

## **Napoleon, Grouchy and the Prussian army: observations.**

Napoleon's situation and ideas.

**F**irst of all, in the total picture of the mission of Grouchy it is of paramount significance to stress Napoleon's presumption which lay at the basis of it: that the Prussian army was either moving towards Namur, away from Wellington, or towards a point between Brussels and Liège, to seek for a junction with Wellington there after all.

Further, Napoleon reckoned that Blücher's army would be unable to fight any action before the 19<sup>th</sup> of June. At the same time, Napoleon expected from Wellington that he would fall back beyond Brussels. And if he would dare to make a stand south of Brussels, he would then be left to his mercy on his own.

As such, Napoleon's ideas about the allies' line of retreat, or rather, their potential positions for a defence deeper down into the Netherlands, fitted almost seamlessly to the way they were actually designed by the allies there, if the need arose. As has been described in the preambles of the campaign, for both the allies and their opponent, the strategic dimensions for a campaign in the Netherlands were far larger as they have traditionally been described.

On the 17<sup>th</sup> of June it became clear to Napoleon that Wellington sought for a confrontation just south of the forest of Soignes. The emperor was confident however that this stand would not last: he expected to annihilate Wellington's army or at least to push it back beyond the forest, or further, beyond Brussels.

The same day, Napoleon had also become aware of the fact that a Prussian column of major strength had been moving towards Wavre. <sup>1</sup> Presuming Grouchy would know about this as well and that he would take the appropriate steps, he did not share this information with Grouchy.

As he received Grouchy's report of 10 p.m. on the morning of the 18<sup>th</sup> of June, Napoleon realized that Grouchy was apparently *not* aware of the presence of this column. <sup>2</sup> In his mind, Grouchy would be able to repair the situation though by basically shifting his sector from the Meuse to the north, to Wavre. Therefore, at 10 a.m., Napoleon pressed Grouchy to go there and to push the Prussian forces beyond Wavre in order to prevent them from using this place as a base for further movements.

It is within this strategic context that Napoleon now pulled Grouchy back into his operation-area to make sure he was *à portée* in case it proved necessary to prevent Blücher of posing a threat upon the right flank of the main French army south of Brussels. At the same time, it would also allow himself to link up with Grouchy for joint operations beyond Brussels against the allies in case they would link up there. From now on, this situation asked for a careful fine-tuning, so therefore Napoleon attached a high significance to a frequent communication from Grouchy's side about his own and the enemy's operations.

In the time-frame of three hours after issuing the order of 10 a.m., two pieces of information dropped in at French headquarters: first of all, that a Prussian force of some apparently relative small size was approaching at Chapelle Saint Lambert and second that Grouchy was heading for Wavre.

These elements triggered Napoleon to issue his order of 1 p.m. In the order of 10 a.m., Grouchy's presence at Wavre in itself was the means of establishing the new operational base upon which Napoleon desired to act. Now, in the order of 1 p.m., Napoleon asked Grouchy to actually manoeuvre towards the main army so as to be able to join it before any Prussian force might place itself between him and Grouchy.

It is crucial to state here that this last request was *not* based upon the actual presence of

“*quelques troupes*” further east. First of all, by 1 p.m. the identity, exact location and intention of this force was still unknown. More importantly, as it was deemed not that much of a threat both in its strength and intention, Grouchy was supposed to deal with it in the act of manoeuvring towards the main army.

The background of the order, first of all, was the presumption in French general headquarters that by the time Grouchy would receive it, he would have pushed the Prussian army beyond Wavre.<sup>3</sup> As it was obviously presumed that the battle at Mont Saint Jean would be victorious, it was also presumed that by the time Grouchy would receive the document, the main army would no longer be near Mont Saint Jean, but further north. It was therefore left to Grouchy to discover the precise location where to find the main army in order to establish the operational line with it.

The significance of the operational union of the main army and Grouchy’s detachment was considered as the first priority for future operations beyond the battle which had just started near Mont Saint Jean. The dealing by Grouchy with what was considered as a minor threat further east was at that moment considered an *extra* advantage of the main purpose Napoleon was aiming at: the union of both parts of the *Armée du nord* in such a way that they could act from the same operational base against a possible allied junction deeper into the Netherlands. As a matter of fact, what now counted for Napoleon was not so much his aim to keep his opponents split, but to prevent his own of being so.

In other words, by 1 p.m., it was all about the pure military principle behind this measure: Grouchy’s direction had to be the *main army*, *whether it still was at Mont Saint Jean (engaged in a battle) or not (in pursuit of Wellington)*.<sup>4</sup>

For this reason, the original order of 1 p.m. had no relation with the Prussian intervention as we know it, as this is all hindsight.<sup>5</sup> Obviously, Napoleon was not aware of the fact that other Prussian corps as the 4<sup>th</sup> were on their way to Mont Saint Jean. Let alone the fact that by 1 p.m. the state of affairs at Mont Saint Jean for the French was all but hopeless; in fact the grand offensive which would settle the battle yet had to start and the presence of “*quelques troupes*” further east was not considered conclusive for its outcome.

It did not take long before these forces were identified, located and their intention determined: it was the 4<sup>th</sup> corps, led by general Bülow, at Chapelle Saint Lambert, bent on attacking Napoleon’s right flank.<sup>6</sup> And this was duly communicated to Grouchy in a post-scriptum.

That is also why just then a further indication was added about where the main army was located as it was expected there to stay for some time to come: in front of the forest of Soignes, on the line of the village of Waterloo, and not somewhere further west or east (in 1815 the forest extended over about 14 kilometres from Alsemberg in the west to La Hulpe in the east).

Eventually, it is of paramount significance to understand the 1 p.m. order in its stages of development and not as a full order which was written in one stroke.

Since the late hours of the 16<sup>th</sup> of June, Napoleon had been aware of the fact that Bülow had not seen any action at Ligny, so he knew the corps was still relatively fresh. At the same time, having Grouchy between Bülow and the other parts of Blücher’s army beyond Wavre, Napoleon saw a unique chance to crush Bülow in the act of uniting both parts of the *Armée du Nord*. As Grouchy would fall upon Bülow from the rear as the hammer, Lobau could act as the anvil on the right flank of the army at Mont Saint Jean. And in case Wellington would have been defeated well before Bülow would have joined his ally, then Bülow would be left on his own between both parts of the French army, as Grouchy would then have cut of him off from the remainder of the army.

Grouchy’s situation and ideas.

By the late evening of the 17<sup>th</sup> of June, Grouchy was in doubt whether the Prussian army was retiring upon Wavre or Perwez. Therefore he assigned his forces positions in and around

Walhain for the next morning, as a temporary halt before making further decisions. These positions were: Exelmans and Vandamme north of Walhain, Gérard at and south of Walhain and Pajol, Teste and Vallin at Grand Leez.<sup>7</sup>

By 6 a.m., the situation of Blücher's forces had become clear to Grouchy: they were pulling back towards Brussels and therefore he took the firm decision to move to Wavre. Based on further information he acquired in the meantime, Grouchy's idea about the enemy further materialised in the sense that he believed that its majority (some 30 to 40.000 men) was moving to the plain of La Chyse, either to fight or to reorganise there and to pull up towards Brussels in an attempt to join Wellington.<sup>8</sup> Resulting, he saw his own advance beyond Wavre towards Vilvoorde on the 19<sup>th</sup> of June as the perfect means of placing himself between the allied armies, of which he presumed Wellington was retreating in front Napoleon towards a position near Brussels as well. From the mishmash of intelligence, Grouchy had gathered that large masses of Prussian forces had pulled through Walhain which he thought were the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> corps. In reality, these were the 3<sup>rd</sup> corps and parts of the 4<sup>th</sup> corps (which he called the 3<sup>rd</sup>), in total perhaps some 32.000 men. The intelligence about the enemy's intention of a junction with Wellington near Brussels in the strict sense of the word was not correct, but it remains a mystery why Grouchy considered the information about the Prussian presence at La Chyse as most positive. This is the more bizarre as there is no clear indication that he took any serious effort to check this while La Chyse was within his range to verify. The significance of this apparent absence of such an investigation cannot be stressed enough; after all, he had Pajol check a possible Prussian presence at Namur before.<sup>9</sup> In fact, it was this fixed idea which led Grouchy to the rooted misapprehension that the junction between Wellington and Blücher would take place near Brussels and to prevent this, or at least to hinder it, a march towards Vilvoorde through Wavre was the best course to pursue.<sup>10</sup> With this choice, Grouchy's mission as it had been phrased in the Bertrand-order came to an end. The cannonade heard at Walhain and the resulting advice of Gérard to move in its direction didn't change Grouchy in this decision.

In time, this advice has been used so as to blame Grouchy not to have followed it but it is of profound significance that it should be seen in its *intrinsic value* as Gérard meant it: *to establish an operational link with Napoleon's main force*. In fact, in 1819, Gérard himself wrote about it: "en manifestant cet avis, je n'étais frappé que de l'idée, du reste fort simple, de nous lier avec les troupes de gauche."<sup>11-12</sup> In this sense, his advice fitted almost seamlessly to the idea as Napoleon unfolded in his orders of 10 a.m. and 1 p.m., and that was the establishment of an operational union with the main army.

In case Grouchy might have had a shred of doubt at all whether he was following the right course after having heard the gunfire from Mont Saint Jean and Gérard's advice, it was not long after that Napoleon's order of 10 a.m. cleared his mind from it, as it prescribed him to go to Wavre and push any Prussian forces away which might have halted there.

In its execution though, Grouchy stranded, until he received Napoleon's second order of 1 p.m. It led him to move part of his forces through Limale onto the left bank of the Dyle stream, but by the time he had completed this manoeuvre, the gunfire from the west had died down and at the same time darkness fell in, which put an end to all operations.

So, all in all, the eventual result was that Grouchy had not been able to comply with the order altogether, but what had become of the emperor was unknown to him. Confident though that the outcome was positive against both Wellington and Bülow, Grouchy felt he could complete the manoeuvre by moving the next day north-west in the direction of Vilvoorde, in order to separate the majority of the Prussian forces from Wellington and to merge his forces with those of the emperor. It is pretty obvious that if Grouchy would have had doubts about the outcome of the battle of Mont Saint Jean, he would never have acted the way he did now.

In terms of space, Grouchy situated the majority of the Prussians at La Chyse, and in terms of time he acted under the same sphere as Napoleon did: that he had plenty of time to prevent them

from joining Wellington.<sup>13</sup>

There was another element though on the late evening of the 18<sup>th</sup> of June which made Grouchy feel highly uncomfortable about and that was the fact that his force for the moment was divided over both banks of the Dyle. And this while the Bertrand order had explicitly stated right from the beginning to “dans tous les cas, tenez constamment vos deux corps d’infanterie réunis dans une lieue de terrain”. That is why he ordered Vandamme to join the remainder of his forces on its left bank on the 19<sup>th</sup> of June.

Conclusion.

For Napoleon, what started as a battle against Wellington as a prelude to the unification of his *armée du Nord* ended in the junction of his opponents there instead, which enabled them to prevail.

The question arises how this total failure could take place. First of all, right after Ligny, Napoleon presumed the Prussian army fled back towards the river Meuse, either to Namur or towards a point between Brussels and Liège in an attempt to seek for a junction there with Wellington. Being heavily crippled after Ligny, Napoleon also believed the Prussians would also not be able for anything for at least two days after the battle. It was for these reasons that right after Ligny, nor a pursuit was set in, nor reconnaissances sent out in all directions to make sure where they had gone to. This allowed the Prussians an enormous head-start in time and space of some 15 hours and 20 kilometres respectively. And when the pursuit and reconnaissances had begun to take place, their starting point was further east (Gembloux) and only in the directions described.<sup>14</sup>

As for Wellington, Napoleon did not deem it probable that he would make a stand south of Brussels. The combination with Napoleon’s presumption that Wellington would fall back upon Brussels or beyond it, created - in terms of space - a gap, in which the Prussians deployed their activities, initially unnoticed by Napoleon.

In his way, Grouchy contributed to this gap in his apprehension that the majority of Blücher’s army was situated at La Chyse. It was this gap which eventually proved fatal for the French, and it was seriously aggravated by mutual presumptions and a lack of communication between Napoleon and Grouchy.

This lack of communication fuelled these presumptions and vice versa. On the one hand, it was Napoleon who thought on the 17<sup>th</sup> of June that Grouchy would know - as he did - about a strong Prussian column which had been moving towards Wavre. Whatever inferences could be drawn from this information, Napoleon simply ignored to inform Grouchy about it, while he knew that he had set him on other trails.<sup>15</sup>

General headquarters did not anticipate towards Grouchy with relevant information in general anyway; it only reacted upon Grouchy’s communications. This brings up the inexplicable huge delay in the delivery of Grouchy’s report of the late evening of the 17<sup>th</sup> of June at Rossomme.<sup>16</sup> Let alone this delay, in case it had reached Napoleon by daybreak, it would probably not have changed the content of the resulting order, in the way it was now sent to Grouchy at 10 a.m. telling Grouchy to move to Wavre.

On the other hand, in case Grouchy’s report of 6 a.m. had suffered a similar delay, this raises the question whether Napoleon would have called for him the same way as he did at 1 and 1.30 p.m. It might very well be, although he could not be sure whether Grouchy was moving towards the Dyle at all.

The order as it was eventually sent to Grouchy by 1.30 p.m. ,with its later additions, was a typical reflection of the development of a situation and lacked proper editing. As such, it became an ambiguous order, which told Grouchy on the one hand that he had to find the main army himself, while on other it unambiguously instructed him to come for it at Mont Saint Jean.

The lack of a proper communication between Napoleon and Grouchy and vice versa continued

unabated deep into the 18<sup>th</sup> of June. Though urged by the emperor in the morning to send frequent communications, Grouchy did not do so, as the first report he sent to Napoleon was from the next day. It was only that day as well, by 10.30 a.m. , that he was informed about the outcome of the battle of Mont Saint Jean. It had taken the courier some eight hours to cover a distance of about 40 kilometres, which left Grouchy in the illusion of a French victory longer as might have been necessary.

In the end, for Napoleon – in hindsight - all measures to prevent Blücher to intervene in the battle at Mont Saint Jean were simply too late and too few, as they were deeply rooted onto erroneous presumptions dating back to the 17<sup>th</sup> of June.

Too late, as by the time that Napoleon for instance asked Grouchy to drive the Prussians away from Wavre, Bülow had already started to reach the heights of Chapelle Saint Lambert, not to speak of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> corps which were to follow next. The basic, but irreversible solution had laid in the timely pursuit of Blücher on the 17<sup>th</sup> of June, enabling the French to fix half of the Prussian army south of the Dyle and thus putting aid to Wellington seriously at risk.

Too few, as Napoleon wasn't aware of the sheer scale of the Prussian forces which were heading for the battlefield of Mont Saint Jean. Eventually, the question asked for an unambiguous solution: the defeat of Wellington. Whatever Prussian force was approaching, this defeat would paralyze it and put it in an extremely perilous situation, having Grouchy in its rear and Napoleon's main army in its front. This is exactly what Napoleon hoped would happen, but neither on his own front, nor on Grouchy's, did.

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<sup>1</sup> In the order of 10 a.m. Soult designates the column as one which was “assez forte” and later in the same document he speaks of “les corps de l’armée Prussienne” which had gone towards Wavre. It might be that French headquarters thought it was two thirds of the Prussian army which had gone to the north from the field of Ligny, perhaps some 50 to 60.000 men. Napoleon was also aware of the fact that Bülow had not shown up at Ligny.

Napoleon claims flankers of the army were in constant contact with those of Grouchy and that the cavalry of Milhaud was used to maintain communication. In this sense, Milhaud would have reported at 9 p.m. to Napoleon having seen Prussian cavalry moving from Tilly to Wavre. In: Mémoires pour servir etc. p.114

It is not logical to suppose that heavy cavalry was used for patrolling, but it is a fact that the information Napoleon refers to in his order dates from the 17<sup>th</sup> as this refers to the initial stage of advance and pursuit of the main army.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that by the time Napoleon sent his order at 10 a.m., he was informed about Grouchy’s doubt whether the majority of the Prussian army fell back upon Perwez or Wavre. Theoretically, it could have meant that Grouchy – for whatever reason – could have strayed further east and not to the north by the time he would receive the order.

<sup>3</sup> By 12.30 o’clock, Napoleon knew that Grouchy had left Gembloux for Wavre in the early morning. Taking into account the distance between these places, it was not unlogical to suppose that Grouchy could reach this second place in the middle of the afternoon. By that time, he would also have received the order of 10 a.m., confirming this same destination. The order of 1 p.m. could be expected to reach Grouchy in the very early evening at Wavre, from where he could move towards the main army further north-west.

<sup>4</sup> This intention he had on the 18<sup>th</sup> is very similar to the claim as phrased by Napoleon to have his army collected by the evening of the 17<sup>th</sup> of June on a line of “5 petites lieues [almost 20 kilometres], stretching from Mont Saint Jean to Wavre, with outposts along the forest of Soignes. The claim in that case is a pure projection of wishful thinking: Mémoires pour servir etc. p.186

<sup>5</sup> In the hindsight and a lack of understanding of the deeper significance of the orders issued by Napoleon on the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> of June to Grouchy fit the theoretical detailed scenario’s which have been described of what would have happened if Grouchy would have moved towards Waterloo either by daybreak from Gembloux or from Walhain by noon. Cf. for example:

Houssaye, H. – 1815. Waterloo p.504-

Charras – Histoire de la campagne de 1815 Vol.II p.333-379

Quinet, E. – Histoire de la campagne de 1815 p.298-303

Aerts, W. - Notes (manuscript) Livre V p.232-243

Horsburgh, E.L.S. - Waterloo. A narrative and a criticism p.171

Lenient, E. – La solution des énigmes de Waterloo p.534

Ropes, J.C. - The campaign of Waterloo, a military history p.259-261

Millar, S. - My duty is to execute the emperor’s orders”: Grouchy at Walhain, 18 June 1815. p.10, 16

<sup>6</sup> The words “nous croyons apercevoir ce corps [Bülow] sur les hauteurs de St.Lambert”

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have given rise to discussions amongst historians what Napoleon's staff could actually see from the knoll at Rossomme. The expression, however, should be seen as a reference to what the patrols had observed beyond Lasne, near the heights of Chapelle Saint Lambert. The words should therefore be interpreted in a more general sense. It is also very well possible that after the first intelligence, additional information dropped in at central headquarters about a Prussian presence there.

<sup>7</sup> Later that day, although initially having been assigned to the command of Exelmans, Vallin attached himself to Pajol (see above).

<sup>8</sup> La Chyse lies about 12 kilometres north-east of Wavre and about 17.5 kilometres south of Louvain, at the *chaussée* leading from this city to Namur. Cf. Map of Capitaine. In that context, La Chyse also might have been a step for a further Prussian retreat to Louvain and not only to Brussels.

<sup>9</sup> According to Berton there was a patrol of the 17<sup>th</sup> regiment of dragoons straying towards the *chaussée* Louvain- Namur, but he provides no further details about its outcome, other than that they found some Prussian fugitives. In: Précis historique, militaire et critique des batailles de Fleurus et de Waterloo p.65

Damiens suggests that the presence of Bülow's numerous baggage moving along Chapelle Saint Laurent (which is in the immediate vicinity of La Chyse) might have led the French to suppose a Prussian concentration there (and as they were informed about by locals). There might indeed have been a link here. In: La bataille de Plancenoit p.127, 131  
Cf. Bülow's disposition of the very early morning of the 18<sup>th</sup> of June.

<sup>10</sup> Grouchy claims to have dispatched his aide de camp Pont Bellanger (accompanied by a few men of his own escort) during the very early morning to Moustier and its vicinity to find out whether any Prussian troops had passed there. Pont Bellanger would have reported to Grouchy that this had not been the case, but he had learned that Prussians had gone towards Wavre instead.

In: Relation succincte p.27

Lieutenant Le Gouest. In: Mémoires etc. Vol.IV p.141

The mission most probably never took place. First of all, at the period of time involved, the Dyle was not on Grouchy's mind. Instead, Walhain and Perwez were, and that is why he sent patrols towards Perwez, Tourinnes, Ernage, Nil Saint Vincent and Grand Leez. And in case he had patrolled towards Mont Saint Guibert, he would have found the enemy there, so there was no need to push as far as the Dyle if he could at all due to the enemy's presence.  
Pontbellanger lived from 1788 to 1827.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. his letter to colonel Simon Lorière, dated 10<sup>th</sup> August 1819. In: SHAT, nr.C15/5

<sup>12</sup> Later, in 1829, Gérard also stated that it served a double purpose: first the one mentioned and second to circumvent the position of Bierges and Wavre. This second element is a product of hindsight, however, as by 11.30 a.m. this was not an issue yet. In: Quelques documents etc. p.40

<sup>13</sup> As with so many subjects connected to Grouchy on the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> of June, the speed at

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which he moved from Gembloux to Walhain has been a subject of debate since the very first years after the campaign. In the rules of hindsight, it has been no exception to blame Grouchy for it.

Comparing, both corps moved from Point du Jour to Gembloux with an average speed of 2.5 km hour, while they did so now at a speed of 1.6 and 2 km/ hour respectively. So, in itself this is slower as one should expect, but the exact reasons for this remain unclear.

Berthézène speaks of a march which was “lente et interrompue par des haltes fréquentes”, but gives no further clarification. Cf. his letter to Gérard. In: Dernières observations p.25

<sup>14</sup> Napoleon blames Grouchy for postponing the pursuit until the next day, while it was him who decided to do so. He regards this decision of Grouchy as the main cause of the defeat at Waterloo. In: Mémoires pour servir p.113-114

<sup>15</sup> Grouchy confirms he did not know about these columns until on the 18<sup>th</sup> of June, after the receipt of the order of 10 a.m. In: Relation succincte p.32

<sup>16</sup> It took the messenger about eleven hours to cover the distance between Gembloux and Rossomme, which is about 30 kilometres.