

Historiography of the meeting at Tirlemont.

One of the very first, if not the first, account of the meeting at Tirlemont is given by Von Clausewitz (1835). After having sketched the different points from which Napoleon could attack (Lille, Maubeuge-Valenciennes, Beaumont, Givet) and Wellington's resulting movements, he writes:

“Les dispositions du duc semblent suffisantes pour ces hypothèses, car un ou deux jours ne pouvaient lui faire défaut.

C'est à ce but qu'ont aussi tendu les conférences que le duc eut à Saint-Trond, au commencement de Mai, avec le prince Blücher, lorsqu'il promettait, en pensant à la position choisie par Blücher près de Sombreffe, de concentrer son armée près de Quatre-Bras et de venir à son secours au cas où la masse principale de l'ennemi se tournerait contre lui; il faut donc comprendre par l'expression “armée” la majeure partie seulement de celle-ci, ce que Wellington pouvait lui-même nommer sa masse principale: la réserve jointe au corps d'aile gauche.”¹

Two years later Von Damitz (1837-1838) wrote: “Es war in den letzten Tagen des Monats Mai, als der Feldmarschall Blücher mit dem Herzoge v. Wellington eine Zusammenkunft hatte, um die gegenseitige Hilfsleistung bei einem Angriffe Napoleons nochmals bestimmt festzusetzen. Man nahm bei diesen Unterredungen an, dass Napoleon bei einem Angriffe der Niederlande den Gewinn von Brüssel als erstes Objekt ansehen würde. Die Richtung, welche er seinen Streitkräften zur Erreichung seines Zwecks geben dürfte, war nicht genau vorher zu bestimmen. Nach der Aufstellung der französischen Corps und nach der Lage der Verhältnisse, musste man darauf gefasst sein, in der Richtung von Valenciennes gegen Ath und Brüssel, oder in der Richtung von Maubeuge über Mons auf Braine le Comte oder Nivelles gegen Brüssel angegriffen zu werden. Auch blieb die Angriffs-Direction von Philippeville über Charleroi gegen Brüssel dem Feinde offen.

In den Richtungen über Ath, Braine le Comte und Nivelles galt der Angriff der englischen Armee. Wählte Napoleon dagegen die Direction auf Charleroi, so traf das Preussische Heer der erste Stoss und die Verbindung beider Armeen wurde bedroht.

Von preussischer Seite machte man sich anheischig, im Fall Napoleon seine Streitkräfte gegen die englische Armee auf Ath, Braine le Comte oder Nivelles dirigiren würde, welche Punkte die Engländer festzuhalten versprochen, dass man sich auf der Flanke der feindlichen Operationslinie bei Sombref concentriren wolle, und dann nach Maasgabe der Umstände zur Unterstützung herbei zu eilen entschlossen sein werde.

Sollte Napoleon indess in der Richtung auf Charleroi vordringen, so galt dem preussischen Heere der erste Angriff, und dann wolle man preussischer Seits die Schlacht annehmen und das Schlachtfeld so wählen, dass die Hilfsleistung der Engländer gesichert bliebe. Für diesen Fall versprach der Herzog v. Wellington sein Heer bei Quatrebras zu sammeln, und die Armee des Fürsten Blücher zu unterstützen.”²

Though Von Damitz mentions late May as the date at which the meeting took place, without mentioning any place where it was held, it can be presumed that he refers to the meeting of Tirlemont of the 3rd of May.³

As he puts the weight in the issue for both commanders upon Brussels as being the main goal of the French and in this connection to Wellington's section in particular, he suggests at the same time that the meeting was some kind of detailing of former more general arrangements for defence.

As has been shown, this was not the case. Von Damitz' version, however, shows that Wellington would be fixed upon holding the places of Ath, Braine le Comte and Nivelles and this more or less matches the area as Wellington focused upon in the Secret memorandum in case Napoleon might attack between the Scheldt and the Sambre.

In this connection Von Damitz binds the position of Sombreffe to this position of Wellington as being one as promised by the Prussian high command from which they intended, according to circumstances, to support the duke. This also fits into the general picture of the moment: the threat upon Wellington and not upon the Prussian army.

Yet, Von Damitz takes this element in as well, and it is here that he starts projecting later events – a French attack upon the Prussian army through Charleroi - into the meeting. By that time this threat upon the Prussian army was no specific issue, but the one upon Wellington, however, was. In what follows, Von Damitz does the same again: projecting later events into the meeting in this case by having Wellington make the promise to Blücher that he would in that case collect his army at Quatre Bras, so as to be able to support the Prussian army. It presumes a position of the Prussian army there where this could be possible, but here Von Damitz doesn't mention it by name; he describes it as a choice of the Prussian leadership in such a way “dass die Hülfeleistung der Engländer gesichert bliebe.”

This description reflects a more general approach which was the baseline of the arrangements of both commanders: to choose their battlegrounds in such a way that cooperation could be possible without going into details on time and space.

As for Quatre Bras, within the context of the moment, this point had no special importance at all. For that reason the mutual agreements were far too general. It also didn't fit in with Wellington's ideas on mutual support on his left flank at that time. And, above all, the threat was felt upon his army, not on Blücher's, let alone the place where the threat then would have been on Blücher, as this could also come from from Givet towards Namur.

It is in this connection that it is necessary to refer to what Von Clausewitz says on the meeting at Tirlemont. ⁴ He suggests as if the meeting was one meant to set arrangements for all eventualities of a French attack, thereby using Wellington's sector as a starting point. But then he eventually turns to a promise of Wellington to Blücher, in case of a French attack upon him. Apart from this highly contradictory element in this short version of the events, Von Clausewitz is also hindered by hindsight, as Von Damitz is, by projecting later events into the meeting by using the combination of the terms Quatre Bras – Sombreffe.

Some years later Siborne described an arrangement between both commanders, without however mentioning the meeting at Tirlemont as such, nor when or where it was held as:

“Blücher had decided, in the event of an advance by the French across the line of the Sambre, by Charleroi, upon concentrating his army in a position in front of Sombref, a point upon the high road between Namur and Nivelles, about fourteen miles from the former place, and only eight miles from Quatre-Bras, the point of intersection of this road with the one leading directly from Charleroi to Brussels, and at which Wellington had agreed, in that case, to concentrate as large a force as time would admit, in order to check any advance in this direction, or to join Blücher's flank, according to circumstances.”⁵

Whether Siborne is mentioning the meeting of Tirlemont or not, this version of an arrangement between both commanders is for the most part probably copied from Von Damitz and is herewith merely a projection of later events into those which had a completely different background as those in June 1815. ⁶

In 1870, Chesney, like Von Damitz, depicted the meeting as one intended to establish a long-term and detailed arrangement for defence of the Netherlands, thereby at the same time projecting later events into the meeting as well, as he binds these arrangements to a French attack through Charleroi only, while this was not the point where a French attack was expected late April / early May. For the arrangement in itself, he takes the words as used by general Von Müffling in his memoirs (1851). ⁷ Because of their importance, the passage is quoted in full:

“Dies [a defeat of one of both armies] zu vermeiden, was alle Regeln empfahlen, und die Vereinigung der englischen und preussischen Armeen zu einer Defensiv-Schlacht, aus welcher in die Offensive übergegangen werden konnte, war durch die Verhältnisse und Localität so deutlich vorgezeichnet, dass darüber gar kein Zweifel aufkommen konnte.

Stand die englische Armee bei Gosselies, die Verbindungs- und Rückzugslinie über Brüssel nach Antwerpen hinter sich, die Preussische Armee bei Ligny, die Verbindungs- und Rückzugslinie, die Römerstrasse nach der Maas hinter sich, so waren sie in ihrer Fronte durch die Sambre völlig unangreifbar. Wurde aber Napoleon genötigt eine der beiden Flügel anzugreifen so konnte er auch nicht hindern, dass der andere Flügel mit gesicherter Rückzugslinie ihm vorwärts entgegenschwenkte und von der Sambre abschnitt.

Nördlich der Chaussee von Sombref nach Quatre Bras, also im Rücken dieses Versammlungslagers, wurde die Dyle in einer tiefliegenden und wasserreichen Niederung gebildet, ziemlich senkrecht auf die Sambre nach Löwen abgeführt, und in ihrer ersten Hälfte von 5 lieues bis Wavre für grossere Truppen-Abtheilungen mit Artillerie ganz unpracticabel, diente dieses Hindernis dazu, die strategische Aufstellung beider verbündeten Heere zu verstärken. Hiernach war für die preussische Armee als Versammlungspunkt vorgeschrieben: zwischen Sombref und Charleroy, und für die englische Armee in letzter Instanz zwischen Gosselies und Marchiennes.”

After having criticised Wellington for not having left his headquarters on the 14th of June, he claims that if he had “so konnten am 15ten Abends sämmtliche Korps der englischen Armee innerhalb des Dreiecks Frasnes, Quatre-bras, Nivelles bivouakiren und am 16ten Morgens die englische Armee in der Offensive bei Gosselies sein.

So hing es also von dem kleinen, unbedeutenden Umstand ab dass der Herzog am 14ten Brussel verliess und Napoleon wäre am 16ten Juni in die caudisnischen Gabeln gefallen !”⁸

From the use of the word “vorgeschrieben” in designated concentration-areas on the one hand and the principle of a defensive battle on the other, the suggestion is given as if this had been something which was agreed upon in a meeting of both Wellington and Blücher. As such, it has been linked by Chesney (and others) to the meeting of Tirlemont.

However, from the text as it is there is no reason to make this connection. The word “vorgeschrieben” is indeed misleading and suggests as if there was some kind of protocol for the combination as described by Von Müffling. Yet, the passage cited has in a number of ways nothing to with the meeting at Tirlemont.

First of all, within the total text of the recollections it comes out of the blue and Von Müffling gives no reference to some kind of meeting or so at all. Further, there is no reference either to elements discussed in the meeting as it has been described.

What makes the essential difference is the starting point from which Von Müffling has written and that is where Napoleon would strike. Was this at the end of April / early May against Wellington (along the line Valenciennes – Brussels), this is not the one Von Müffling is dealing with. As a starting point he sketches the line Charleroi – Brussels instead. But if this statement of Von Müffling has no relation to the Tirlemont meeting, what is then its status ?

Von Müffling’s statement should only be regarded as a pure strategical one, as a description of a position he felt by far the most suitable for a defensive battle and in which Napoleon would have “fallen into the Caudin forks”, i.e. would have suffered a humiliating defeat.⁹ As such, it is not linked to the meeting of Tirlemont, but stands on its own. After touching upon the absolute need for cooperation in order to carry out a defensive battle which could be turned into an offensive one and therefore into victory, it is for Von Müffling self-evident where this would be possible: in the triangle Sombref – Gosselies – Charleroi. Having Wellington’s army around Gosselies and Blücher’s army around Sombref, so with their communication lines at right-angles to their front and at the same time having the Sambre in front, he regarded this arrangement as the ideal position to beat the French, as if they would

attack one of both armies in force, there would always be the other one to assail them in their rear and to cut their communication and supply line.

Taking it from this scenario, it would be in the positions as he describes the armies that this combination would be possible. Yet, it is just one scenario and it is also here that hindsight has crept into Von Müffling's account as he subsequently uses this - in his idea - perfect combination against Wellington to criticize him for not having placed his headquarters in Nivelles on the 14th of June and thereby having made it impossible to work this way.

Yet, in disconnecting this passage of Von Müffling's recollections from the Tirlemont meeting, what remains is yet still the basic strategical element which was all too valid for the situation in general no matter where Napoleon would strike: the absolute need for cooperation as felt by both armies so as to be able to beat Napoleon.¹⁰

While Von Ollech (1876), from the documents available, sees the absence of a promise of Wellington to Blücher, it is Von Pflugk Hartung (1903) who considers the meeting as one which was meant for further directives for both armies. However, at the same time he rightly claims that at the time of the meeting it was Wellington who was under threat of an attack, resulting in a promise for support from Blücher and not also one from Wellington to Blücher.¹¹

Von Lettow Vorbeck (1904) concludes that Blücher didn't make any *specific* promise, as he was in the middle of the Saxon rebellion.¹²

De Bas and T'Serclaes de Wommersom (1908-1909) are typical examples of authors using hindsight in the interpretation of the meeting as they use the events of the campaign to understand it. Resulting, their starting point is a French attack upon Blücher and not upon Wellington. Additionally, they also portray the meeting as one meant for the design of overall arrangements of the frontier of the Netherlands.

Winand Aerts (1915) clearly distances himself from Von Damitz by stating that during the meeting "il fut sans doute question de la défense des frontières et de l'appui mutuel, mais on n'entra dans aucun détail de temps ni de lieu." Whatever positive this approach might be, Aerts lacks to see the other elements of the specific situation of that moment.¹³

Houssaye (1917) also dismisses the idea of the pretended concentration on the line Sombreffe – Quatre Bras as at that time the direction of the French attack could come from Lille, Maubeuge, Condé or Philippeville. He also states: "Bien plutôt, les deux commandants en chef s'étaient entendus seulement pour un jonction en avant de Bruxelles, sans fixer le point précis; les circonstances en décideraient." Yet again, however, Houssaye is another historian who doesn't recognize the fact that the moment the meeting was held where the accent of a French threat was: on Wellington.

Additionally, he is wrong in claiming that Ropes describes the meeting as one dealing with the invasion of France only. In fact, Ropes writes: "The two commanders no doubt fully intended to act in concert, and expected and relied upon the hearty support of each other, but there was not, as we believe, any definite agreement as to particular steps to be taken in the event of a French invasion." By using the word "particular" Ropes wants to show that the agreements on the defence of Belgium were of a general kind, in contrast to those who claim they were linked to Sombreffe and Quatre Bras. So basically, Houssaye and Ropes are in the same line of thinking. But yet again, it is also Ropes who doesn't make the connection to the specific situation of the moment, late April / early May.¹⁴

Hofschröer, also noting a lack of sources on the meeting itself, tries to reconstruct it by using the sparse accounts of it, orders issued later and subsequent actions of the allied commanders. In using the first category he ascertains the "various assurances of assistance to Wellington", but at the same time he translates this, apparently in combination with the way prince Von Thurn und Taxis has described the arrangements made at the meeting, as "the whole allied strategy as being clarified between Blücher and Wellington at Tirlemont." For Hofschröer, the

starting point for the meeting was “to develop the allied plans.” In this way, he shares the same (erroneous) approach of describing the meeting as one set up to develop a long term strategy for the defence for both commanders. By then using later (Prussian) orders and events of the 14th and 15th of June in order to understand the nature of the arrangements of the meeting, Hofschröder is also caught by hindsight by projecting an agreement into this meeting that Wellington and Blücher “had agreed to move rapidly and in force to support each other in the event of one of their armies being attacked by Bonaparte. In case of a French assault via Charleroi, the Prussians planned to fall back to the Sombreffe position to fight a major rearguard action, in which they would be supported by Wellington’s forces.”¹⁵

Hofschröder completes the “whole allied strategy” by stating that, while Blücher was concentrating his forces near Sombreffe, “Wellington would move in support of the Prussians.” Apart from the fact that there is no foundation for this assertion (Hofschröder gives no sources), the context of the situation right then was just the opposite, and this is something which clearly comes out from the documents available: it was one in which it were the Prussians who gave assurances of support, not the other way around, as there was no reason for it.¹⁶

By doing so he binds the battle of Ligny to the meeting at Tirlemont, but this event stemmed from a different background. That is why he runs into trouble in trying to match both backgrounds, by asking himself “why there was only one offensive possibility, namely an assault on the Anglo-Dutch-German army?”

The answer is that this was the one realistic option at the time of the meeting of Tirlemont. An offensive through Charleroi on the Prussians -as it happened mid-June - wasn’t. The confusing element here might be the area around Sombreffe, as this is so closely linked to the events of the 15th and 16th of June.

At the time of the meeting of Tirlemont, however, this area comes out as a point which was more than one in which a potential battle-ground was located.¹⁷

In taking a look at the orders of Blücher to Zieten and Pirch on the 5th of May, it is very tempting to understand them as pointing to the area involved as a probable battle-ground, but that is not what it was all about at that particular moment. What Blücher is doing here is this: all signs indicated a possible French attack upon the left of Wellington’s army. In that case Zieten had to fall back upon Fleurus and Pirch to concentrate near Namur.

There, at Fleurus, Zieten had to await the French movements to see whether the enemy would turn to Namur or to Wellington. The reason for this was that Blücher, despite the intelligence which was available, did not fully rule out the possibility that Napoleon might move from Givet upon Namur after all, so he reckoned there could be two options. It needs no explanation that Namur had for the Prussians a natural and eminent importance, not only in the relation to Prussia, but also towards Wellington.

During the development of the French advance, Fleurus was for Zieten to be a point to await this, no more. Pending its result, Blücher would take further measures. These would then be related to the two possible scenarios as sketched.

In case of a French attack upon Wellington, Blücher could include the area around Sombreffe as a concentration point for the Prussian army from which Blücher could give assistance to the duke of Wellington and who would probably face Napoleon somewhere between Enghien, Halle and Braine le Comte. This line of attack corresponded to one of the scenarios as Wellington had designed it in his Secret memorandum and having this position as a result.

And in case of an attack upon Blücher through Namur he could concentrate his army further east, between Sombreffe and Gembloux. In that sense, this area can be regarded as the operational area of the Prussian army, while the one between Enghien, Halle and Braine le Comte was the one for the duke of Wellington.

As a result, the strategic dimensions in which the positions of both armies should be seen were much larger as is traditionally done, by binding them on the points Sombreffe – Quatre Bras. In both cases, however, the road leading from Namur to Nivelles can be seen as the major line of communication between both areas.

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¹ Quote from the French translation, of 1973 (Campagne de 1815 en France, p.35). As indicated, the original dates from 1835.

² Geschichte des Feldzugs von 1815 etc. p.37-38

Von Pflugk Harttung takes this version in his manuscript in GSA VPH-HA,VI nr.III.3.p.32

He does the same in his Vorgeschichte (p.157, 234) but here he expresses his doubts about Quatre Bras as having been set as a point of concentration.

³ Hofschröder mentions two meetings in which Wellington and Blücher met to discuss defence matters: one on the 3rd of May at Tirlemont and one on the 29th of May at Brussels. In the first one Wellington was the one who received assurances of support, while on the second meeting mutual arrangements were made. However, there was just one meeting where defence matters were discussed in particular and that was the one held at Tirlemont on the 3rd of May.

Cf. Hofschröder, P. 1815.Waterloo. Wellington etc. p.116, 123

⁴ Clausewitz, C. von - Hinterlassene Werke etc. p.22

He erroneously situates the meeting at St. Trond.

⁵ History of the war etc. Vol.I p.39-40

⁶ Charras does the same in his book, dated 1857. In: Histoire de la campagne de 1815 p.84

⁷ Chesney, C. - Waterloo. Conférences p.97

⁸ Müffling, K.von – Aus meinem Leben p.232-233

⁹ The expression is in origin a French one, as “Passer sous les fourches caudines” which in its turn goes back to a passage in the mountains near Benevente in Italy where a confrontation took place between the Romans and the Samnites in 321 b.C.

¹⁰ In his publication of 1817 (Geschichte des Feldzugs der englisch-hanovrisch-niederländisch-braunschweigschen Armee etc.), Von Müffling doesn't mention the meeting.

¹¹ Ollech, Von – Geschichte etc. p.45

Pflugk Harttung, J.von – Vorgeschichte etc. p.23

¹² Lettow Vorbeck, O.von – Napoleons Untergang p.172-173

¹³ Aerts, W. - Etudes etc. p.52-53

¹⁴ Houssaye, H. - 1815.Waterloo p.116-117

Ropes, J.C. - The campaign of waterloo p.71-72

¹⁵ Hofschröder, P. - 1815.The Waterloo campaign. The German victory p.324

Also in: Did the duke of Wellington deceive etc. p.181

¹⁶ Hofschröder, P. 1815. The Waterloo campaign etc. p.116-118, 127, 161, 189-190, 343

¹⁷ There is no precise idea of when the battle-ground position of Sombreffe was communicated to Wellington, but that it was done before the campaign can be derived from the fact that Blücher

mentions it in his letter of the 15th of June (noon) to the duke, and in a way that Wellington knew what he was talking about (see below).