this reasoning, however, Stawitzky neglects the deeper purpose of the Prussians: to come out offensively of these villages eventually in order to push Napoleon back towards the Sambre. In: Geschichte des Königlich Preussischen 25ten Infanterie-Regiments p.70-72

¹² The first attack of Tippelskirch which emerged from Wagnelée was vulnerable as it lacked sufficient screening in front, a proper position to fall back upon in case of misfortune, a clear target and was carried out in close vicinity of the enemy.

The second attack, additionally, was initiated too swiftly after the first, which caused units to have no time to collect properly. In: Stawitzky, L. – Geschichte des Königlich Preussischen 25ten Infanterie-Regiments p.54, 73

¹³ It is incomprehensible how Gneisenau can claim both Saint-Amand-le-Hameau and Saint-Amand-la-Haye were never lost. Cf. his report to Von Knesebeck, dated 17th of June 1815 (see below).

Blücher, in his turn, claims in his report to the Prussian king that his troops were in the possession of Saint Amand itself during the evening (see below).

¹⁴ By these movements, Ollech states that Gneisenau regarded Thielmann in fact as the reserve for the army. Strange place to have it as a reserve, so far out of range from the area where the heaviest fighting took place. At the same time, he sees that the corps was needed to protect the exits towards Gembloux and Namur and that it was not ordered to relieve the 1st and 2nd corps because of the expected support of Wellington – which is an erroneous presumption (see below). In: Geschichte etc. p.145

¹⁵ According to Von Pflugk Harttung it was on Blücher's order, but he gives no proof for that claim (as I haven't either). In: GSA.VPH-HA, VI nr.III nr.3 p.81

In the context of communication on the battlefield, it is lieutenant Von Gerlach, attached to Prussian general headquarters, who states this headquarters should have sent out more officers in all directions to have more information about what was happening. His impression was that Gneisenau was fixed upon Ligny. In: Aus den Jahren preussischer Not etc. p.148

¹⁶ Von Thielmann, in his report about the battle, uses this argument, as well as the fact that he had to defend such a large front, for his lack of offensive operations. In: Former KA, VI.E.22.I In: GSA. VPH-HA, VI nr.VII p.41

Cf. Unger, Von - Gneisenau p.338

¹⁷ According to Von Lettow Vorbeck Von Thielmann couldn't see the situation at Ligny from a position near Point du Jour, but he could from Potriaux. In: Napoleon's Untergang Vol.III p.339

¹⁸ According to Von Pflugk Harttung, Blücher wanted to have his left wing occupied with two brigades only and then on a relative tight front-line, so that the other brigades could be available for the right wing.

As a result, he blames Thielmann for scattering his troops over such a wide front, as far as Balâtre, and not having taken up a concentrated defensive position in and around Tongrines, against the Ligne.

At the same time, however, Von Pflugk Harttung sees that Thielmann's task was not fully clear as his position pointed half to the right and half to the front.

Other than that, he also criticizes Thielmann for reinforcing the companies he had in front with other units, as this would have been contrary to Blücher's orders.

However, as long as these specific orders are not to be found, these comments lack any solid ground. In: GSA.VPH-HA, VI, nr.III nr.3. p.61-63

¹⁹ C.v.W. - Betrachtungen etc. In: Geschichte etc. p.72

²⁰ Delbrück, H. - Das Leben etc. Vol.IV p.381-383

Von Pflugk Harttung In: GSA.VPH-HA, VI nr.III nr.3.p.54

Clausewitz, Von – Hinterlassene Werke etc. p.66

²¹ These were:

Von Brause's brigade: the 22nd regiment (2100 men), 2nd and fusilier battalion of the 2nd regiment of Elbe Landwehr infantry (1600 men)

Von Langen's brigade: the fusilier battalion of the 21st regiment (800 men) and the 2nd battalion of the 23rd regiment of infantry (600 men)

Of Von Röder's cavalry there were still the 6th regiment of uhlans (500 men), the 2nd regiment of dragoons (West-Prussian nr.1) (480 men), the 2nd regiment of Kurmark Landwehr cavalry (300 men) and the 5th regiment of Brandenburg dragoons (600 men).

Of the 3rd corps, the majority of the 9th and 12th brigades of infantry wasn't used either.

²² Reiche, Von - Memoiren etc. p.183

Delbrück, H. - Das Leben etc. Vol.IV p.381

Ollech, Von - Geschichte etc. p.141

Uffindell, A. - The eagle's last triumph p.212

Pollio, A. – Waterloo p.224

²³ Von Pflugk Harttung In: GSA.VPH-HA.VI nr.III nr.3.p.95-96

²⁴ Reiche, Von - Memoiren etc. p.183

Von Pflugk Harttung In: GSA.VPH-HA, VI nr.III, nr.3 p.64

²⁵ Cf. in the account of the battle mentioning several examples of regiments of cavalry suffering from French fire in static positions.

Freiherr Von Wechmar also confirms for the 1st regiment of Silesian hussars (on the extreme right flank) that it had nothing to do until in the evening some French cavalry appeared. In: Braune Husaren etc. p.62

The men of the 1st regiment of Westphalian Landwehr would have stood in reserve the whole day, sabres drawn. Cf. Wickede, J.von – Ein Deutsches Reiterleben p.296

On the 17th of June, baron Van Panhuys wrote: “Je suis fâché de dire que la cavalerie n’a pas fait ce que’elle aurait pu faire et que les Landwehr sont peu agueries.” In his report to baron Tindal. In: NA, nr.2.02.01 nr.6585

Zieten sees that the cavalry was of very little use, but also recognizes the fact that it was steady under the heavy gunfire. In: Tagebuch des Königlich Preussischen I.Armeekorps etc. (Kriegsarchiv VI.E.13) In: Pflugk Harttung, J.von - Die Schlacht bei Ligny In: Die Armee 1.Jg.1902 nr.2 p.24

Sohr’s brigade, due to its vicinity to Saint Amand and the features of the ground wasn’t able to act offensively. This way, the brigade stood motionless, exposed to enemy gunfire until 8 pm. The only role it had was to form a screen for the infantry to fall back upon. Cf. Beitzke, H. – Aus dem Leben etc. p.135

It is even in the use of this weapon that Von Damitz makes it dependent on the arrival of Wellington in the battle: it would have been held in a supportive situation as long as the crisis for the enemy had not been reached, i.e. by the arrival of Wellington. In: Geschichte etc. p.192

²⁶ Prince von Thurn und Taxis. In: Aus drei Feldzügen etc. p.324-325

²⁷ Gneisenau in his report to Von Knesebeck, 17th June 1815 (see below). He mentions cavalry of the 1st corps, plus two regiments of the 2nd corps, all in rear of Ligny. It is not clear which two regiment he means all the regiments of this corps were on the right wing. Blücher, from his side, complained about the role of cavalry in the battle in his proclamation to the army, dated 17th of June (see below).

²⁸ Gneisenau to Hardenberg, 22nd June 1815 and to Boyen, no date. In: Delbrück, H. - Das Leben etc. Vol.IV p.530, 540

The fact that the cavalry in the centre was in confusion is confirmed by the prince Thurn und Taxis in his memoirs. In: Aus drei Feldzügen etc. p.326-327

²⁹ In: KA. Nr. VI.E.7.II.1 In: Pflugk Harttung, J.von - Die Schlacht bei Ligny p.24

In another chapter, Von Pflugk Harttung refers to the lack of self-confidence within the cavalry which was due to a lack of money, proper horses, equipment, training and experienced cavalry officers. In: GSA, VPH- HA VI nr.V.4C p.34

³⁰ See below.

³¹ Report of lieutenant colonel Lehmann, commander of this artillery. In: KA, VI.E.7.II.199 In: GSA. VPH-HA, VI, nr.VII, nr.5 p.2

³² Cf. Tagebuch des Königlich Preussischen I.Armeekorps etc. (Kriegsarchiv VI.E.13) In: Pflugk Harttung, J.von - Die Schlacht bei Ligny In: Die Armee 1.Jg.1902 nr.2 p.22

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- ³³ Von Pflugk Harttung. In: GSA. VPH-HA, VI nr.III nr.3.p.105
Count Von Wedel, member of the 5th regiment of hussars (Pommeranian nr.1) (brigade Von Sohr) writes about the commotion in the evening and night due to the rumour that Blücher would have been taken prisoner. In: Geschichte eines Offiziers etc. p.250
- ³⁴ Colonel Von Reiche seriously blames Von Thielmann for not having carried out sich an offensive on the French flank. In: Memoiren etc. p.195
- ³⁵ Cf. Clausewitz, Von – Hinterlassene Werke etc. p.64
- ³⁶ In: Hinterlassene Werke etc. p.64-65
- ³⁷ In: Lettow Vorbeck, O.von - Napoleons Untergang Vol.III p.524-525
Cf. Gneisenau to Boyen, no date. In: Delbrück, H. - Das Leben etc. Vol.IV p.540
Nostitz, colonel - Das Tagebuch etc. p.27
- ³⁸ Cf. these reports in the chapter on the Prussian headquarters on the 17th of June. Also: Gneisenau to Boyen, no date. In: Delbrück, H. - Das Leben etc. Vol.IV p.540
- ³⁹ Von Clausewitz writes: “Der Hauptfehler Blüchers scheint eine gewisse Unklarheit des Plans zu sein, woraus die Besetzung der doppelten Fronte und die Neutralisierung von 20,000 Mann entstand.”
So, Von Clausewitz sees this lack of a clear plan as well, but links this to the position / neutralisation of Von Thielmann. In this, he criticizes Blücher for not making a clear choice in his line of retreat, in which he sees some kind of contradiction.
Yet, it is here that Von Clausewitz completely neglects the basic idea behind the plan as it was developed by Von der Gröben (and of which the general concept was used in the positions for the battle), which had the absence of Wellington’s army as a premise. This premise, in its turn, is contradictory to the one of Von Clausewitz, as he believes the Prussians did expect Wellington. In: Hinterlassene Werke etc. p.64
- ⁴⁰ Damitz, Von - Geschichte des Feldzugs etc. p.220
Berthézène, general - Souvenirs etc. p.367
Captain Von Röder, chief of staff of the 11th brigade Von Luck, adds that a battalion was placed over the road to Namur to prevent units from turning east. In: Erinnerungen etc. p.323
- ⁴¹ Gourgaud dedicates four pages to the battle in his 129-pages long publication, while the memoirs of Napoleon do so in seven pages in a publication of 201 pages.
In: Gourgaud. La campagne de 1815 etc. p.48-51
Mémoires pour servir etc. p.93-99
- ⁴² Cf. H.de Mauduit where he explicitly states he does so. In: Les derniers jours etc. Vol.II p.42
- ⁴³ Colonel van Reiche was the chief of staff of Von Zieten in 1815.
- ⁴⁴ Houssaye gives a time-table of the battle which is rather tight as it sets certain actions at certain whole hours (apart from the fact that these are sometimes simply incorrect). In: 1815.Waterloo p.188

⁴⁵ Lettow Vorbeck, O. von – Napoleons Untergang Vol.III p.324-341

⁴⁶ Hofschröder, P. – 1815.The Waterloo campaign p.264-287