

Napoleon divides his forces: the right wing.

Introduction.

After 2 p.m. - from Belle Vue - Napoleon issued orders to the 2nd, the 1st and the 4th corps, as well as to Ney. The appointment of Ney as commander of the left wing, however, did not automatically mean that the right wing was assigned its commander as well. This was caused by the fact that Napoleon was called to his right wing to intervene there; with his presence, there was no reason for Napoleon to appoint one. If Grouchy would have been commander over the right wing on the 15th of June, he would have reported on the units forming part of this wing in his reports of the evening of the 15th of June and the very early morning of the 16th (5 a.m.), but in both reports he contains himself to those of the reserve-cavalry.

Further, more importantly, it was on the morning of the 16th of June that Grouchy was formally informed in writing by Napoleon and Soult of his new command. Also, both Vandamme and Gérard were informed about Grouchy's new command at the same time. The inevitable conclusion is that Grouchy acted on the 15th of June in his original position as commander of the reserve-cavalry, and not as commander of the right wing.¹

By designating commanders for the two wings *during* and not before campaign, Napoleon did not allow them the time to properly assemble effective staff officers, establish rapport with their subordinates and understand their roles.²

The action at Gilly.

The French plan to attack the Prussians in their position near Gilly was pretty straightforward: pin the enemy's line by a frontal attack, while at the same time to turn its flank so as to intercept and destroy it. For the frontal attack part of Vandamme's corps and (possibly) Pajol were used, while Exelmans was supposed to turn the enemy on its left. The moment however that Napoleon saw the Prussians slip away the moment he barely had started his advance, he launched his duty squadrons in a frontal charge. For some reason Napoleon felt that he didn't have any suitable cavalry around and that is why he launched these squadrons, even though these were units which were not to be involved just like that. For some unknown reason Pajol must not have been available right away, but yet his forces were the perfect weapon to charge the Prussian line and to roll it up, especially in conjunction with Exelmans being on the other flank.

In reading Grouchy's report about the 15th of June, it can be derived that Pajol was used in the pursuit of the Prussians over the road coming from Charleroi, not in the action itself. Pajol himself is not explicit about the action either: he asserts that his corps was in the frontline all the time, but doesn't give any details.

By the time the French infantry could have reached the Prussian front line, it had fallen back for the French cavalry; the encounter only took place further to the rear, at the edge of the wood. It should be noted that the distance between the French front line and this edge (near Sart Allet) was about 1.5 kilometre.

Aware of the Prussian presence to the right, Napoleon, expected to have a confrontation with the Prussians first, therefore he saw the possibility for the 4th corps of Gérard to pass the river Sambre at Châtelet, not so much as to avoid any congestion at Charleroi, but as to give him a role in a possible action against the Prussians. That's why the order of 3.30 p.m. to Gérard. However, it proved far too late that Gérard crossed the river to play a role in the events at Gilly later that day.³

Having seen himself the Prussians in the position of Gilly and having developed a plan of attack there with the cavalry and infantry eventually available, Napoleon obviously intended to crush

the Prussian force there. However, though the emperor had the most of the Young Guard at hand, the only forces he then had available against the Prussians to his right were formed by cavalry. For some reason, he preferred to use infantry of the line, and not of the guard – in this situation not a very wise decision. This is the more singular as the Imperial guard was ordered to replace the 3rd corps to head the central column, and then one would expect it would then also be used in this way.

Yet, Napoleon spared at least the Young Guard as a reserve for Pajol and the French staff started to wait for the 3rd corps, just the one all these changes in the central column were done for in order to gain precious time, and which was now lost again. One wonders why this futile changes had been arranged at all. ⁴

Though he had ordered Gérard to make a short-cut through Châtelet, Napoleon felt a serious shortage of infantry of the line, supposing there would be an action with the Prussians on his right. The only corps which was near enough was the one of Vandamme but that was by that time just in front of Charleroi. Although he could have used an aide de camp to do so, Napoleon himself apparently saw reason enough to ride back towards Charleroi to speed it up himself.

Eventually, the French did attack the Prussians but before the French could actually push through their attack, their adversaries got away for the most part to positions in rear of Fleurus; the French, accordingly, took up their positions in front of this village. ⁵

It was with his 4th corps that Napoleon would have been able to turn what was now a mere direct offensive onto the 1st Prussian corps into a manoeuvre, thereby giving him the chance to actually destroy it. If the 4th corps had started its march far ahead of the other columns and further to the right, for instance towards Lambusart, in this combination Napoleon would have fixed Zieten from the west and turned him through Lambusart. Gérard's goal was changed to Châtelet, but this change was too late and not thorough enough to make a difference. If Napoleon would actually have outmanoeuvred Zieten there, he would at least have disturbed the Prussian concentration and battle-plan near Sombreffe. ⁶

To the left, Napoleon also had the chance of cutting off Von Steinmetz, but he slipped through via Gosselies, back to the 1st corps, and this would in that case also have been impossible. ⁷

The right wing and the strategy of the central position.

In the context of his strategy, Napoleon wanted to establish his army in a central position around Charleroi. For the 15th of June, this meant a left wing eventually to be in a position between Gosselies and Marchienne-au-Pont. This goal can be taken from original documents, but for the right wing - at least for the 15th of June - this is less evident. Obviously, this is complicated by the fact that Napoleon could expect more resistance on his right as on his left, as he reckoned. By hitting the Prussians they would either confront him near the Sambre or fall back to some position further east.

Napoleon contents himself in blaming Vandamme that he had not been able to reach Fleurus on the very night of the 15th, but not so much by his refusal to advance any further that evening, but by his delay in the march towards Gilly. ⁸

On the other hand, no commander is blamed for not reaching places like Fleurus or Sombreffe by Napoleon or Soult in the official documents of the French general headquarters of the morning of the 16th of June. In these, Sombreffe is the key destination, and for reaching this place plenty of time is given. If it would have been the goal for the day before, this schedule would have been out of the question.

When it comes down to his mission for this day, marshal Grouchy's claims are contradictory. On the one hand he claims he had a mission, given by Napoleon, to penetrate as far as Fleurus [⁹], while on the other he claims his mission reached as far as Sombreffe, with posts towards

Gembloux and Namur. ¹⁰ Neither for the first instruction nor for the second there is any proof, and in the second case Grouchy might well have confused it with his instructions of the 16th of June.

Taking the complexities of possible hostilities on the right wing into account it may very well have been that Napoleon had Fleurus in his mind as a target for the 15th of June, but for this there is no real strong proof. ¹¹

General observations on the French activities on the 15th of June.

In the context of the application of the strategy of the central position, Napoleon had planned to have his army on the left bank of the Sambre on the 15th of June, but the question rises whether this goal had been achieved.

The question arises how Napoleon could expect to have the most of his army to cross the Sambre virtually without any delay. Apart from the delays in the departures of the several army-corps in the advance towards the Sambre-river, the unavoidable congestion resulted.

The front-width, including Marchienne-au-Pont, was simply too small (barely five kilometres) for an army of 120.000 men. ¹² Extending it to the right, for instance towards Châtelet, would have been a serious option. ¹³

The features of the area on the right bank of the Sambre and south of Charleroi formed part of the element of surprise Napoleon was aiming at, but at the same time they formed a risk in delays in case things did not run as planned. The roads towards the Sambre did not allow a swift advance specially in case there would be enemy resistance south of this river.

That night, Napoleon had the following units north of the Sambre: the 2nd corps, the 1st corps (without the divisions of Marcognet and Quiot and the cavalry brigade of Gobrecht), the 3rd corps, the division Hulot of the 4th corps, the Imperial Guard, the cavalry corps of Pajol, Exelmans and Milhaud, in total about 85.000 men (71 % of the army). ¹⁴

At the Sambre itself were the divisions of Marcognet (1st corps) and the ones of Pécheux and Vichery (of the 4th corps), in total about 12.785 men (11 % of the army). ¹⁵

Still south of the river were the 6th corps, the *grand-parc*, the corps of Kellerman, plus the divisions Quiot and the 2nd cavalry brigade (Gobrecht) of the 1st corps and the cavalry division of Maurin (of the 4th corps), in total about 21.178 men (18 % of the army). ¹⁶

So, of all three columns, several parts totalling almost one third of the army, were still south of the Sambre on the night of the 15th of June. Taking into account all the delays and the congestion, the result could have been worse.

In theory, the strategy of the central position asked for a two or three days march between the left and right wing. This corresponds to the 40 - 45 kilometres as needed for the creation of a full *rupture stratégique*. The question arises why Napoleon, as coming from the line Marchienne-au-Pont - Charleroi, did not unfold his two wings in a more or less equal way to both the east and west. It would have allowed him the space to manoeuvre and in this way he could make sure he had created sufficient interval between both his opponents right away. This could - for instance - have been a deployment from Marchienne-au-Pont on the line towards Courcelles and Trazegnies.

Though it is asking questions derived from later events, this in all probability had to do with the fact that Brussels was the main target of the first stage of the campaign. By not diverging too far left, it would allow Napoleon to head straight up from Charleroi to Brussels, after having thrown Blücher away to the east. This approach was very closely linked to Napoleon's belief that Wellington would be reluctant or able to concentrate his army in front of the *armée du Nord* right away. Additionally, it allowed both French wings - within the followed strategy - more easy mutual support on a short distance, if needed.

Chances for the 16th of June.

Taking all French operations of the 15th of June together, Napoleon had carried out an etappe on his left to throw his forces towards Brussels and on his right to throw his forces against Blücher. The “central position” in his strategy he had taken was roughly marked by the line Mont-sur-Marchienne – Châtelet – Fleurus – Frasnes – Gosselies.¹⁷

Yet, that day Napoleon had not been able to destroy or to disperse the corps of Zieten: in fact it had gone back without any confusion and with some resistance at some points. As the 1st Prussian corps was still on its own, it would have been a huge advantage if Napoleon would have been able to destroy it, but it was not to be.¹⁸

But even though his forces had faced several delays that day, from the positions Napoleon had on the night of the 15th of June, he still was able the next morning, if he would act swiftly, to prevent Blücher and Wellington from concentrating their armies right in front of him. Of course, Napoleon couldn't know if they would, but in the current situation - right in front of the enemy - such a concentration was of course a risk for both allied commanders.¹⁹ For Napoleon, moving further east on the early morning of the 16th of June could mean either a disruption of a Prussian concentration (which was covered by the withdrawal of Zieten) or the enhancement of a Prussian retreat towards Namur.

In the way Napoleon's operations on the 15th of June were finished (even with all their problems and therefore the lack of disrupting Zieten's concentration), they could yield serious prospects for further progress the next day, but all would depend upon further operations.²⁰

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¹ Cf. Pascallet, M.E. Notice biographique sur le maréchal Grouchy p.56

Jomini to the duke of Elchingen, 15th october 1841. In: Souvenirs et correspondance etc.p.119 and in the AN, fonds Ney, nr.137 AP 18

Gourgaud for instance also doesn't mention Grouchy's command on the 15th of June at all. In: La campagne de 1815

Napoleon, in his memoirs, doesn't make any allusion to a command of Grouchy over the right wing whatsoever.

Le Sénécal states that Grouchy, after his discussion with Vandamme on the evening of the 15th, reported this back to Napoleon; the result was that Napoleon reported back to Grouchy that precise instructions would go out to the corps commanders, i.e. to obey Grouchy. This would mean that Napoleon did actually give Grouchy the command but didn't formalize it yet on the 15th to the respective commanders. In: Mémoires du maréchal Grouchy. Vol.IV p.126-127

Houssaye claims Napoleon did give the command over the right wing orally, but that he forgot to communicate this to Vandamme. In: Houssaye, H. 1815.Waterloo p.127

The discussion on what Napoleon was heading for that day (cf. below), is often linked to the shares and responsibilities of Grouchy and Vandamme. And in this, it is often being asserted as if Grouchy had the command over the right wing, and thus over Vandamme. This general, after having participated in the action of Gilly, would have refused to advance any further and that he established his bivouacs, to the annoyance of Grouchy (and Pajol at least, see below).

The confusing element here is that Grouchy himself sometimes indicates that he actually had the command over the right wing, but he did so in order, subsequently, to devolve the responsibility of a lack of progress to Vandamme.

Cf. Grouchy. In: Relation succincte p.13

Rélation de la campagne de 1815 p.11-12

Le Sénécal. In: Mémoires du maréchal de Grouchy Vol.IV p.127

Grouchy even quotes an order, carried by Pontbellanger, which he would have written out for Vandamme, which reads:

15 juin 1815, à 6 heures du soir

Au lieu de prendre position, portez-vous de suite sur Fleurus où le corps du général Zieten s'est rallié, et d'où, en conformité des ordres de l'Empereur, il doit être chassé ce soir, ce que je ne puis faire avec ma seule cavalerie.

In: Grouchy. Ordres données par le maréchal de Grouchy etc. p.2 and in Relation succincte 3^e série p.2

In the same publication Grouchy also mentions a similar order also dated 6 p.m. given in his name and carried by Bella for Vandamme "de descendre des hauteurs en arrière de Fleurus, au lieu d'y faire prendre position à son infanterie, et de venir coopérer à l'attaque de cette ville etc." In: Relation succincte 2^e série p.14

Apart from the fact that by 6 p.m. the attack of Gilly had just started, Grouchy – from his capacity as commander of the cavalry – could never have written this order for Vandamme.

² Cf. Kirkpatrick, D. – Fighting in the fog of war etc. p.26

³ Jomini erroneously claims that Napoleon sent a column through Châtelet to intercept Prussian units which came from Namur. In: Précis politique etc. p.126

⁴ It is also H.de Mauduit (member of the Old Guard) who expresses his strong astonishment about the way the Guard was used that day: first a forced march to reach Charleroi and beyond, and then suddenly a halt in front of Gilly, where the Prussians were, but seeing no action. In: Les derniers jours etc. Vol.II p.13

⁵ The claim of Grouchy and his aide de camp Bella that Vandamme immediately attacked the Prussians, but was forced back by the enemy cannot be maintained as Pirch II himself says nothing about such a success and if this had been the case, he would have mentioned it. It is (another) attempt to blame any misfortune to Vandamme. In: Relation succincte p.11-12 and 4^e série p.31

⁶ It is Chesney who sees the importance of the delay of Gérard as well, but he doesn't actually specify it. In: Waterloo conférences p.111

⁷ Lenient, E. - La solution etc. p.141-145

⁸ Cf. Mémoires pour servir etc. p.180-181
Also see: Gourgaud - La campagne de 1815 p.57

⁹ In: Ordre données par le maréchal Grouchy etc. p.2

¹⁰ Grouchy. In: Relation de la campagne de 1815 p.11-12
Grouchy in a letter to baron Berthézène, dated 23rd november 1840. In: Mémoires du maréchal de Grouchy. Vol.V p.457-458 In this letter he claims there were written instructions, but these have never existed.

¹¹ In his report of the evening of the 15th of June, Pajol criticizes Vandamme in not having been willing to support him to take Fleurus. He writes:
“J'aurais occupé ce village [Fleurus], si le général Vandamme eut voulu m'envoyer et me soutenir par quelque infanterie; mais il paraît que ce général a pris à tache de faire tout ce qui est contraire à la guerre, car il a négligé d'occuper Lambusart et la tête du Bois de Gilly à Fleurus, qui sont les deux points principaux, dans la position ou nous nous trouvons.”
Yet, this does not necessarily have to mean that Pajol was actually ordered to push as far as Fleurus.

Napoleon claims he intended to have his headquarters at Fleurus by the night of the 15th, but this statement is mere conjecture in light of all discussions later (see below) In: Mémoires etc. p.180-181

According to Rogniat the key element was a swift march on the 15th of June as far as Fleurus, while having an advanced guard towards Sombreffe. In: Considérations etc. p.343

¹² Cf. Oosterman, J.T. – De overgang van de Sambre etc. p.87

The *Armée du Nord* was composed thus:

1st corps: 19323 men. 2nd corps: 22569 men. 3rd corps: 17379 men. 4th corps: 15.249 men.

6th corps: 9861 Pajol: 2830 men. Exelmans: 3000 men. Kellermann: 3855 men. Milhaud: 3516 men. Imperial guard: 20826 men. Grand-parc and general staff: about 1200 men. In: SHD. C15 nr.34 and 35

¹³ Lenient, E. - La solution etc. p.145

The fact that the French didn't use any pontoon bridges may have been caused by the fact that these units (divided over two sections) were too far to the rear to be used in time, but there is no 100% proof for that. Cf. Von Pflugk Harttung. In: GSA, VPH-HA, VI nr.II.12 p.39 and Oosterman, J.T. – De overgang van de Sambre etc. p.87

¹⁴ 1st corps: 10239 men. 2nd corps: 22569 men. 3rd corps: 17379 men. Division Hulot: 4647 men. Imperial Guard: 20826 men. Pajol: 2830 men. Exelmans: 3000 men. Milhaud 3516 men. In: SHD. C15, nr.34 and nr.35

¹⁵ Division Marcognet: 4151 men. Divisions Pécheux and Vichery: 4423 and 4211 men. In: SHD. C15, nr.35

¹⁶ 6th corps: 9861 men. Grand-parc: 1000 men. Kellermann: 3855 men. Division Quiot: 4230 men. Brigade Gobrecht: 700 men. Division Maurin: 1532 men. In: SHD. C15, nr.35

¹⁷ Napoleon himself says about this position: “L’armée française bivouqua, dans la nuit du 15 au 16, dans un carré de quatre lieues de côté; elle était également en mesure d’appuyer sur l’armée prusso-saxonne ou sur celle anglo-hollandaise; elle se trouvait déjà placée entre elles. Les deux armées ennemies étaient surprises, leurs communications déjà fort gênées. Toutes les manœuvres de l’empereur avaient réussi à souhait; il était désormais le maître d’attaquer en détail les armées ennemies; il ne leur restait, pour éviter ce malheur, le plus grand de tous, que le parti de céder le terrain et de se réunir sur Bruxelles ou au delà.” In: Mémoires pour servir etc. p.87

Roughly, it measured about 10 x 10 kilometres. Cf. Oosterman, J.T. – De overgang over de Sambre etc. p.160

¹⁸ Von Pflugk Harttung. In: Fehler etc. In: GSA, VPH-HA VI nr.II,11 p.14

GSA, VPH-HA, HA VI, II.12 p.56

Colonel Hardinge criticizes the Prussian leadership for having left the 1st corps on its own for too long and so far ahead against the French, as in his view the decision for a defensive had already been taken on the 15th of June. Colonel Hardinge to colonel Gurwood, 20th July 1838. In: HL, MS61 WP 7.2.21

¹⁹ Aerts, W. - Etudes etc.p.283

²⁰ Grouard concludes that the situation on the night of the 15th of June was a most favourable one for Napoleon, but in this Grouard too much takes the concentration of Blücher and Wellington in front of the French army as a fact, and this is something Napoleon couldn't know and - at least on his left – did not really expect. In: La critique de la campagne de 1815 p.43-44