

The defensive position of the allied armies.

The Anglo-Netherlands-German army.

The prince of Orange.

The fact that the prince of Orange concentrated his forces around Ath should be explained by the framework as set out by the plans for defence as have been referred to above. The same is what happened to the mobile army of the Netherlands, which was initially placed along the Meuse, west of Maastricht.

On April the 20th 1815 king Willem explained to his son Willem why he had moved the army to the Meuse and not towards Antwerp the month before. It had to do with the fact that all military matters relating to Flanders were managed by the British and that the authorities of the Netherlands had been held afar by the British.

Antwerp and other places in Flanders were annexed by the British as their sector, and the result was that Willem “portais le corps d’armée mobile qui est destiné à prendre part aux opérations, sur la Meuse ou à portée de ce fleuve pour pouvoir former en cas de retraite les garnisons de Maastricht, Venlo et Grave et jeter les débris dans un camp retranché en avant de Nimègue, qui était fixé pour le point de rassemblement de tous les secours et renforts que je [Willem] pourrais rassembler ou recevoir d’autres puissances. Anvers et tout ce qui était entre l’Escaut et la mer m’était étrange, de sorte que je ne m’en occupais point, attachant d’ailleurs le plus de prix à la ligne de la Meuse et à conserver au moins un noyau d’armée qui servirait de point de rassemblement aux renforts et secours à attendre.”¹

In this way, both secondary operational areas near Antwerp and Maastricht were in use, while the British-Hanoverian force of the prince of Orange was in front of Brussels. Yet, during the first days of April, upon Wellington’s instigation, the prince pulled the mobile army of the Netherlands towards his own forces. And immediately after his arrival, Wellington quickened the process so as to meet one of his axioms: to have his whole army more easy to assemble and to be able to prevent any parts of it being cut off.

The backgrounds of Wellington’s defensive concept.

It is in the context of the subjects alluded to in this chapter that Wellington shaped the background of his defensive position. This was formed out of three elements.

The first one was to provide for the defence and the security of his military communications with England, Holland and Germany and of the objects entrusted to his care.² Wellington’s responsibilities were manifold, both diplomatic and military. Besides having to keep open the communication with England, the Netherlands and Germany, he also had to protect the Netherlands court and seat of government at Brussels, as well as the fugitive Louis XVIII and his royalist entourage at Ghent.

As has been stated, Brussels in particular had for Wellington an immense importance, being the southern capital of the Netherlands. This country itself was a creation of the treaties of peace and of the congress of Vienna.

The second element for Wellington was to occupy his defensive position in such a manner and take such precautionary measures as would enable him to assemble at the latest period of time the largest disposable force at his disposition. To make this possible it was important for the duke was “to put our troops in such a situation, as, in case of a sudden attack by the enemy, to render it easy to assemble, and to provide against the chance of any being cut off from the rest” as he wrote to the prince of Orange on the 11th of May.

Wellington summarized his, and Blücher's, position and situation as "the course to be pursued by the allied generals respectively was to be prepared to move in all directions, to wait till it should be seen in what direction the attack should be made, and then to assemble the armies as quickly as possible to resist the attack, or to attack the enemy with the largest force that could be collected."³

Wellington's third element in his defensive position in the Low Countries was his unwillingness "to break up his defensive position with a view to take one with his army, having solely in view the object of fighting a great battle in cooperation or in conjunction with the Prussian army."⁴

This subject has been dwelled upon in relation to the discussion which took place in April between Wellington and Gneisenau (and before them between the prince of Orange and Von Kleist) about a junction of the allied armies at Tirlemont. At the same time, however, when it came down to cooperation with the Prussians, Wellington obviously had to keep an open flank to the Prussian army as a defeat of both his own and this army would have a tremendous effect upon both their governments and the allied alliance.⁵

Wellington's ideas.

In his survey of the summer 1814, the duke of Wellington apparently gave a priority to the sector west of the river Dendre. In West-Flanders the network of inundations and of the *places fortes* of Ypres, Furnes, Nieuport, Ostend, Brughes, Roesbrugge and the fortress of Kenouke were points of attention, while between the Lys and the Scheldt the high ground between Audenarde to Harlebeke was another one.

This last position, plus the one east of the Scheldt, was also mentioned by lieutenant colonel Carmichael Smyth of the engineers in a memorandum which he wrote for the duke of Wellington on the 27th of December 1814.⁶

From the instructions to colonel Chapman of the engineers it also becomes clear that Wellington wanted to know about the defensive features of both the Scheldt and the Dendre (the last one from Dendermonde to Ath). From all this it becomes clear that Wellington took into account that any French attack might come from west of the Scheldt and then to turn east towards Brussels.

Later, in April 1815, he still considered this as a possibility, but by that time he had given up a defensive position on the left bank of the Scheldt. The Scheldt, and possibly the Dendre, were taken into account as defence lines for the protection of Brussels. In both cases Wellington considered the sector west of the Lys as too strong for a French attack.

By September 1814 Wellington's attention, as far as a defense system was concerned, had extended along the whole southern frontier, stretching from the North Sea to Liège. Apart from the restoration of the works in the towns in West Flanders, Liège, Huy and Charleroi were also mentioned, as were Mons, Ath and Tournai.

But even though Wellington saw the sector between Namur and Mons as the "most vulnerable point of the line of the frontier", the scope of Wellington's actual attention - at least for possible positions to fight a French army - stretched from the Scheldt in the west to the line Charleroi - Brussels in the east.

What played an eminent role in these kind of measures was a principle which the duke wrote about in 1816, and which was already applicable to the situation in 1814 and 1815.

It was "de rendre l'extrême frontière si respectable qu'elle ne peut pas être attaquée par coup de main, et que le temps soit donné à rassembler les troupes pour la défense du pays."⁷

As has been stated before, for the duke there were good positions for an army at La Trinidad [?], at Renaix behind Tournay, between Tournay and Mons on the high grounds about Bla-

ton, around Mons, on the Haine from Binche towards Mons, about Nivelles, between Nivelles and Binche and at the entrance of the forêt de Soignes.⁸

Three months later, in December 1814, Carmichael Smyth saw the best defensive position for the sector between Tournai and Mons at Halle, and in case the French would move over its left bank, at the valley of the Dendre.

Though Carmichael Smyth saw the advantages of positions like those of Blaton and Mont Palisel, he also saw that these were “too much en l’air and not sufficiently supported and [that they] would scatter our forces too much.” According to Carmichael Smyth the position of Halle, however, would “be nearer to our own resources. It cannot be passed but by a dangerous flank movement, and may be rendered (by the aid of field works) most excellent.” Here, he also saw a strong connection to the (only in the north inundated) valley of the Dendre: “Almost the whole of that valley may be disputed with a prospect of success, as the high ground is upon the Brussels side. At Grammont (in particular) there is a most excellent position which I think could hardly be forced. [...] The position of Halle might be made (as before stated) extremely strong with field works, and may be still further supported by a pretty good ridge in front of Anderlecht which in case of our being obliged to move from Halle would favour our retreat. But I think Halle might be so strengthened that it could not be forced in front. Its left would rest upon the Senne, and the skirts of wood (on the other side) might be filled with light troops.”⁹

Colborne wrote late March that “redoubts are to be immediately constructed at Hal” so by that time it was already a point of attention in the defensive strategy in case the army had to fall back from a position between Tournay and Mons.

Possibly influenced by Carmichael Smyth, it was by April 1815 that the duke of Wellington had drawn his envisaged position to resist the enemy higher up towards Brussels, i.e. in front of Halle, in the area Enghien – Braine le Comte – Halle.¹⁰

Although Carmichael Smyth hadn’t surveyed the ground beyond the line Brussels – Charleroy, he regarded the sector between Mons and Namur as the most vulnerable one. In case the enemy would advance through Binche and Charleroi, he saw the position of Mont Saint Jean - thoughbeit not yet surveyed and assessed - as a probable one to fight a French army, especially if it would be improved with field works.

He writes: “[...] in advancing from Binch and from Charleroi it is much to be wished that the ground near Braine la Leud may offer the same advantages. I have not yet gone over it, but I understand that it does not. The country near Nivelles and Genappe, I know to be very open, and to offer no features of which we could profit. It is however highly desirable that the country near Braine la Leud should be carefully reconnoitred and perhaps it may be found more favourable upon a close inspection. [...] It appears to me that the best mode of defending this open parts of the country will be to assemble as large a corps as we can on the best ground that can be found, near where the two roads from Binch, Charleroi and Namur meet, to strengthen this position by field works [...]” Basically, this is the area around Mont Saint Jean.¹¹

Carmichael Smyth then pleas for the establishment of an entrenched camp in and near Namur from the principle “of being enabled to place a considerable corps in security and in a situation from whence they could act upon an enemy’s flank and rear, should he advance to attack our troops occupying ground in front of Brussels. The occupation of Namur is moreover highly advisable as commanding the navigation of the Meuse, and connecting our communications with the Prussian armies, although the last object might be equally attained from Huy or Liège.”¹²

For Wellington, in April 1815, a French advance between the rivers Scheldt and Sambre meant that he would assemble his army in the area in front of Halle. Within the same sector,

however, at least in December 1814, lieutenant colonel Carmichael Smyth made a clear distinction while describing two sectors for choosing different potential battle-grounds in front of Brussels. In this he used Mons as the breakpoint: near Halle in case of a French attack in the sector between Tournai and Mons, and near Mont Saint Jean in case of a French attack in the sector between Mons and Charleroi (and beyond).

For the roads from Binche and Charleroi, both being in the sectors of both his own and the Prussian army, Wellington had a pragmatic approach, considering them in a sector of possible cooperation with the Prussian army, depending on the circumstances.

At the same time, in relation to the advice as given by lieutenant colonel Carmichael Smyth, it cannot be ruled out that, in case of a French attack in the sector between Mons and Charleroi (and beyond), the duke considered the position of Mont Saint Jean, near Waterloo, as a realistic one to fight the French south of Brussels.¹³

In fact, it was in April 1815 that lieutenant colonel Carmichael Smyth was instructed by Wellington to survey the vicinity of Mont Saint Jean (as he was to do the same in front of Halle). Carmichael Smyth gave the task to C.Chaplin, member of the corps of military surveyors and draughtsmen. The results were put down in a map covering an area which comprised to future battlefield of Waterloo.¹⁴

Clearly, the British had strong maritime interests in the preservation of Ostend and Antwerp and that was the reason why they made strong pleas for British garrisons there, in stead of those as coming from the army of the Netherlands.

Being the nearest port to Great Britain, it was through Ostend that the British army was led towards the Netherlands. As such, the line between Ostend and Brussels was a most important communication line to Great Britain. Through time, Wellington has been severely criticised for having his main supply line to the west (Ostend), so parallel to his front and not at right-angles to it.¹⁵

However, in the total orientation of his mobile army (northeast-southwest) Wellington, as a professional, was not so naive to chose his main supply line in the way as he has been criticised for. His main supply line and line of retreat, in case he had to uncover Brussels, ran at right-angles to his front, i.e. to the north, towards Antwerp.¹⁶

It had already been late March that Antwerp was marked as the central depot of the British and as such it formed the main supply line for the army. At the same time, lord Bathurst then pointed the prince of Orange to take positions “with a view both to covering Antwerp and the Dutch frontier”. Early May he also stressed the importance of Antwerp and Ostend to Wellington, not only as means of providing for the communication for the army, but also for securing a retreat in case of mischance. Late March, it was the prince of Orange who explicitly mentioned Antwerp to Von Kleist as the place where the British would go in case of a retreat. Not long after his arrival in the Netherlands, it was Wellington who stressed the importance of Antwerp and its connection to the North Sea through the Westerschelde to the king of the Netherlands, as being the porte d’entrée for the British towards Antwerp and herewith as a vital means of securing the security of Holland.

As a passage over the Rupel near Boom was considered of vital importance in the line of retreat towards Antwerp, it was by the middle of April that this access towards Antwerp from the south was facilitated by the construction of a pontoon-bridge.¹⁷ The construction of this bridge had been initiated late March.

Last but not least, it had already been in December 1814 that lieutenant colonel Carmichael Smyth had pointed to the importance of redoubts near Dendermonde and Mechelen to cover a retreat to Antwerp.

In fact, sir Hudson Lowe wrote to lord Bunbury on the 24th of March: “[...] the army might in three marches be concentrated behind the Nethe between Lierre or Duffel and Rupelmonde,

having Antwerpen close to its rear. I have been giving directions for a bridge of boats at Boom to have that passage open to us as well as Malines. I trust however if the Prussians come up this movement will not be necessary and that we may be enabled to maintain our present attitude.”¹⁸

And on the 3rd of April the prince wrote to lord Bathurst: “[...] I was induced to concentrate the troops in that neighbourhood [near Ath] , because it is obvious they can be withdrawn unmolested behind the Nethes in two marches [...]”¹⁹ Within this context, Von Röder’s fear, as expressed early April to Gneisenau, that the British might fall back upon Antwerp was not unfounded. On the other hand, Wellington did not exclude the possibility of falling back - in case of reverse - towards Maastricht or Jülich, in order to keep himself united with the Prussian army.²⁰

It is in this sense that Wellington expressed himself to king Willem in 1816 about his army: “[...] je crois que si l’armée destinée à défendre les états V.M. ne peut pas se maintenir en avant de Bruxelles, elle doit opérer sa retraite ou sur Anvers, ou sur Maastricht, selon les vues et espérances politiques du jour [...]”²¹ This principle also applied to Wellington’s army in 1815, lying in front of Brussels.

The cantonments.

Right after his arrival in Brussels, Wellington requested Gneisenau to move his army up as far as Charleroi (and beyond), so as to close the line of defence in front of Brussels. It can be questioned why he did so just there.²²

It was clear from the beginning that the army as initially led by the prince of Orange and later by Wellington was simply not strong enough to cover the huge stretch of land between the sea and Liège.

Already by September 1814, Wellington had a clear eye for the sector between the Scheldt and the line Brussels – Charleroi, but not beyond, as far as possible favourable grounds for actions was concerned. At that time, his attention was also fixed upon the construction of “a good casemated work on the site of an old Roman work near Binch which will command the communication from Mons to Charleroi.” In hindsight, this element can be seen as the key to a communication to the east, to another sector as his own.

By mid-June, the frontline of the Anglo-Netherlands-German army stretched from Menin in the west, along Tournai, Roucourt and Mons to Bonne Espérance in the east where the outposts of the brigade of Van Merlen touched upon those of the brigade Von Steinmetz of the 1st Prussian corps. The outposts were formed by Hanoverian cavalry, except for those in the sector of the cavalry of Collaert, east of Mons. They were supported by companies of the infantry divisions which were in their rear.

The second and third line were occupied by the divisions of the 1st and 2nd corps, which were located to the left and right of the axe Roucourt – Enghien – Brussels respectively. The headquarters of the 1st corps was at Braine le Comte, that of the 2nd at Grammont. The cavalry corps was to the right of the line as sketched, having its headquarters at Ninove, while the reserve was in and around Brussels.²³

The sector west of the river Lys was covered by garrisons in the reinforced places of Ypres, Nieuport, Ostend and Ghent, some of which were also protected by inundations. Within the sector of the field-army, Mons and Tournai also had their own garrisons. And last but not least, Antwerp as a place of storage and communication, had its own garrison.

The outer boundary of the field-army in the west was the river Lys, while in the east this was roughly the road running from Brussels to Frasnes and from there a line bending in towards

Bonne Espérance. The road at Frasnes running down along Gosselies to Charleroi was in the Prussian sector, so this road was in the sectors of both armies.

In the north the outer boundary of the field-army ran roughly along Ghent, Alost and Vilvorde back to Brussels. Roughly speaking, the frontline of the field-army was opposite the French sector stretching out between Lille, Valenciennes and Maubeuge.

On the whole, here the cantonments were neither secured by any natural barriers like rivers, heights etc. nor by any strong vanguard at some distance in front which was able to resist the enemy in order to save time for the remainder of the army to collect at some assembly point further to the rear.²⁴

When it came down to a French invasion of the Netherlands, there were roughly speaking for Napoleon three options to do so. First of all, he could operate from Lille into the coastal corridor between the North Sea and the rivers Lys / Scheldt.

The second one was to attack in the central sector between the Scheldt and the Sambre, and the third to strike east of the Meuse towards the Rhine valley.²⁵

In case Napoleon might operate between the sea and the rivers Lys and Scheldt, Wellington felt confident about the presence of the measures he had taken in that sector. Further, if the French would move in, he could attack the French from behind the river Scheldt. From the way Wellington arranged his field army, it becomes clear that he felt the most probable threat to come from the line Lille – Maubeuge, so from the northern departments of France (and the great fortresses there). From here, several paved roads ran into the central part of the Netherlands in particular, most of them ending up in Brussels.

Therefore, Wellington deemed it necessary to observe them. These roads were the one from Lille leading to Ghent through Menin and Courtray, the one leading from Lille to Ghent and Tournay, or upon Ath and Brussels, the road leading from Condé through Tournay, Ath and Enghien to Brussels and the one leading from Condé and Valenciennes through Mons to Brussels.²⁶

About the basis of Wellington's cantonments Von Müffling wrote by the middle of June: "Die Haupt-Verbindungs- und Handelsstrasse von der Hauptstadt Paris zur Hauptstadt Brüssel läuft über Mons. Die Cantonirungen der englischen Armee mussten daher dergestalt angelegt sein, dass diese sich zwischen Brüssel und Mons versammeln konnte, dass es ihr jedoch frei stand, sich auf ihrem linken Flügel mit der Preussischen Armee zu vereinigen. Dies berücksichtigend, hatte der Herzog von Wellington an der Grenze bei Mons leichte Cavallerie, auf dem halben Wege nach Brüssel das Corps de Bataille, in Brüssel selbst nebst Umgegend die Reserve. Das Hauptquartier gehörte in den Sitz der Regierung, die Hauptstadt von Belgien."²⁷

The Prussian army.

In his memorandum of 1842, Wellington wrote:

"[...] if it is considered that the objects of protection of the army under the command of the duke of Wellington were extended over a tract of country of greater length than were those protected by the allied army under the command of prince Blücher, it will be found that this part of the country, contiguous in its whole extent to the French frontier, and traversed in all parts by excellent paved roads leading from some one or other of the French fortresses, required for its protection a system of occupation quite different from that adopted by the Prussian army under the prince Blücher."²⁸

What Wellington refers to is his mobile army, plus the system of fortresses and their garrisons.

The presence of these, in relation to the Prussian sector, however is unclear. Though Von Müffling, sir Hudson Lowe, Wellington and Carmichael Smyth (and as a result colonel

Chapman) had pointed to the importance of having (the citadels of) Liège, Huy, Namur and Charleroi being paid attention to, no works seem to have been carried out there, neither by the Prussians nor by the Netherlanders or the British.²⁹

In 1814, and also in the first half of 1815, the country between Brussels and the Meuse seems to have had no priority in being surveyed by British engineers. In May 1815, however, Prussian engineers did do some surveys around Sombrefe / Point du Jour and possibly from there towards the Orneau (Mazy etc.) and the Dyle (Bousval etc.) as well.³⁰⁻³¹

On a wide scale, by late 1814, Von Müffling regarded the fortresses on the Rhine as the basis upon which all the operations for the defence of the Netherlands would have to depend, but at the same time he saw that only Mainz and Wesel would be able to serve as *points d'appui*, as all other ones were in a ruined or dilapidated state. Because of the huge distance between these places, Von Müffling had recommended Koblenz and Köln to be fortified. At the same time, he favoured the construction of roads between Luxemburg and Köln and between Mainz and Namur for the further completion of the defensive network on the left bank of the Rhine, between the rivers Meuse and Moselle.

From March 1815 onwards, as the strength of the Prussian armies was built up, the army of the Lower Rhine was formed from the north and from the east on the right bank of the Meuse, while at the same time other forces moved up from the interior towards the Rhine.

In March, cooperation between the army of Von Kleist and the forces of the prince of Orange was seen while the tract of country between Mons and Namur was virtually uncovered and the distance between both forces was immense. Right after the arrival of Wellington and Gneisenau, however, this gap was covered by pulling the 1st Prussian corps as far west as Binche, while it reached towards Namur in the east, where it touched upon the 2nd corps.

As the 1st corps formed the link to Wellington's forces, the 3rd corps still formed the link towards the Moselle. This situation continued until about the middle of May, when the 3rd corps was pulled up towards the Meuse and the 4th corps was led from the Rhine to the left bank of the Meuse. From that time on, the main concentration of the Prussian army was there, while the 3rd corps blocked the area between the Meuse and the Ourthe in a southward and westward direction.

The link to the Moselle was now taken over by the Bundeskorps under Von Kleist. So, through time, there was a general shift of forces to the west and north-west to close upon the defence of the Netherlands and Wellington's forces, while at the same time on the right bank of the Meuse the communication towards Liège and Mainz were still covered by the 3rd corps and the Bundeskorps respectively.

On the left bank of the Meuse, the remainder of the army covered the communication to Liège as well. It was through this town (and that of Huy further upstream) that the line of retreat ran. There was yet another line of retreat for the Prussian army in case a defence in front of Brussels would, for whatever reason, have to be given up and that was one through Tirlmont, St.Trond and Maastricht.³² In the centre-rear of the three army-corps on the left bank of the Meuse was Tirlmont. This was the point formerly favoured by the Prussians to give battle in cooperation with Wellington.

After having sketched the possibilities for the French to attack the Prussian army (i.e. through Charleroi, Namur or Ciney) and therefore the Prussian 1st, 2nd and 3rd corps being in the first line and the 4th in the second, Von Damitz claims: "Die Concentrirung der Armee war nach diesen Ansichten in jeder der bedrohten Directionen bedacht und berechnet. Das Preussische Heer würde eben so leicht sich bei Cinay wie bei Namur oder Sombrefe gesammelt haben, wenn es die Umstände erfordert hätten."³³

Let alone the fact whether this concentration was easy, Ciney was not a concentration point for the whole army in case of a French offensive along the right bank of the Meuse. As has been stated before, in that case, by the 13th of May, Gneisenau had another scenario in mind:

“..dass man ihm die Ardennen und Eifelgebirge überlasse und in Vereinigung mit der Wellingtonschen Armee sofort in Frankreich eindringe. Sollte H.v. Wellington aber nicht hierauf sich einlassen, so können wir solange warten, bis der Feind über die Maas geht um uns eine Schlacht zu liefern, die wir dann annehmen können, oder sollte er, ohne uns am linken Ufer der Maas aufzusuchen, gegen den Rhein vordringen, so müssen wir ihn so weit vorrücken lassen, bis er näher dem Rhein ist, um sodann über die Maas zu gehen, und ihm eine Schlacht unter ihm nachtheiligen Umständen zu liefern. Dies wäre unser Entwurf zum Feldzug, im Fall wir über die Ardennen her den Feind zu erwarten hätten.”

And one month later, Von Müffling wrote to Gneisenau: “sollte der Feind am rechten Ufer der Maas vordringen, so ist der Herzog bereit, entweder mit uns über die Maas ihm entgegen zu gehen, oder (was ich ihm unter gewissen Umständen vorgeschlagen habe) gerade durch die französischen Festungen durch in des Feindes Rücken zu gehen.”

In all, there was such a level of resemblance in these plans, that there would probably be no chance that both allied commanders would disagree what to do in case Napoleon might move over the right bank of the Meuse.

With his other statement “die Preussische Armee hatte die Aufgabe zu lösen, sich nach Maasgabe der Umstände, auf dem rechten wie auf dem linken Ufer der Maas zu concentriren, und die Punkte von Cinay, Namur und Sombref zu decken”, Von Damitz fails to appreciate the importance of the decisions taken towards the middle of May. These were to move most of the army of the Lower Rhine to the left bank of the Meuse, as from then on the main threat was regarded as coming from there.

A state of suspense.

In their positions in the Low Countries, the armies of Wellington and Blücher had similar starting points they acted upon: one of defensive and one of an offensive nature and these were closely linked.

Wellington describes the situation as: “It is obvious that the first measures of the generals commanding the armies of the allies must have been defensive. Those in the Belgian provinces, and those on the left bank of the Rhine, must have been strictly and cautiously formed upon these principles. Their forces were weak in comparison with the French force opposed to, or which might be brought against them. The latter enjoyed other advantages in the nature and strength of their frontier. These allied troops were at the outposts. They were destined to protect the march of the other armies of the allies to the countries which were intended to be the basis of the operations to be carried on against the enemy, for which the treaty of the 25th of March had made provision.”³⁴

The defence of the Low Countries was a condition for an allied invasion into France, but at the same time this invasion could only be carried out as soon as the allies had superior forces available. It had been Wellington’s and Blücher’s hope that the grand European alliance would launch an immediate offensive before Napoleon could complete his military preparations, but the large and unwieldy Russian and Austrian armies needed time to get into position and it was decided at Vienna on a methodical mobilisation to be followed by an invasion of France late June.³⁵

As long as this was not the case, an invasion into France was considered to be too dangerous. Wellington says: “ [..] The two allied armies, the one in the Netherlands, the other in the provinces on the left bank of the Rhine, were, as has been already shown, necessarily on the defensive. They were waiting for the junction of other large armies to attain by their cooperation a common object.

But their defensive position and immediate objects did not necessarily preclude all idea or plan of attack upon the enemy. The enemy might have so placed his army as to render the attack thereof advisable, or even necessary.

In that case the allied generals ought, and in all probability would, have taken the initiative. But in the case existing in 1815 the enemy did not take such a position as is thus supposed. On the contrary, he took a position in which his numbers could be concealed, his movements protected, and his designs supported by his formidable fortresses on the frontier, up to the last moment. The allies could not attack this position without being prepared to attack a superior army so posted: they could not therefore have the initiative of the operations in the way of attack.

They had the option of taking the initiative in the way of defensive movement. But such defensive movement, or alteration of the well-considered original position taken up by each of the allied armies, must have been founded on a conviction that such positions were faulty, and might be improved, or upon an hypothesis of the intended movements of attack by the enemy. There was no reason to believe that the first was the case; and it must never be lost sight of, that to found upon an hypothesis which might, and probably would, prove erroneous, considering what the advantages were of the position of the enemy on the frontier, the alteration of the position of the allied armies might have occasioned what is commonly called a false movement; and it must be observed, that whatever may be thought of Buonaparte as a leader of troops in other respects, there certainly never existed a man in that situation, in any times, in whose presence it was so little safe to make what is called a false movement.

The initiative then rested with the enemy; and the course to be pursued by the allied generals respectively was to be prepared to move in all directions, to wait till it should be seen in what direction the attack would be made, and then to assemble the armies as quickly as possible to resist the attack, or to attack the enemy with the largest force that could be collected.”³⁶

So, what basically evolved was a state of suspense, both politically and militarily as it was not certain that Napoleon would invade the Netherlands and until he did so, Wellington and Blücher could only remain in a state of watchfulness.³⁷

This state of suspense for instance also comes back in Wellington’s words to Gneisenau on the 10th of April, as “nous trouvant dans ce moment sur la défensive, et n’ayant aucune intention d’en départir jusqu’à ce que les Souverains assemblés à Vienne décident sur l’attaque et les plans d’opérations, l’initiative est avec l’ennemi; et c’est difficile de fixer en avance exactement les opérations de chaque corps sous telles circonstances.”

And to the prince of Orange, on the 11th of May the duke wrote: “In the situation in which we are placed at present, neither at war nor at peace, unable on that account to patrol up to the enemy and ascertain his position by view, or to act offensively upon any part of his line, it is difficult, if not impossible, to combine an operation, because there are no data on which to found any combination. All we can do is to put our troops in such a situation, as, in case of a sudden attack by the enemy, to render it easy to assemble, and to provide against the chance of any being cut off from the rest.”

Wellington’s words stating “the initiative then rested with the enemy; and the course to be pursued by the allied generals respectively was to be prepared to move in all directions, to wait till it should be seen in what direction the attack should be made, and then to assemble the armies as quickly as possible to resist the attack, or to attack the enemy with the largest force that could be collected” contain an element which has been stressed in former chapters and on which it is necessary to make some concluding remarks: mutual cooperation.

The dimensions of the cooperation between both allied armies.

First of all, the strategical dimensions of this cooperation for the sector between the rivers Scheldt and Sambre and throughout the whole period as covered by the preambles will be dealt with.

As has been shown before, it was in March 1815 that both commanders – the prince of Orange and general Von Kleist – had not been able to find a way out in the stalemate which had arisen due to their diverging interests and the resulting large gap between both armies.

The Tirlemont proposal was in that sense not the way to bring about a breakthrough, also not for Wellington and Gneisenau, early April.³⁸ With both him and Gneisenau entering the scene at the same time, as commanders with other full-powers, other responsibilities and more troops, a new era ensued in which Wellington succeeded to convince the Prussians to reach out as far as Charleroi and thereby to close the defence line in front of Brussels. At this period of time, presuming the main French offensive would be directed against him through the French sector between Valenciennes and Maubeuge, Wellington saw his concentration area in the triangle Ath – Braine le Comte – Enghien (with Mons and Tournai as breakpoints in front).

From then on, distances between both armies were much shorter and for a proper cooperation they were regarded as sufficient as it led Wellington to think at that time that if the enemy would attack him between the Scheldt and the Sambre rivers “le corps du général Ziethen formerait la gauche de l’armée, et se rassemblerait à Charleroi; et je crois qu’il serait à propos que les autres troupes de votre Excellence se rassemblent à Namur.”

In other words: at that time it was realistic for Wellington to believe that while he was in front of Brussels, in a sector about halfway between the frontier and Brussels, that the Prussians would be able to come to his aid, as coming from Charleroi and Namur.

It should be stressed that this position of the Prussian army was the wish of Wellington. For the month of April there are no data on which any realistic Prussian concentration sector can be determined. In this period no actual threats of imminent French attacks emerged.

This situation, however, changed by the end of April and the beginning of May. It was then that Wellington, still presuming the main attack would be on him, hung on the area between Enghien, Braine le Comte and Halle to eventually meet the enemy.

The Prussians, from their side, most probably did so to a sector east of Fleurus as far as Gembloux (and even beyond towards Hannut). For the Prussians this was at that moment a sector from which they would be able to support Wellington, while at the same time they would be able to meet any major French irruption from Givet through Namur.

One month later, on the 8th of May, Wellington described his position with that of the Prussian army as “I say nothing about our defensive operations, because I am inclined to believe that Blücher and I *are so well united*, [italics are mine] and so strong, that the enemy cannot do us much mischief. I am at the advanced post of the whole; the greatest part of the enemy’s force is in my front; and, if I am satisfied, others need be under no apprehension.”³⁹

These words again show the dimensions of the cooperation of both armies in relation to how they had been before Wellington and Gneisenau arrived on the scene. From then on, they were much tighter as they had been and apparently also regarded as sufficient in case of a possible invasion of Belgium.

While Wellington's operational area didn't change in May, it was in the middle of this month that the army of the Lower Rhine had left the Rhine in favour of the left bank of the Meuse due to the threat felt upon Wellington's sector. The result was that it gave the Prussians the idea that Napoleon might throw his main thrust against them through Charleroi, and not only through Givet – Namur.

As a result, by the end of May, the position of Point du Jour had come into play as a possible defensive position in case the French might carry out their main attack through Charleroi. Yet, this was an extra element in the Prussian operational area as this still stretched further east as far as Gembloux, and even beyond towards Hannut, in order to be able to meet either an attack through Mons / Charleroi on one side or through Givet / Namur on the other. This clearly can be taken from Blücher's orders of late May.

This means that in case of a major attack on Wellington, through Mons, that the sector to the east of Fleurus, to Gembloux and beyond, towards Hannut was the Prussian focus for concentration of the army, and therefore for possible support to Wellington.

At least at this stage it seems that for him all depended upon the circumstances of the attack where he would concentrate his forces.

By mid-June, the situation respecting the main concentration areas of both armies in case of a main attack upon one of each of them hadn't changed. In case of a main French offensive against the Anglo-Netherlands-German army, Wellington would choose for the triangle Enghien – Braine le Comte – Halle as his ultimate concentration area. In the event of a main French offensive on his army (either through Charleroi or Namur), Blücher would do so in the sector the east of Fleurus, to Gembloux and beyond, towards Hannut.⁴⁰

By mid-June, however, Wellington had apparently become more concrete when it came down to cooperation. In case the main French attack would fall upon upon Blücher, i.e. at least through Charleroi, then Wellington would concentrate his forces around Nivelles. Whereas if this attack would take place against Wellington, then Blücher would do so between Fleurus and Gembloux.

This was the strategical background in which the initial events of the campaign of 1815 should be seen. It is clear from this, contrary to what often has been asserted, that within this context, Quatre Bras played no role whatsoever.

Mentioning Quatre Bras in this stage as a major strategic point for the allies is as with the way the intentions of Napoleon on both the 15th and 16th of June have often been described (see below): it is a way of projecting events which had yet to take place into arrangements in which these events couldn't of course have a place at all. In this sense, also here, it is projection which is dominating the historiography of the campaign.

In numerous cases it is suggested as if the concentration points of Blücher's and Wellington's armies were similar to the ones Napoleon was aiming at on the 15th and 16th of June – a most peculiar coincidence and for those who adhere to this theory too good to be true, but this opinion is built upon highly erroneous assumptions (see below).⁴¹

Within these geographical and strategic dimensions, arrangements were set by both commanders about the way they wanted to cooperate. For this it should be stressed what has been stated before: "As far as cooperation between the rivers Scheldt and the Sambre was concerned, what mattered for both armies was that each of them had its flank to the partner army open to either receive or to give support to the other. What mattered was a realistic prospect of cooperation, so as to avoid each army having to fight a major action alone. This cooperation could be either by a direct junction just before a battle or an indirect one during a battle, wherein one army would be on the defensive while the other would move in the flank or rear of the enemy. In other words: the basic formula was that both armies would concentrate in time on one or two points arranged in such a way that both armies would be able to cooperate.

⁴² That was the basic agreement upon which all depended, and all further resulting arrangements were dependent on the specific situation regarding time and space.

Whereas these arrangements were of a rather general character, those for cooperation in case of a French offensive on the left bank of the Scheldt or over the right bank of the Meuse were virtually non-existent or open to consideration.

Von Müffling wrote on the morning of the 15th of June to Gneisenau: “Sollte der Feind zwischen dem Meer und der Schelde eindringen, so könnte die Armee auf zwei Punkten (wo Brückenköpfe angelegt sind), sich über die Schelde zur Offensive bewegen, sollte der Feind am rechten Ufer der Maas vordringen, so ist der Herzog bereit, entweder mit uns über die Maas ihm entgegen zu gehen, oder (was ich ihm unter gewissen Umständen vorgeschlagen habe) gerade durch die französischen Festungen durch in des Feindes Rücken zu gehen.”⁴³

In other words, in these two other scenario's the mutual distances between both allied armies were of such an extent that another type of concept was probable to come play and that was the invasion of France by the army which was not under attack by the Armée du Nord.

Calculations.

Calculations of the speed in which the allied armies would be able to concentrate at specific points form the key to assess any realistic possibilities for cooperation. Being a most obvious rule in warfare this doesn't need any further explanation. As such, they merit a special attention.

These calculations contain different steps to go through when concentrating an army. These are: the time needed to get the alarm of the start of the hostilities there where the decision for the concentration of the army is to be taken, the time needed to draft and send out the orders to the different units of which the army is composed, the concentration itself of these units at their assembly places and consequently their marches to the concentration point of the army as a whole.

As a rough estimate, the army of Wellington covered in its cantonments an area of about 80 kilometres (west-east) x 70 kilometres (north-south). Taking the army as a whole, it was on the 13th of June 1815 that captain Bowles (1st Regiment Foot Guards) wrote: “ [...] One day's march would concentrate us on the centre, and two on either flank of our present line, and we must always have sufficient notice to enable this to be done with ease.[...]”

In this short description, Bowles makes a clear distinction between the actual marches for the concentration of the army as such and its preparatory elements, in an *ideal situation*. Bowles' statement provides a proper reference for statements as done in the context of this subject.

It meant that it would take the army one day's march (about 12 hours) to assemble somewhere between Ath and Soignies and two day's marches (about 24 hours) either at the Scheldt river or Nivelles / Quatre Bras. In this, he apparently uses a speed of about 3 kilometres per hour as a starting point.

For the Prussian army, the general report dated 19th of June states: “Die Konzentrationspunkte der vier Preussischen Armeekorps waren Fleurus, Namur, Cinay und Hannut, und so gelegen, dass die Armee auf einem dieser Punkte in 24 Stunden versammelt sein konnte.”⁴⁴ Taking these 24 hours and the distances involved, what is meant here is the concentration of the army as such. In this sense it resembles the reference as given by Bowles (see above).

Final observations on the preambles.

In historiography, in relation to the campaign itself, its preambles regarding the allied armies in the Netherlands are often dealt with in a rather coarse way.

For that reason, this study of the preambles is an attempt to integrate available and relevant sources in a systematic way. The proper value of the preambles can only be traced through a step by step description and analysis of these sources. In that sense, in former studies, strategic elements, concepts and backgrounds which can be found in a lot of these single documents or in their sequences are often insufficiently explored or not even explored at all.

A typical example of this last approach is the strong tendency to neglect the importance of the coming invasion of France by the allied armies. Apart from a possible French attack, this invasion was constantly on the minds of their commanders and played a significant role in the way they behaved. The more time was progressing, the more they felt confident about a swift start.

As it had been planned for late June, it became a particularly strong item in the week before the war was started by Napoleon and as such formed a fundamental background for this period of time.

Gash wrote about the battle of Waterloo: “There is a standing temptation to view the 1815 campaign in terms of the events of 18 June, Yet clearly it is more realistic and more illuminating to consider the battle in the context of the campaign.”⁴⁵

In respect of the preambles a variation upon this statement is applicable: “there is a standing temptation to view the preambles of the campaign in terms of the events of the campaign itself. Yet clearly it is more realistic and more illuminating to consider the campaign in the context of its preambles and its aftermath.” All too often the preambles have been described as if the only result could, as if almost inevitably, take place the way it did. In other words: the description of the preambles in former studies all too often suffers from hindsight, resulting in a distortion in the description of the events and their interpretation, thereby making it virtually impossible to view them in their own value. In that sense, the preambles as they have been described here is not only an attempt to view them in this value, but at the same time as to break down those cases where hindsight has come in, and to put them in their right context at the same time.

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¹ King Willem to his son Willem, 20th April 1815. In: NA, 2.02.01 nr.6211

² Cf. Memorandum on the battle of Waterloo. In: WSD, Vol.X p.522

³ Cf. Memorandum on the battle of Waterloo. In: WSD, Vol.X p.518-519

⁴ Memorandum on the battle of Waterloo etc. In: WSD, Vol.X p.518-522

⁵ Cf. Memorandum on the battle of Waterloo. In: WSD, Vol.X p.520, 522

⁶ NAK, WO 30/35 nr.7

⁷ Wellington to Willem, 10th March 1816. In: Colenbrander, H.T. (ed.) - Gedenkstukken etc. Vol.VIII p.30

⁸ Memo on the defence of the frontier of the Netherlands. In: NA, 2.02.01 nr.6592
The position of Blaton and the area there near Mons (i.e. the position of Boussu) are described in more detail in another document in the same file. Cf. Observations générales etc, by M.de Bosset, lieutenant colonel in British service. In: NA, 2.02.01.nr.6592

⁹ NAK, WO 30/35 nr.7

¹⁰ It was again in March 1816 that Wellington repeated the importance of field works at Halle (and Waterloo) as a second line of defence in Belgium.

He regarded the fortresses at the river Meuse and those between that river and the Scheldt as the first line. In his letter to king Willem, dated 10th March 1816. In: Colenbrander, H.T. Gedenkstukken etc. Vol. VIII p.31

¹¹ Later, after his arrival in Belgium sir Hudson Lowe wrote in his “queries submitted regarding the measures to be taken for the defence of the Belgic provinces, on the supposition of the French government having any hostile designs against them” one of his queries as follows: “Should any intermediate post be taken up between the frontiers and Brussels, supposing the latter line of operations be thought the most suitable, query in respect to the construction of a work at Mont Jean [sic], being the commanding point at the junction of the two principal chaussées leading direct from the French frontier on the side of Charleroi and Namur to Brussels, and the line of direction in which an enemy must then move ?”

In: Holland Rose, J. - Sir H.Lowe etc. p.517-518

¹² NAK, WO 30/35 nr.7

¹³ Bleibtreu, in his extreme anti-British approach, claims that Wellington didn’t intend to have a battle further south towards the Sambre, but only one just in front of Brussels, i.e. at Mont Saint Jean. He also regards Nivelles as a line to the west, away from the Prusians, while in reality Nivelles was the major starting point for Wellington for support towards the Prusians. In: Englands grosse Waterloo-Lüge p.11-12

Pryse Lockhart Gordon, a former military, and resident in Brussels since 1814, claims to have met the duke of Wellington, while accompanied by the duke of Richmond and the prince of Orange, on the 13th of June. The he would have stated “that if he was attacked from the south, Halle would be his position, and if on the Namur side, Waterloo.” There can be consid-

erable doubt about the status of these words as, first of all, the prince of Orange was not in Brussels that day and the relation of Pryse Lockhart Gordon to the army cannot be substantiated. In: Personal memoirs or reminiscences etc. p.267

¹⁴ Cf. above.

¹⁵ Cf. Gash, N. - Wellington and the Waterloo campaign p.2
Bas, F.de – La campagne de 1815 Vol.I p.264 He believes the duke would fall back to Ostend in case of a retreat.

¹⁶ Cf. Von Müffling. In: The memoirs of baron Von Müffling etc. p.220
Whitehead only sees the communication line towards Ostend and an alternative one in the one to Antwerp, in case Wellington would have to give up the first one. In: Waterloo. Wellington's right flank p.203

¹⁷ Cf. Sir Carmichael Smyth. In: Chronological epitome of the wars etc. p.369
The importance of the bridge is clearly mentioned by captain Oldfield of the royal engineers. He does the same for the bridge linking the centre of Antwerp and the *tête de Flandre*, a former fortification on the left bank of the Schledt river. In: NAM, nr.7403-147

¹⁸ BL, Add.ms.20.114 f.87-88
Lierre and Duffel are both south-east of Antwerp, Rupelmonde south-west. The overall position is immediately south of Antwerp.

¹⁹ NAK, WO.1/205.1 p.13-16

²⁰ Cf. chapter on the 10th of April and the 6th of May.

²¹ Wellington to king Willem, 10th March 1816. In: Colenbrander, H.T. (ed.) - Gedenkstukken etc. Vol.VIII p.30

²² Hofschröer puts the fault line of the coalition in the Low Countries along the axis Thuin-Charleroi-Fleurus-Gembloux-Tirlemont, but it was further west, on the line Binche - Frasnes les Gosselies – Wavre – Louvain. In: 1815. The Waterloo campaign. Wellington etc. p.112

²³ According to a British "officer on the staff" the position of the cantonments of the cavalry was dictated by a sole element: forage. In: An account of the battle of Waterloo, fought on the 18th of June, by the English and allied forces, commanded by the duke of Wellington p.28

²⁴ Cf. the criteria set for cantonments in general, as described by general-major Knoop. In: Quatre Bras en Waterloo p.23

²⁵ Cf. Gash, N. - Wellington and the Waterloo campaign p.2

²⁶ Cf. Memorandum on the battle of Waterloo. In: WSD, Vol.X p.523

²⁷ Aus meinem Leben, p.232-233
It should be stressed that this situation, with the reserve at Brussels, existed only from late May onwards.

²⁸ WSD, Vol.X p.523

²⁹ Cf. Wellington's Memo on the defence of the frontier of the Netherlands. In: NA, 2.02.01 nr.6592

Carmichael Smyth. In: NAK, WO 30/35 nr.7

Sir Hudson Lowe to major general Bunbury, 17th October 1814. In: WSD, Vol.IX p.349

In 1814, sir Hudson Lowe made a cursory tour along the southern frontier of the Netherlands, as he wrote a report entitled: "Private. Observations on a cursory tour along the frontier of the Belgick [sic] Province from Liège to Tournay. 1814" Manuscript in the LMB. Published in: Willems, R. - La barrière des Pays Bas 1715-1815. De Marlborough à Wellington. In: Carnet de la Fourragère (1948) p. 194-199

By mid June 1815, the ramparts of Charleroi were in a state of decay.

Cf. Aerts, W. - Etudes relatives etc. p.261-262

Delloye, S. - Charleroi 1815 p.4

Leloup - Les délices du Pays de Liège etc. p.333-334

Lithography of Jobard. In: De Cloet, Voyage pittoresque dans le royaume des Pays Bas Vol.II p.156

³⁰ There is a detailed sketch though of the strip of country along the Sambre, stretching from Namur to Peruwelz, entitled "Sketch of the military frontier of Belgium from Namur on the Meuse to Peruwelz to Tournai", as "reconnoitred in June 1814 by Charles Hamilton Smith, D.A.Q.M.Genl.". In: NAK, MR1.163 (28).

Cf. Lemoine-Isabeau, C. - La cartographie du territoire Belge de 1780 à 1830. Annex 6.W12

Another one is a survey carried out in 1815 along the Sambre between Charleroi and Lobbes by a captain Harris, with an accompanying plan. In: NAK, WO78.1765 and MPH 242/10

Cf. Lemoine-Isabeau, C. , La cartographie du territoire Belge de 1780 à 1830. Annex 6.W13

³¹ In: Considérations etc. In: NA, 2.02.01 nr.6592

In this document captain Van Swieten places his (what he calls second) line of defence here not along the Sambre but further north, extending from Braine le Comte in the west along Perwez as far as Tongres in the east, without mentioning any strongholds in these places however. Though he emphasizes other sectors as the one meant here, he yet mentions Namur as a potential point through which the French might irrupt, coming from Givet.

³² Cf. events of the 17th of June.

Von Clausewitz here completely misses the point of the allied cooperation in case a defence in front of Brussels would fail. He admits that Wellington could in that event move to the Meuse, while Blücher could move towards Wellington, upon Antwerp. There is evidence that the first scenario was realistic, but none of the second; in fact the Tirlemont scenario was the Prussian compromise towards Wellington. In: Campagne de 1815 en France p.42

³³ Geschichte etc. p.40

³⁴ Cf. Memorandum on the battle of Waterloo. In: WSD, Vol.X p.515-516

³⁵ Gash, N. - Wellington and the Waterloo campaign.p.2

³⁶ Cf. Memorandum on the battle of Waterloo. In: WSD, Vol.X p.518-519

³⁷ Gash, N. - Wellington and the Waterloo campaign.p.2

³⁸ At the end of March, colonel Colborne was yet highly optimistic about the cooperation of both armies in the distances involved, as he wrote on the 31st of March:

“However, I think everything must now go on well, even if we should be attacked before the arrival of duke of Wellington. Redoubts are to be immediately constructed at Hal, and on the roads where it may be necessary to halt and look about us. The whole will retire in three columns [...] and as the Prussians cross tomorrow and the Nassau brigade is at hand [at Namur] no disaster can happen to us on the march.” In: BL, Add.ms.37.052 f.115-116

³⁹ WD, Vol.XII p.360

⁴⁰ Cf. Wellington’s orders of the 15th of June.

For Hussey, depending on the circumstances, the Prussians could march over three roads to support Wellington: one through Charleroi – Binche – Mons, one through Charleroi – Quatre Bras – Nivelles and one through Namur – Sombreffe – Nivelles or Genappe.

Yet, as Wellington sought a defence deep within the country, well away from the frontier, the first one most probably wasn’t considered. In: The aftermath of Tirlemont etc. p.31 (footnote nr.20)

⁴¹ Pollio also sees that the concept of a concentration at both Sombreffe and Quatre Bras has never existed and that it is one invented at a later date. In: Waterloo p.166

⁴² Cf. chapter on the period 30th of April – 6th May.

According to Von Lettow Vorbeck the allies confined themselves to a most general arrangement in which they “[sich] nur zu gegenseitiger Unterstützung verpflichtet hatten.” In: Napoleon’s Untergang Vol.III p.272

According to Pollio there was no “*accord précis*” what to do in case of a French attack. In: Waterloo p.169

⁴³ Von Pflugk Harttung, J.von - Vorgeschichte etc. p.47 and in Die Vorgeschichte der Schlacht bei Quatre Bras, p.197-198

Original in KA. VI.E.3.Vol.II.p.53

It reached Prussian headquarters the same day. Cf. the note Ad acta, d.15.Juni. In: KA. VI.D.9.nr.257b In: Pflugk Harttung, J.von - Vorgeschichte etc. p.48

The “*ordre de bataille*”as referred to is not available.

⁴⁴ In: Bas, F.de & T’Serclaes de Wommersom, J.de - La campagne de 1815 etc. Vol.III p.444

⁴⁵ Wellington and the Waterloo campaign p.1