

The French advance towards the Sambre on the 15th of June.

As has been indicated before, the strategy of the central position was built upon two pillars: surprise and security.

Apart from the strict military measures taken, the detailed geography of the area to be used for the advance to this central position obviously played an important role in this approach.

The Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse, in this case the area roughly between Solre-sur-Sambre, Beaumont, Philippeville and Charleroi, was in 1815 generally characterised by the presence of large forests, scattered villages, sand-roads and waters which flow in deep and narrow low grounds.

From Lobbes to Sart-Eustache an almost unbroken, about four kilometre wide fringe of forests ran south of Charleroi. Further to the south, another fringe – but much more broken up, ran from Leers-Fosteau to Castillon, Lennesse and further towards Morialné. Parts of these forests were used by Napoleon to conceal his forces, the forests in front of Beaumont and those of Gaiolet and Naubert, further east, in particular. Though in his orders Soult speaks of the “grand route” leading from Philippeville to Charleroi, there was in the designated area not a piece of paved road whatsoever.¹

The main brooks here are the Biesme and the Heure, both flowing into the river Sambre. While it was for the Prussians a defence line, the river served for Napoleon as a barrier contributing both to the surprise and cover of the manoeuvre. After having traversed an inaccessible area in front of it, the allies may have thought that Napoleon might not take the trouble to cross this river. At the same time, the river allowed Napoleon to advance without the risk of a superior allied confrontation. But, this was not all.

From the *ordre de mouvement* it becomes clear that additional measures were taken by Napoleon to protect his advance in its front and flanks. First of all there was the screen of cavalry in front of the columns. On the left, d’Erlon was instructed to establish bridge-heads on the major crossing of the Sambre to make sure the Anglo-German-Netherlands army would not cross the river to fall upon the French flank or rear. Reconnaissances were to be carried out to make sure about any enemy movements on both flanks of the advancing army. Both flank columns were also instructed to move in such a way that they might be able to resist in case of an enemy attack.

² For the advance from Beaumont to Charleroi four connecting roads had been surveyed. Of these, two were basically used: those between Beaumont and Marbais and between Beaumont and Yves.³

In the advance, speed was the key. In the column to the left, Reille had left in time (at 3 a.m.) and had carried out a swift march, even including the actions at Maladrie, Thuin and Montigny-le-Tilleul. The only moment Reille seems to have been hesitating was when he arrived in front of Marchienne-au-Pont by 10 a.m.

He has been criticized for that [⁴], but he had a good reason to do so. As he knew through messengers that further to his right the central column in approaching Marcinelle by 9 a.m. had not started to cross the Sambre there, he felt the need to assemble most of his forces immediately south of the river, before entering the left bank in order to be sure about his forces there and to match up with the other column, which started to cross the river at Charleroi by 11 a.m. Apart from that, there was a simple technical reason for the delay as the bridge was not very wide and pontoons were not available.

Yet, it meant that as far as the Prussians was concerned that thanks to this lack of French progress, Von Steinmetz’ brigade was eventually able to link up with the rest of the 1st corps.⁵

Though the cavalry of Domon and Pajol almost left at their respective hours, the situation with the 3rd corps completely messed up the sequence and timing of the units in this column. The result was that there was a gap between the advance guard and the main column.

The serious delay in the departure of the 3rd corps is usually explained by the fact that Vandamme simply did not receive any orders. And this, in its turn, would have been caused by its messenger having fallen from his horse and thereby breaking his thigh. If this were true, what should have happened in that case is that the general officer, as mentioned by Janin, or someone else should not have informed Janin but Vandamme about the situation immediately. The truth about why Vandamme did not receive any orders will most probably never be disclosed, but the traditional explanation makes no common sense and simply cannot be maintained.⁶ The delay of Vandamme had its effects upon the units in rear and things had to be re-arranged by Napoleon himself to make sure that the cavalry, which was far ahead, had the infantry-assistance needed to cross the Sambre at Charleroi. As to counterbalance the delay of Vandamme, the Imperial Guard was ordered to the front of the central column, to take over the role of the 3rd corps.

The delay in the column of the 4th corps was even worse. Gérard left with his corps by 7 a.m. while he was supposed to leave at 3 a.m. His speed made the delay even larger as it was, as he covered the 30 kilometres in about 14 hours, thereby having an approximate speed of about 2.1 km / hour.

This delay of Gérard is sometimes being explained by the desertion of Bourmont and his staff [⁷], the terrain the troops had to march through [⁸] or the change of direction towards Châtelet. However, the first argument cannot be a reason as this desertion took place by 5 a.m., an hour at which Gérard should have left already. Both other elements may have played a role, but these were additional elements.

The deeper background of this delay can be found in the incomplete concentration of the corps north of Philippeville, the day before. Being drawn to the Armée du Nord late, it had been a very tight schedule to get there in time and faced a tremendous effort to advance already the next day for war. The result was that the corps was placed in scattered positions between Florennes and Couvin.

With the delays in departure at both the columns in the centre and to the right, the required coordination between the three columns in order to converge upon Charleroi almost simultaneously became impossible. Whether there have been attempts to coordinate at all cannot be fully corroborated from facts. The only circumstances which hints to this is the lingering of Reille at the river Sambre - before actually crossing it – until he could be sure the centre column did the same.

Napoleon was to be kept informed by the corps commanders about their progress, but for the existence of written reports there is no evidence.⁹ There is no doubt, however, that Napoleon was informed about the progress of the columns, at least on the one in the centre where he personally intervened by moving forward the Imperial Guard.

The column to the left was the first one to reach the Sambre and by doing so, it had formally complied to the *ordre de mouvement* of the 14th of June. By the time Napoleon had allowed the 2nd corps to cross the river at Charleroi instead of Marchienne-au-Pont, the corps had already arrived at Marchienne-au-Pont. What caused Napoleon to make this alteration remains unknown.

It has been suggested that it would have been wiser of Napoleon to have 1st corps advance on the left bank of the Sambre. By solely advancing on the right bank of the Sambre, Napoleon would have exposed himself to the danger of losing precious time for the crossing of his whole army of the Sambre in case he would meet fierce resistance there. The idea would be that the 1st corps could advance in a parallel way to the 2nd and that it could cover its left flank.¹⁰

Yet, first of all, this idea is in complete contradiction to Napoleon's axioma of cover afforded by the Sambre within the strategy he used. Other than that, such an advance would also be in contradiction to his other axioma: to keep one's forces concentrated in such a way that they can be *à portée* to each other all the time; a river splitting them in two would not allow this. Last but not least, it was just because of his fear that Wellington might fall upon his rear that Napoleon took precautions at the Sambre river with the 1st corps; if he would have it advance on the other side of this river, he would take the risk that it might succumb under allied superiority, being cut off from sufficient support in time.¹¹

For the 15th of June, Napoleon intended "d'avoir passé la Sambre avant midi, et de porter l'armée à la rive gauche de cette rivière." From the context this is written in the general order, it becomes clear that Napoleon expected from his initial advance that his vanguards would have crossed the Sambre before noon, and that he would be able to bring his army over this river to the central position around Charleroi during the remainder of the day.

For a proper assessment of the advance towards the Sambre, the only question therefore is whether these vanguards did actually cross the river Sambre before noon that day. On the left, Reille had reached Marchienne-au-Pont by 10 a.m. but had started to cross the Sambre with the majority of his corps towards 12.30 / 1 o'clock. In the centre, Pajol crossed around 11 a.m., while to the right the front of the 4th corps did not do so until in the evening. The preliminaries to the events later that day should therefore be qualified as a partial success.

Napoleon's intentions versus allied expectations.

Surprise may have been the key element of Napoleon's attack, but what matters is the basic question: were the allied commanders actually surprised on the 15th of June ?

A background to the way of how the allied commanders reacted on the attack of Napoleon on the 15th of June can be filtered from an analysis of the intelligence they had on Napoleon's activities and the true state of affairs on his side.¹²

During the first half of April, the allies were informed about the fact that French forces were deployed along the north frontier of France, from Dunkerque and Lille as far as the Moselle and the Rhine. Though Wellington deemed a French attack highly improbable, in case Napoleon would attack he thought he would most probably do so between the rivers Scheldt and Sambre. Upon which information he based this idea remains unknown.

After that period of time, the impression was one of a more or less stationary situation on the French side but this changed by the end of April. Then, information about the whereabouts of the Imperial Guard and Napoleon himself triggered Wellington to take preventive defensive measures. He reckoned a French irruption could take place in front of all sectors of his frontline and this may have been caused by the fact that he thought French forces were extended along the line stretching from Lille as far as Metz. In reality, however, this frontline was much smaller as it involved the line Valenciennes – Maubeuge – Mézières, while being linked to Paris through Laon. Napoleon, in his turn, took into account a possible allied irruption upon Avesnes.

This very concentration of French forces between Valenciennes and Mézières emerged as a threat upon Wellington again in the second week of May, but not as one coming from this sector as a whole, but from the one stretching from Valenciennes to Maubeuge.

The situation caused the Prussian army to move away from the Moselle and to take positions along the Meuse. Some days later, however, the threat appeared to have been a *defensive* concentration of Napoleon on the Sambre after all. From the allied point of view this reasoning was not illogical at all, as what they had planned was an invasion of France. Meanwhile, in May, this invasion was postponed to the 16th of June. They could be sure that their opponent would be aware of this delay as well. So early May, the mutual chance of an invasion had eventually resulted in defensive measures on *both* sides, instead of an invasion on one of them.

From the second week of May until the 15th of June reports of Napoleon having left or about to leave Paris continued to stream towards Brussels and Namur unabated. Throughout the month of May, also more detailed information about the strengths and whereabouts of the main French forces dropped in and these roughly pointed to an area between Paris and the frontier in the north, i.e. from Paris, through Guise and Laon, to the line Valenciennes – Maubeuge – Avesnes – Rocroi – Mézières and Metz. And while intelligence told the allied commanders about the rise in the Vendée in May and the military movements as a result, the first speculations on a possible French offensive in the north at specific dates started to come through. During the first two weeks of June, Wellington and Blücher were alerted about a returning threat from Maubeuge. As a result, the prince of Orange and general Zieten took measures to have their corps in readiness to be able concentrate at any moment; this situation was maintained until war broke out.

With this situation, the French threat shifted from the line Valenciennes – Maubeuge to Maubeuge as the main concentration point of the French army. In real life, the French *Armée du Nord* was then in the area between Paris, Valenciennes, Maubeuge, Philippeville and Metz. During the last two days before the campaign started, Wellington felt that his and Blücher's army were too strong for Napoleon to attack them, but he did not rule out the fact altogether that he could.¹³

Meanwhile, both Blücher and Gneisenau felt on the 11th and 12th of June that the threat had diminished. As the threat had passed, Von Müffling - in his turn - believed on the morning of the 15th of June that the French movements around Maubeuge were not intended to strike on the Netherlands, but to mask a possible major concentration around St.Menehould. His guess was that Napoleon could operate in a defensive war from this central position against allied columns coming from the north and from the east.

It was on the 14th and 15th of June that intelligence was acquired in both Brussels and Namur on a French concentration east of Maubeuge, towards Beaumont and north-west of this place, towards the frontier. As a result of this, Zieten took preparatory measures to make a concentration of his corps possible, but he did not push this through on the 14th of June (see below). Wellington did not take any further measures, as what the prince had done before.

Though the Prussians had their own intelligence, most of the information which they obtained about French activities came in through Brussels, Ghent and Charleroi. At some stage, this information involved French movements in the sector Valenciennes – Mézières. Yet, in *both* armies a potential threat seems predominantly to have been felt as coming from Valenciennes – Maubeuge, and still later Maubeuge and its immediate vicinity. The sector further to the east, as far as Mézières and Rocroi was virtually non-existent. For the Prussians this meant a threat upon their extreme right flank, and for Wellington one upon Mons in particular. Only at the very latest moment the presence of a concentration east of Maubeuge, near Beaumont transpired.

In the mishmash of information which reached both allied headquarters, it was of course the trick to select information which could be regarded as reliable information. Additionally, it

needed time to travel to these places, so in this respect both allied commanders were in a vulnerable position.

The departure of Napoleon and the Imperial Guard could be an important signal for an imminent attack, but since May this kind of information was delivered almost on a daily base. In the “confusion” of French activities which took place for several weeks in all kind of geographical areas, it was the trick to determine those movements which could be qualified as more pronounced and which as such made the difference between a supposed and a real concentration of forces. Obviously, this applied to both lateral movements and those in a south-north direction.

Former experience had taught the allies - and Wellington in particular - that Napoleon’s activities could very well be defensive ones, instead of offensive ones. An invasion was not only the option for Napoleon, but also one for the allies. In short: there was a risk that a concentration of the *Armée du Nord* aiming at the invasion of the Netherlands could be absorbed into a pattern of so-called defensive activities while these were not - and this is what actually happened.

This connection is of eminent importance to understand and assess the proper value of the surprise effect of the concentration of the *armée du nord*. In the traditional historiography of the campaign of 1815 it is common practice to assign the success of this concentration through its concentration *per se*, but the phenomenon has far larger dimensions in both time and space. The way the allies were moulded by what they had experienced about the enemy in the months before the middle of June substantially contributed for Napoleon – also unwillingly - to the success of his masked concentration of the *armée du Nord*.

The result was that the allies were not surprised about the *fact* that Napoleon attacked; in fact they had taken it account for a long time that he *could*. What they *were* surprised about was the timing and the direction of the attack. It was at the very latest moment that general Zieten expected to be attacked on the 15th of June or shortly thereafter.

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¹ The map of Ferraris indicates it as a “grand chemin.”
Cf. Aerts, W. – Etudes etc. p.246-247

² D’Erlon was supposed to move in such a way that he would be able to support the 2nd corps, if necessary. The 4th corps, being on its own in the column to the right due to the absence of the 3rd corps was supposed to move “serré en ordre de bataille.” Whether Gérard did so is unclear.

³ It remains unclear why the central column moved through Les-Hayes-de-Nalinnes (so further east), while there was a direct road connecting Marbais and Marcinelle through Bomerée.

⁴ Oosterman, J.T. – De overgang van de Sambre etc. p.161

⁵ Cf. J.von Pflugk Harttung In: GSA, VPH-HA,VI, nr.II.11.p.62 and II.12.p.43

⁶ Bleibtreu also considers the theory of the broken thigh to be a pretext. In: England’s grosse Waterloo-lüge p.36

Napoleon himself clearly puts the blame on Vandamme, without entering into any details however. In: Mémoires pour servir etc. p.180

Thiers’ version is a typical pro-Napoleon one of the events, blaming the delay of Vandamme on Soult as having sent out one messenger, the fact that Vandamme himself was hard to find being in an isolated house. Thiers also comes up with the myth of the broken thigh. In Histoire du consulat etc. Vol.VI p.431

According to Gourgaud the 3rd corps left in time but was delayed by taking wrong roads. In: La campagne de 1815 p.37

Cf. Pontécoulant, F.G. de - Souvenirs militaires p.21

Oosterman, J.T. – De overgang etc. p.89

Oosterman points to several elements for coming to the natural cause of the delay such as:

-Vandamme could also have asked for his orders, the moment it became clear he didn’t get any

-Vandamme could know about the orders for Domon, Lobau etc.

-in Vandamme’s column, also engineers and pontoons had to move along and it is highly improbable that this was not discussed before

However, even though Vandamme had been informed of what was expected of him regarding the time of departure of his corps (3 a.m.) in the general order dated 13th of June, this does not mean that he could take it for granted that this was going to be the actual order to receive. In: Register of staff. In: BNP, FR.Nouv.acq.4366

In relation to the confusion about the destination of Vandamme’s corps in the days before the outbreak of hostilities, it should not be fully excluded that a messenger could possibly have been sent to Philippeville, the place where Vandamme was supposed to be accordingly to the original instructions.

⁷ Quinet, E. - Histoire de la campagne de 1815. p.82

⁸ Gourgaud - Campagne de dix huit cent quinze. p.37

⁹ Reports written to Napoleon and / or Soult were produced in the evening by the following commanders: d'Erlon (4.30 p.m.), Reille (9 p.m.), Vandamme (10 p.m.), Gérard (possibly 10 p.m.), Lobau (8 p.m.); no reports are available from Drouot and Grouchy.

¹⁰ Cf. Oosterman, J.T. – De overgang van de Sambre etc. p.87, 158

¹¹ Oosterman incorrectly claims that d'Erlon had the powers to cross the Sambre at Aulne. He was allowed to do this, but only as to guard the bridge-head there, not in his full strength for manoeuvring on the left bank. Cf. De overgang van de Sambre etc. p. 91, 161

¹² This background and analysis though can only be of a very general character as the intelligence which the allied commanders used was much more extensive as we currently have it. In addition: intelligence regarding strengths of French units are left out in this analysis, as these cannot be compared to the actual strengths of them through time.

¹³ Cf. Hussey, J. – Thirty-six hours in Belgium etc. p.16

For this viewpoint, see Wellington's letter to lord Lynedoch and the letters from major general Van Reede and baron Van der Capellen, both dated 15th of June.