

## **Projection: a theory on the French activities on the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> of June.**

Historiography of the campaign regarding the 16<sup>th</sup> of June, particularly from the French side, is often dominated by the projection of ideas and events which were to take place into those which actually preceded them.

The trend for this theory is set right away by Gourgaud in 1818. He not only projects all the ideas and events which were yet to come in the course of the afternoon of the 16<sup>th</sup> of June into those of the morning of that day, he also pushes the orders for Ney which were given then that day into the 15<sup>th</sup> of June. At the same time, while the situation on the right wing remains underexposed, he accentuates the orders for Ney to take Quatre Bras, thereby clearly marking Ney as a scapegoat for the lack of success on the 16<sup>th</sup> by making the right wing dependent on the success on the left wing.<sup>1</sup>

Two years later, in 1820, the same line of ideas is given by Napoleon himself in his version of the events. In this version however, Napoleon even takes it further, not only by making his plans much larger as they really were, but also by basing his so-called ideas during the campaign upon things he then could have no knowledge of at all. He claims for instance that he intended to attack Blücher before Bülow and Wellington could have joined in as to fight a common battle on the 17<sup>th</sup> of June. This is all based upon the later events, as also his theory as if Blücher would have done better to concentrate his whole army at Wavre and Wellington at Waterloo.<sup>2</sup> This general version claims as if Napoleon would have recognized the danger from both sides all day, and that is just in reality what he didn't.

Yet, it seems as if Napoleon saw later the crucial point when he would have said on the 8<sup>th</sup> of May 1816: "J'aurais dû coucher le 16 [sic =15] à Fleurus, battre les Prussiens ce jour-là, 16, et les Anglais le 17."<sup>3</sup>

One week after the campaign, Ney saw it just the other way around, which is another signal that he had fully disregarded the real strategical situation, while putting his own sector in the very centre of the events. On the other hand, he didn't seem to understand that Napoleon did not plan two actions, but that they arose because of wrong presumptions about the enemy. Ney writes: "Par quelle fatalité, par exemple, l'empereur, au lieu de porter toutes ses forces contre lord Wellington qui aurait été attaqué à l'improviste, et ne se trouvait point en mesure, a-t-il regardé cette attaque comme secondaire ? Comment l'empereur après le passage de la Sambre, a-t-il pu concevoir la possibilité de donner deux batailles le même jour ? C'est cependant ce qui vient de se passer, et c'est ce que les militaires qui l'ont vu, ont encore peine à comprendre."<sup>4</sup>

Of two important historians who adhere to this theory, Jomini and Charras, it is Charras (1857) whose basic reasoning in this simply doesn't fit. On the one hand he states that it was Napoleon's intention to reach Quatre Bras and Sombreffe at the same time, but on the other in seeing that Napoleon didn't reach as far as Sombreffe on the 15<sup>th</sup> of June, he uses this as a reason that Ney wasn't ordered on the 15<sup>th</sup> of June to occupy Quatre Bras.

But how is this possible as this occurred after Napoleon had met Ney near Charleroi ? Charras criticizes Napoleon for not reaching Sombreffe, but doesn't do so for Ney. He also gives the impression as if each wing exactly knew where the other was, thereby influencing their activities; an absurd statement. Even though he methodically disputes a huge number of issues of Thiers, Charras also takes the later events too much as a basis for his theory and insufficiently sees the strong priority of the need of a maximal concentration of Napoleon against the Prussians.<sup>5</sup>

Jomini's account (1841) is mere theory within a theory: he doesn't give any real proof whatsoever for his assertions. Having read the "Documents inédits", in which Soult states that the actual order to occupy Quatre Bras was given on the morning of the 16<sup>th</sup>, Jomini recognizes his trouble reconciling these versions, but explains it by making the outright

absurd statement that Soult didn't know about the order actually having been given on the 15<sup>th</sup> of June.<sup>6</sup>

Grouard (1907) also has the simultaneous occupation of Quatre Bras and Sombreffe as a starting point, but at the same time gives this theory a strange twist by stating that by doing so, Napoleon would give away his best chances of success. By doing so he could trigger them to concentrate further to their rear and eventually to unite in front of Brussels. It is for this reason that Grouard claims that Napoleon intentionally didn't occupy these points so as not to lose his best chances and therefore didn't order Ney and Grouchy to take them. He claims as if Napoleon knew about the enemies situation and that he used their fault to concentrate in his front for his own advantage, specially to provoke a battle with Blücher and to defeat him.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, Ney is slaughtered as being too slow on the 15<sup>th</sup> and early morning of the 16<sup>th</sup> of June.<sup>8</sup> It is assigning Napoleon intentions and divine knowledge he never had and never could have had.

Camon (1907) is another, yet far more extreme historian in this theory, thereby blaming all lack of success to Ney and Grouchy as if they would not have been able to seize the Namur-road as Napoleon would have wanted it.<sup>9</sup>

It is Ropes (1916) who follows Grouard in this idea of Napoleon. In this, he uses Napoleon as a main source not realizing that this source, in its turn, is not a solid one at all. Further, in not having properly read and thereby disregarding the content of the official documents of the 16<sup>th</sup> of June in particular, Ropes runs into serious trouble explaining their content, as they do not fit into his idea and situation he believes Napoleon was in.

And this was, according to Ropes, the fact that Napoleon didn't want to seize Brussels but that he wanted and expected to start the campaign from the very first moment with a decisive battle with Blücher's army, thereby suggesting as if Napoleon had planned the battle of Ligny right from the start.<sup>10</sup>

About the important letters of Napoleon to Grouchy and Ney of the morning of the 16<sup>th</sup> of June in which he explains his ideas and expectations for that day, Ropes writes: "It is quite true [...] as several writers have pointed out, that the emperor was to a considerable extent mistaken on this morning of the 16<sup>th</sup> in his apprehension of the situation. But it is an error to take these letters as if they were written for the purpose of giving Napoleon's estimates of the probabilities; they are rather instructions in the event of the occurrence of not possible contingencies."<sup>11</sup> A most strange way of writing letters: taking "not possible contingencies" as a starting point for what to do and thereby making things even more complicated as they already were.

Ropes belongs to a group of historians who claim that Napoleon was arranging his affairs in such a way, that the Prussians were allowed to concentrate their army in the position of Ligny giving him the opportunity to destroy it.<sup>12</sup> This, however, is turning things completely upside down, as if Napoleon was deliberately aiming for a major battle with the Prussians on the 16<sup>th</sup> of June: all official documents, however, clearly show that he didn't, but that he developed his plans for such a battle as the Prussians concentrated in front of him.

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<sup>1</sup> Gourgaud. Campagne de 1815 p.39-40, 41, 45, 52, 55

A typical false example in this model is that Napoleon would only have advanced towards Gilly when he had learned that Ney was beyond Gosselies and that he advanced towards Quatre Bras. Cf. Gourgaud, Campagne de 1815 p.41 and 58

F.de Bas does the same; he hangs his full picture of the events upon the capital importance of Quatre Bras, thereby completely disregarding the importance of the situation on the French right wing and the French strategical situation in general. The reason for doing so is probably to figuratively enlarge the Netherlands initiative to occupy the crossroads of Quatre Bras. In: La campagne de 1815 Vol.I p.378, 381, 484-485

It is in this context that count Flahaut, who carried Napoleon's letter dated between 8 and 9 a.m. claims that he also carried at the same time the (oral) marching orders for Ney in which would have been said "de se porter sur les Quatre Bras, d'occuper fortement ce point important, et (si les forces qu'il rencontrerait le lui permettaient) d'appuyer le mouvement de l'empereur sur l'armée Prussienne avec toutes les troupes dont il pourrait disposer." Cf. his letter to A.H.Brialmont, dated 1857 In: Kerry (ed.) The first Napoleon p.314

<sup>2</sup> Mémoires pour servir etc. p.81, 89-94, 100-101, 190-193

It is Clausewitz in 1835 who clearly sees this projection of ideas by Napoleon and his followers, especially onto Ney and the impossibility of the existence of those ideas *during* the campaign. In: Hinterlassene Werke etc. p.72-74

It is Camon who follows the myth and takes over the scape-goat theory, in which Napoleon is spared in everything. The strategical fault Camon makes is that while he stresses the separation of Wellington and Blücher, he thereby disregards the capital importance of destroying the Prussian army. In: La guerre Napoléonienne. Précis des campagnes Vol.II p.174, 183

Rogniat (1820) does the same: he believes Napoleon fought two actions with the one at Quatre Bras to hold Wellington back from assisting Blücher, but that was just not his presumption. In: Considérations etc. p.343

At the same time, however, he sees the absurdity in the claim as done by Montholon in the sense that Napoleon did not push through to Sombreffe on the 15th of June to make sure Blücher could not avoid a battle by pulling back to Wavre. Cf. Rogniat in his reaction to the Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de France sous Napoleon [p.135-136]. In: Réponse aux notes critiques de Napoleon p.262-264

<sup>3</sup> In: Gourgaud - Journal de Saint Hélène Vol.I.p.133

<sup>4</sup> In his letter to Fouché, dated 26<sup>th</sup> June 1815. In: LMB, nr.AS1301

<sup>5</sup> Charras - Histoire de la campagne de 1815 Vol.I p.97, 115, 118, 124

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Jomini to the duke of Elchingen, 1<sup>st</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> of October 1841. In: Souvenirs et correspondance etc. 107-109,119

For the original of the letter dated 15<sup>th</sup> of October. In: AN, Fonds Ney 137 AP18  
Jomini, A.H.de - Précis politique et militaire de la campagne de 1815 p.129-130

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Jomini also believes in the myth of the nocturnal conversation between Ney and Napoleon.

<sup>7</sup> Grouard, A. - La critique de la campagne de 1815 p.32-42

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Grouard, A. - La critique de la campagne de 1815 p.38, 70

For those who do link these events with this criticism to Ney, see:

Jomini. In his correspondence with the duke of Elchingen. In: Souvenirs et correspondance etc.p.117

Ropes goes so far as to claim that if there would not have been a gap between the advance guard of the 1st corps and the rearguard of the 2nd corps, the march of this 1st corps would never have taken place, as then the 1st corps would already have reached Frasnes, the moment the imperial messenger reached the Brussels road. This is, however, taking facts further as they can, as at the time this was not an issue. In: The Waterloo campaign p.181

Berthézène also blames Ney for having his reserves too far away, while at the same time he blames him that the 1st didn't show up at Ligny. In: Souvenirs militaires p.373-374

<sup>9</sup> Camon - La guerre Napoleonienne. Les systèmes d'opérations p.188-190

Camon. La guerre Napoleonienne, p.172-173

<sup>10</sup> Ropes, J.C. - The campaign of Waterloo p.7, 12-14, 45, 51-59

<sup>11</sup> Ropes, J.C. - The campaign of Waterloo p.136

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Navez, L. - La campagne de 1815 Vol.I p.104

Thiers, A. - Histoire du consulat et de l'empire. Vol. VI p.432-433

Delbrück, H. - General Wolseley über Napoleon, Wellington und Gneisenau p.4-5