

Grouchy's defence.

Introduction.

As Grouchy has been accused throughout his life of being one of the determining causes, if not *the* cause, of the French defeat at Waterloo, this doom haunted him for the rest of his life. A life, which was dominated by his public defence against all sorts of allegations made against him and of which the general character will be outlined below. The period involved can roughly be divided into three parts: 1815-1820, 1820-1847 and the one beyond Grouchy's death, from 1847 until 1874.

1815-1820: exile in the United States.

In the years he was in exile in the United States, Grouchy wrote four accounts about the campaign of 1815. The first one was a brief one and which Grouchy wrote before the 20th of August 1818. Why he wrote it remains unknown, but the manuscript eventually came in the hands of W.K.Bixby, who decided to publish it in 1915, under the title "Marshal Grouchy's own account of the battle of Waterloo." ¹

The second one was a reaction upon an article published on the 21st of September 1818 in an American magazine called Aurora. ² It was published under the title "*Bataille de Waterloo, par un veteran de l'armée francaise.*" ³

In the same year, Gourgaud published his "*La campagne de 1815, ou relation des opérations militaires qui ont eu lieu en France et en Belgique pendant les Cent Jours*". Though he had no access to useful papers and persons, it prompted Grouchy to write a refutation against the allegations made in this book. Because of this, Grouchy asked general Bernard, former aide de camp of Napoleon, to edit the manuscript. He did so and this resulted in 1819 in the publication entitled "*Observations sur la relation de la campagne de 1815, publiée par le général Gourgaud, et refutation de quelques unes de assertions, d'autres écrits relatifs à la bataille de Waterloo.*" ⁴

It was one year later that Napoleon published his "*Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de France en 1815.*" As if this was not enough, this book contained numerous severe allegations against Grouchy, to which he saw the need to react again. He did so in April of the same year through his publication entitled "*Doutes sur l'authenticité des Mémoires historiques attribués à Napoleon et première refutation de quelques-unes des assertions qu'ils renferment.*"

Meanwhile, as a side-line, general Berton had informed marshal Gérard (1773-1852) in August 1819 about errors in Grouchy's observations he had written after the publication of Gourgaud's book. They related in particular to the meeting of Gérard and Grouchy at Walhain and about the delay's in the movements of Gérard's corps on the 17th and 18th of June. Despite the pressure of his former aide de camp, colonel Simon-Lorière, Gérard decided to stand aloof. Yet, Gérard did ask one of his former divisional commanders, general Hulot, for his version of the events of June 1815.

An article published in the *Constitutionnel* of 10th of January 1820 by the son of Grouchy, Alphonse, however triggered Gérard to react as it basically ignored the meeting of Grouchy and Gérard at Walhain. A correspondence between Gérard and Alphonse de Grouchy in January 1820 resulted in De Grouchy's revocation of the errors in the article and which was accepted by Gérard. At the same time, he promised to remove the errors in the second, upcoming edition of his fathers "*Observations sur la relation de la campagne de 1815, publiée par le général Gourgaud, et refutation de quelques unes de assertions, d'autres écrits relatifs à la bataille de Waterloo.*" For that reason, he asked Gérard for further information

about the true line of events regarding the 4th corps in the campaign. As a result, Gérard sent him several notes he had written as a reaction upon Grouchy's publication of 1819 (and which he would eventually publish in 1829). Additionally, he sent him the account which he had meanwhile received (in February) from general Hulot.⁵



Alphonse de Grouchy (1789-1864).

1820-1847: return to and life in France.

Alphonse de Grouchy did not keep his promise, so the second edition of his father's second publication did not contain the corrections Gérard had expected. It was therefore that Gérard decided to refute the erroneous statements in his first official publication, dated 1829, entitled "*Quelques documents sur la bataille de Waterloo, propres à éclairer la question portée devant le public par M.le marquis de Grouchy.*" By that time, having been granted amnesty, Grouchy had been back in France for nine years.

Other than the correspondence of January 1820 between himself and Alphonse de Grouchy, Gérard included in this booklet accounts of colonel Simon Lorie, general Hulot, Denniée and the notary Hollertt. A reaction from Grouchy was not long in coming. In fact, one month after Gérard had published, by December 1829, Grouchy published his "*Fragments historiques relatifs à la campagne de 1815, et à la bataille de Waterloo. De l'influence que peuvent avoir sur l'opinion les documents publiés par M.le comte Gérard.*"

The debate between Grouchy and Gérard eventually closed in 1830 with Gérard's "*Dernières observations sur les opérations de l'aile droite de l'armée Française à la bataille de Waterloo, en réponse à M.le marquis de Grouchy.*"

In 1820, colonel Rogniat had published his "*Considérations sur l'art de la guerre.*" As he had dedicated some parts on Grouchy's performance in 1815, Grouchy sent him his comments, upon which Rogniat's reacted on the 25th of January 1825 by recognizing his mistakes in criticizing him for not moving to Mont Saint Jean on the 18th of June and for moving too slow.⁶

In 1829, it was not only the discussion with Gérard which kept Grouchy busy. In the same year, a poem entitled "*Waterloo*" was published by Barthélémy and Méry. In its anti-Grouchy tone, it fuelled the controversy. After first having reacted upon it in a Parisian newspaper on the 4th of November 1829, Grouchy renewed his comments sixteen days later in a brochure

entitled “*Fragments historiques relatifs à la campagne de 1815 et à la bataille de Waterloo – lettre à mm. Méry et Barthélémy.*”

After a lapse of about 10 years of relative rest, Grouchy was incited to get into the controversies about his role in the campaign of 1815 again. It was 1840, and by then he was already 73 years old.

During the campaign in 1815, as the allied marched to Paris, Grouchy had got in touch with Wellington in writing. The aim of this letter was to gain time in order to settle an armistice. Anticipating trouble, it was in February and April 1840 that Grouchy successfully sought support from general Drouot, as he had been the one who had actually sent the letter involved, in the sense that the letter had been used for the purpose as described, and no other.⁷

On the 27th of May 1840, general Berthézène (1775-1849) – as a reaction on an article published by Sarrut and St. Edme – published a brochure which seriously harmed Grouchy’s reputation. Berthézène’s claim was that Grouchy had betrayed the imperial cause by communicating with the enemy, by attempting to harm the fidelity of the troops and by compromising the reputation of the *Armée du Nord*. Grouchy replied by sending a note to Mr. Sarrut.

Berthézène immediately replied in a letter which he sent to four Parisian newspapers that he had never intended to harm Grouchy’s fidelity to the emperor. This was for Grouchy not satisfactory though. He therefore published on the 7th of July 1840 a complaint about slander called “*Plainte contre le lieutenant général baron Bethézène*”, and which he repeated on the 12th of September 1840 in his “*Campagne de 1815. Fragments historiques réunis pour établir le fait de calomnie répandue dans un libelle du général Berthézène, publiée en date du 27 Mai 1840.*” The booklet essentially was a compilation of all sorts of documents dating from shortly after the campaign, witnessing Grouchy’s full support of the imperial cause. Eventually, this all resulted in a letter dated 19th November 1840 in which Berthézène withdrew his complaint and admitted having been wrong.⁸

Between April 1840 and April 1841, Grouchy also got in touch with Jomini (1779-1869), who intended to publish a supplement to his book “*Vie politique de Napoleon raconté par lui-même.*” For that reason, Jomini paid Grouchy a visit and they extensively corresponded about several matters of the Waterloo-campaign for one year.⁹

In 1843, Grouchy’s last publication was the “*Relation succincte de la campagne de 1815 en Belgique, et notamment des mouvements, combats et opérations des troupes sous les ordres du maréchal Grouchy, suivie de l’exposition de quelques-une des causes de la perte de la bataille de Waterloo. Pièces et documents officiels inédits jusqu’à ce jour, et qui légitiment les dispositions qu’a dû prendre le maréchal Grouchy par suite des ordres de l’empereur.*”

Though the full publication counts several hundred pages, the text of the “*Relation succincte*” from Grouchy himself is only 64 pages long. The reason for this difference is that his account is supported by the presence of numerous authentic documents from the campaign. About these, Grouchy wrote to baron Baudrand in November 1841 that “une circonstance inespérée venait de me faire retrouver tous les documents officiels qui avaient été égarés depuis vingt-cinq ans” and which in his mind unambiguously showed that he was not to blame the way people had done all those years.¹⁰

Post 1847

For Alphonse de Grouchy, the controversy around his father relating to the events of June 1815 probably lay dormant until Adolphe Thiers published his “*Histoire du consulat et de l’empire*” in 1862. It contained such numerous erroneous statements about the activities of his father in the campaign of 1815, that he decided to refute them in a publication which he was able to finish just before his death, in 1864. It was entitled “*Le maréchal de Grouchy du 16 au*

19 Juin, avec documents historiques inédits et réfutation de M.Thiers, par le général de division sénateur Marquis de Grouchy.” It basically comprised two parts: his own general account of the events covering the period 16th – 19th June 1815, plus his actual refutations of Thiers’ statements.¹¹

As a grand reprise, it was finally Grouchy’s grandson who published in 1873-1874 the five volumes of the “*Mémoires du maréchal Grouchy, par le marquis de Grouchy, officier d’état-major.*” The title suggests as if these are the memoirs of marshal Grouchy himself, but they are not. They contain numerous documents, orders, letters and most publications from marshal Grouchy, as well as his son and these are linked by texts written by this grand-son. Other than that, the volumes contain numerous accounts of other participants of the campaign of 1815, who in some way or another had to do with Grouchy’s role.

By publishing this way, both Grouchy’s son and grandson strove to defend their father and grand-father against the allegations made against him for his role in the campaign of 1815.

Résumé.

In looking back upon the way Grouchy himself handled his defence over a period of 25 years, it becomes clear that Grouchy entered upon all sorts of allegations made against him, without actually getting to the core of the grand strategic dimensions and ideas of the situation he and Napoleon were thinking and acting in on the 17th and 18th of June. Moreover, the majority of these allegations stemmed from hindsight, something Grouchy did not refute in that way.¹² What made matters worse, in justifying his behaviour, Grouchy ignored vital and authentic information and events which could basically have helped him in this very defence. By doing so, he lost his credibility even more, after the doom he was already under after the shattering defeat of the *Armée du Nord* back in 1815.

One of the most striking details is that Grouchy never admitted in his defence that he was convinced the majority of the Prussian army was massing at La Chyse. Though erroneous in itself, it could have helped him explaining why he did what he did, especially in connection with Napoleon’s ideas about the situation of his adversaries.

This immediately brings up the significance of the “Bertrand-order”, another backbone for his defence and which Grouchy ignored in his defence for 22 years. It was not until in the spring of 1840 that Grouchy admitted he had received it on the 17th of June. Before, he had either remained silent about it or had bluntly denied he had ever received any other orders on the 17th of June as the oral ones which he mentions in his publications so often.¹³ Yet, even though the order was now public, Grouchy still adhered to the oral orders (as he had always done before) in his *Relation succincte*, which dates from 1843.¹⁴ By that time, he finally had all the authentic documents from the campaign at his disposal. Why they had remained undisclosed even for Grouchy for such a long time remains a mystery.

Grouchy himself fell into the trap of hindsight by criticizing Napoleon of putting him “*hors de cercle de ses opérations*” while he knew that *during the campaign* it was the emperor’s full conviction that Blücher had actually pulled back as far as Namur or Louvain, and Wellington towards Brussels.¹⁵ At the same time, Grouchy believed the majority of the Prussian army was at La Chyse. So, in their idea, both Napoleon and Grouchy believed were functioning *within* their scope of operations.

Another blunder of Grouchy in his own defence was to deny the advice Gérard had given him at Walhain. He did so until 1820, and this, plus Grouchy’s allegations against Gérard about slowness in his movements, were too tempting for Gérard to react upon. And of course, on the first item, eventually there was no other option for Grouchy as to admit he had received it, let alone the value of it.^{16, 17}

Apart from his inconsistencies in the time of arrival of both orders of Napoleon from the 18th of June in several of his publications, Grouchy came up with the most singular argument for not complying with the order of 1 p.m. by stating that he had read the word “*engagée*” as “*gagnée*” due to the bad handwriting. He still did so by 1841.¹⁸ As the text itself is available, anybody can see that this reasoning is just too absurd to accept, not only as the word “*engagée*” is clearly readable, but also from the actual content of the order.¹⁹

In its controversial character, Grouchy’s mission has always been very prone to be dominated by hindsight and all kinds of personal and political interests as a result of which it is very hard to get down to the very bone of the events as they actually took place. This is what has happened, yet the confusing thing is that as a result of this, Grouchy himself - in his very defence - stepped into the same trap of hindsight, thereby obscuring the real backgrounds and – with that – a proper clearing of his name even more.

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¹ On the backside of the manuscript is written the following endorsement: “Battle of Waterloo handed to me by my friend Grouchy (marshal) with a request that I would translate it for the National Intelli [unreadable], Aug.20th 1818.”

It remains unknown who wrote this, and whether it was eventually published in the magazine or newspaper alluded to. The publication also shows a page of the manuscript itself.

In: Marshal’s Grouchy’s own account of the battle of waterloo p.6

² This publication has been unavailable so far.

³ In: Mémoires du maréchal Grouchy Vol.V p.78-101

⁴ As a result of his father’s publication, his son wrote two short and general articles in support of his father’s case in the *Censeur Européen* in August 1819. Cf. in: Mémoires du maréchal Grouchy Vol.V p.215-220

Later, in 1874, Grouchy’s grand-son wrote that Grouchy had done much better to wait for his return to France before emitting his objections against Gourgaud’s work, as now – lacking proper documents – he made serious errors which did him more harm than good. In: Mémoires du maréchal Grouchy Vol.V, p.195, 264

⁵ Hulot, in his turn, had written in August 1819 to colonel Janin after Grouchy had produced his first publication about the delay in the movements on the 17th and 18th of June, the actions at the mill of Bierges and Gérard’s advice. In: Documents inédits etc. p.39-50

⁶ In: Mémoires du maréchal Grouchy Vol.IV p.150

⁷ In: Mémoires du maréchal Grouchy Vol.IV p.151-154
Relation succincte 8me série p.62

⁸ In: Mémoires du maréchal Grouchy Vol.IV p. 151-156, Vol.V p.428-429, 439-453
In: Meulenaere, Ph. de – Bibliographie analytique des témoignages oculaires imprimés de la campagne de Waterloo p.135-136

Berthézène had written his memoirs about the campaign of 1815 in 1816, and wrote an introduction to it in 1823. They were eventually published in 1855, so six years after Berthézène’s death.

⁹ In: Relation succincte etc. 8me série p.3-45
Mémoires du maréchal Grouchy Vol.V p.453-476

¹⁰ In: Relation succincte 8me série p.61

The authentic documents from 1815 involved are divided over the following three series:

1e series: orders of Napoleon to Grouchy issued during the campaign

2nd series: letters, reports and intelligence sent by Grouchy to the emperor

3rd series: Grouchy’s letters to different generals, and their reports to him

The remaining series contained mainly material from a later date:

4th series: accounts sent to Grouchy from Le Sénécal (3.6.1830), major Lafresnaye (17.12.1829), Le Gouest (21.3.1841), Voland (31.12.1840), Bella, Bloqueville and Berthézène

5th series: Grouchy's correspondence with Fouché, Soult and Davout from 1815

8th series [the 6th and 7th have never been published]: Grouchy's correspondence with Jomini, Rogiat (1825), Marbot (1830), Baudrand (16.12.1841) and Drouot (4.2.1840)

¹¹ In: Mémoires du maréchal Grouchy Vol.IV p.1-95, 217-285

The publication contained many eye-witness accounts which had already been published in the Relation succincte back in 1843.

¹² Some of the most important of these allegations against Grouchy are:

-why he did not move from Walhain to Mont Saint Jean on the 18th of June

-why he did not move from Gembloux straight to Mont Saint Jean

-why he had not reached Wavre by the evening of the 17th of June

-why he had reached Gembloux so late on the 17th of June

¹³ In April 1840, Grouchy did not speak about the order yet. In fact, he denied having received no more than three orders on the 16th, 17th and 18th of June. Cf. Relation succincte 8me série p.36-37

After having received a letter from Jomini dated 8th May 1840, in a note to the "Relation succincte" Grouchy however mentions the order, recognizing he had not done so in 1819, so it must have been in April or May 1840 that the order became public. It might have been through the correspondence between Grouchy and Jomini or through its official publication as right in 1840, the order was published by Bauduin, Paris under the title: " Ordre de l'empereur Napoléon au maréchal Grouchy, reçu sur la route de Namur, où Napoléon avait enjoint de se rendre au moment où il quitta le champ de bataille de Ligny pour se porter aux Quatre Bras. D'après la lettre autographe du grand maréchal du palais Bertrand. " Cf. Piérart, Z.J. - Le drame de Waterloo p.238

Jomini referred to the order in a letter dated 12th July 1840 to Grouchy, in the sense that Grouchy had mentioned it before, and as Jomini wanted to have it. In: Relation succincte 8me série p.33

In 1819, Grouchy wrote that Napoleon believed Blücher was pulling back towards Brussels, Louvain or Liège. This belief lay at the basis of the order involved, but that's all Grouchy says about it. Cf. Observations etc. In: Mémoires du maréchal Grouchy Vol.V p.153

A shadow of the order also shone through in the "Biographie des hommes du jour", published by Germain Sarrut en B.Saint Edme already in 1836. Here, they cite Napoleon as having said to Grouchy on the 17th of June: "Dirigez-vous vers la Meuse, c'est du côté de Liège ou de Maestricht que se retire Blücher." Where they go this citation from remains unclear. In: Vol.II, 1st part, p.260

In 1842, M.E.Pascallet published the order in his "Notice biographique sur le maréchal Grouchy, pair de France avec des éclaircissements et des détails historiques sur la campagne de 1815, dans le midi de la France et sur la bataille de Waterloo." (p.79-80)

Grouchy also published a small part of the order in an undated letter in the "Journal des Sciences Militaires". This article was a reaction upon the French translation of the work of Von Damitz (1837-1838) and was most probably post-1840. In: Mémoires du maréchal Grouchy Vol.V p.476-484

¹⁴ In: Relation succincte p.21

¹⁵ Observations sur la relation etc. In: Mémoires du maréchal de Grouchy, Vol.V p.148
Fragments historiques etc. In: Mémoires du maréchal de Grouchy, Vol.V p.293

¹⁶ Though Grouchy opposed to Vandamme as well, Vandamme himself never entered into any public controversy. As they were both still in exile, after the publication of Napoleon's and Gourgaud's books, he had advised Grouchy "de s'abstenir de tout ce verbiage inutile et inexact", but it was of no avail.

Between December 1829 and May 1830, Vandamme had some communication with colonel Simon Lorière who sought support for Gérard's case. Vandamme told Simon Lorière he had read the publications of Grouchy and Gérard, but he did not feel any necessity to enter into public controversy with Grouchy for whom he, as also becomes clear from these letters, had an utter contempt. In: SHD, nr.C15/5

Vandamme died in July 1830.

¹⁷ It was only in his Relation succincte (p.33-34) that Grouchy extensively described the conversation which took place at Walhain.

¹⁸ Cf. Relation succincte p.39

¹⁹ Cf. Grouchy In: Observations sur la relation etc. In: Mémoires du maréchal de Grouchy Vol.V p.123

Bataille de Waterloo, par un combattant de Waterloo. In: Mémoires du maréchal de Grouchy, Vol.V p.96

Doutes etc. In: In: Mémoires du maréchal de Grouchy, Vol.V p.230

Fragments historiques relatifs etc. In: Mémoires du maréchal de Grouchy, Vol.V p.285

Cf. Gérard. In: Dernières observations p.21

Odd enough, Grouchy's son Adolphe still used the term "*gagnée*" in his publication dated 1864.